Creative Management

Can unconscious thinking help managers?

Jane Henry.

Now many of these situations that managers face are ones where the information is incomplete it's uncertain, it's novel, it's complex. Does that situation require a particular kind of thinking?

Guy Claxton.

It's precisely in those kinds of situations where the slower more intuitive kinds of thinking come into their own. I've described two different modes of thinking as hair-brain, which is the fast deliberate conscious analytical be clear at all costs type of thinking, that works very well when what you're looking for is a modification of a conventional understanding in a situation which is clear, well defined, well understood.

But in situations as most management situations particularly as the theory of complexity is revealing to us situations which can't be analysed which can't be nailed down, in situations like that, then the tortoise mind the other brand of thinking comes into its own, which is much more dreamy much more fuzzy much more contemplative, much more leisurely.

Now business people would always say of course we have to make decisions fast, but actually there's often more time to make a decision than you think there is, and doing things fast, doing things in a hurry, the the pressure to be decisive to come up with a solution quickly, isn't actually required by the events you may have a week or two before a decision is actually required in which to germinate or to gestate a solution then of course you have to come to a decision and reach action, but often that internal pressure, and the pressure which is created by a busy business culture mitigates against the discovery of a genuinely creative solution.

Jane Henry.

Another of the findings about how the brain works is that much more information is processed unconsciously than was previously realised. Can you explain to us when conscious thinking comes to the fore and when unconscious thinking comes to the fore?

Guy Claxton.

Well conscious thinking comes to the fore in situations where it's possible to articulate the information, I mean thinking consciously there are our common sense notion of thinking implies kind of talking to ourselves. And yet an enormous amount of information in a face for example, or let alone in the atmosphere in a room or a long term problem in a in a business context in a manufacturing context or what to do about a marketing campaign, a great deal of that information is more fine grained than can be captured in words and concepts. Many of the problems which people are facing are not those which are amenable to systematic logical analytical articulation. The problem is of course that our obsession with information technology and the computer drives us towards thinking that it's precisely that kind of analytical explicit forms of thinking which are the best or the only forms of thinking that are available to us so, I think our computer mentality if you like has some carries some of the blame for leading us to ignore these other very valuable but slightly more nebulous ways of thinking.

Jane Henry.

This is fascinating, because managers are often encouraged to be explicit about what they're doing, they're encouraged to plan, to predict, does that interfere with the unconscious processing?

Guy Claxton.

Well it does but I my sense that many managers are quite astute there is research which shows that senior managers particularly are well at home with their intuition. They get their idea about the new product development or the new marketing campaign in the bath or on the golf course or somewhere or other, and then they think to themselves how am I gonna sell this to the board, or how am I gonna sell this to the team.

 So the idea comes first, the innovation comes first it pops up out of the autonomous activity of the of the brain if you like, and then the rationalisation comes afterwards, but our public image says that rationalisation came first and led logically step by step to the idea. So I think you will find that creative business people there are many examples of this, just like creative artists and creative scientists, do their thinking backwards they get the result, and then think now how can I create a plausible story which will make it seem as if I had this in the approved fashion, but actually they know perfectly well that it didn't come about that way at all it just popped into their minds.