

PROBLEM SOLVING

Assessing others: Getting beyond your gut feeling

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We spend a large part of our working lives sizing up other people. Is my colleague trustworthy? Is my supervisor really knowledgeable? Is the candidate I'm favouring a good fit for the job, or does she just talk a good game?

Leaning on intuition when pondering such questions makes snap decisions seem obvious, even if they may not be the right ones, according to Samuel Barondes, a psychiatrist at the University of California, San Francisco, and author of a new book, *Making Sense of People: Decoding the Mysteries of Personality*.

"We need our intuitions because we live in a world of surprises. But intuitions are just the raw data. They're highly imperfect and vary considerably from person to person. So you need to build on them," Dr. Barondes said. First impressions – made within a few seconds of an encounter – can be as flawed as they are persuasive, he said. "All of us assume that others are like us, and we're so attracted to certain traits that we sweep things under the rug."

To get the long view in a short time, what's needed is a system that fills in the blanks. Using findings from neuroscience and psychology – along with celebrity profiles to spice up the mix – Dr. Barondes's book offers just that: a way to assess people who can be as difficult to peg as university dropout Steve Jobs, or social charmer Bernie Madoff. "We want to form that instant impression instead of stepping back, even for a short period, to rethink the parts of the picture we may not be paying attention to," Dr. Barondes said.

One common misstep for a hiring manager, for example, is to follow your gut in an interview and end up being blinded by a polished appearance and a shiny résumé. The requirements of the position should be your primary focus, Dr. Barondes said, not the candidate's charisma.

To help you think more systematically about people, he offers a taxonomy that includes the well-known "big five" personality traits – extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness – along with a list of 10 troublesome behaviour patterns that allow you to identify the danger areas for each one.

For example, in an interview you might be swayed by an applicant who scores highly on extroversion and agreeableness. But do you really want a sparkly, life-of-the-party type as a senior administrator? The downside of high extroversion is emotional instability, notes Dr. Barondes, who identifies this behaviour pattern as "histrionic" – perhaps fine for a performer, such as Marilyn Monroe, but risky for other positions.

To wit, Dr. Barondes compares the extroverted and gregarious former U.S. president Bill Clinton with calm, cool Barack Obama. "Why are there so many histrionics in the world? They're attractive! They're sexy! They're theatrical and up there on stage. People who are more conscientious, thoughtful and plodding are attracted to that profile," he explained.

His distillation of the "top 10" troublesome patterns crystallizes what can go wrong in work relationships. A manager might be brilliant and have a sterling résumé, but if he always has to be right and pedantically lectures anyone within earshot of his rightness, he'll earn the resentment rather than the respect of staff and colleagues.

When it comes to top dogs, "the big troublesome patterns are narcissism or its cousin, sociopathy," Dr. Barondes said. "These people have little empathy. They believe that they are special, that they are entitled – that they are unconstrained, superior people. If they're mainly interested in looking like big shots, that's narcissism. If they think they're entitled to take what ever they want from you – and less interested in self-aggrandizement – those are the sociopaths," who are primarily male, and make up 4 per cent of the population, he said.

It's likely that the talented but opportunistic O.J. Simpson, or convicted fraud artist Mr. Madoff, could never have travelled as far on charm, smarts and chutzpah had anyone systematically assessed their traits, along with their troublesome patterns, their moral choices, and their own versions of their life stories – which together form the multivalent approach outlined in this book. "Are they just interested in getting ahead, or are they people who have a vision?" Dr. Barondes asks. Assessing someone's true nature, then, is more about "think" than it is about "blink."

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

