



TRUSTING YOUR GUT FEEL:

LISTENING TO WHAT WHISPERS, NOT WHAT SCREAMS

Laura Huang

When I completed my on dissertation on investor behavior in 2012, there were a few significant findings that jumped out at me.

First, investor gut feel was experience-based. It was uniquely personal and individual and could not be replicated or passed down from person to person. Which meant something important: Once these investors tried to explain their gut feel to someone else—to justify the logic underlying it—they would essentially talk themselves out of the right decision. Being able to intuit is a skill, built up over years of personal experience. But second, it was informed by data and analytical information.

The rich interaction between personal experience and external data produced an outcome: Gut feel was actually the impulse at the end of this process, which was based on both thinking and feeling. Rather than being based on rapid, nonconscious compulsion, as much of prior literature suggested, what investors called their “gut feel” was the final result of an elaborate “intuiting process” that was rooted in dynamic, expertise-based emotion-cognitions—experience and data—specific to the entrepreneurship context. In other words, data was certainly a factor in the intuiting process, but by the time they had a gut feel, the data had already been so neatly folded into their emotional experiences that it no longer appeared to be just data, or even neutral information. Instead, it helped them make sense of and was claimed as personal reflections. Much like drinking an enjoyable iced tea on a hot day, we understand that there were once solid granules of sugar dissolved in water, but we just enjoy the refreshing liquid beverage as a whole.

It's here where I answered a question that had been nagging at me for some time: Is there a difference between intuition and gut feel?

The answer is a resounding yes. Intuition is the process that leads to a final moment of recognition that we call our gut feel. The process and the outcome are distinct.* Granted, the process may last mere seconds (or, alternatively, drag on for years). We might be consciously aware that we're in the midst of that process or not. Either way, there is a moment at which we just know. Oftentimes while looking back, we describe this moment with the following words: "I just had a gut feel. I just knew."

The third significant finding from my dissertation research was that individuals who trusted this gut feel (the outcome of their intuiting process), rather than an arbitrary thought while still in the midst of the intuiting process, found that it doesn't lie.

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*Some might say: But isn't this just a question of semantics? Couldn't one argue that intuition is also the end result of the intuiting process? In which case, intuition and gut feel would be synonymous? After all, intuition and gut feel are terms often used interchangeably in both research studies and everyday conversation. Both are part of our verbiage and nomenclature: The psychology of intuition is often referred to in the science of judgment and decision-making, whereas its practical application is expressed as trusting your gut feel. I argue that intuition is the process and gut feel is the outcome, and the two are distinct. Until we understand the full process, we can never understand what the right outcome should look like. By delineating between intuition and gut feel, you'll know better, and knowing the difference will lead you to breakthroughs that you never thought possible.

Let me explain this a bit more, because at first glance, it might seem ridiculous. There is no part of our brain that is 100 percent right 100 percent of the time—not your reasoning, not your memory, not your gut feel. The idea that you can trust your gut feel all the time is as misguided as the idea that you can trust that the data reported is always solid and untainted.

It's situational. Gut feel is fully and absolutely effective in the right contexts—inadequate, even damaging, in the wrong ones. Gut feel is not for every decision. Investors who relied on their gut feel for complex and chaotic decisions—contexts in which they had to rely on their gut feel because it was the (only) way for them to manage the complexity and extreme risk associated with the decision to invest money into certain start-ups—found that their gut feel was spot-on. Take Uber, for example. When Uber was in its infancy, it screamed “bad investment”: The company faced regulatory challenges fraught with legal battles and airport bans; they had technology risks and glitches in their mobile app, including algorithmic pricing that often shut down operations; they had no established market position; and not to mention, there were all the implied and underlying feelings about the business itself. (This is terrifying. Why would I or anyone voluntarily get into a stranger's personal car?)

Yet, despite these challenges, investors had a gut feel. It was a gut feel that emboldened them to trust their prior experience and their own inner voices and make an investment that would otherwise be considered overly risky and likely to lead to failure. In academic speak: Their gut feel allowed them to cognitively and emotionally reframe investment risk into a compelling narrative that transcended avoidance behavior and led them to invest.

Put simply: A small set of investors saw that they weren't betting on Uber as much as they were betting that the taxi industry was broken and that there were major changes and disruption that would be coming to the public transportation industry.

This type of decision-making is quiet and intentional. It is informed by both the data that we have and the experience that we've accumulated and results in a personal, internal signal that is straining to be heard. Distinguishing between this kind of signal on the one hand and wishful thinking and what others are saying—social conversations, people's expectations, the media, bandwagons, etc.—on the other is hard because the latter speaks much louder. These forces are also much more unrelenting; there are even modern-day algorithms that target you until you're forced to listen. We can't help but notice what is louder, brasher, more flamboyant. But we can also learn and train ourselves to listen to what whispers, not what screams.

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And finally, fourth, almost by corollary, what jumped out to me was that the power of intuition was not just about making the "right decision"; it was also about the ability to take quick action on that gut feel at the right time. The fact that gut feel is quiet often prevents us from being able to take intentional and quick action. Decisiveness.

Quick action is part of what makes a decision the “right decision.” It’s true that investors never have the counterfactual, the alternate ending had they taken a different course of action. But making a choice and making it work—sometimes by fixing or overhauling it or course-correcting—actually made it the right investment. It was a virtuous cycle where that decision led to their ability to mentor, make introductions, provide resources and know-how, get access to increasingly better deals and sort through them, and continue to use their gut feel to take future action—all more effectively. And they achieved extremely high levels of success as a result.

GAINING AN EDGE BY RELYING ON YOUR GUT FEEL

We call lots of things gut feel. Gut feel is not just emotion. It is not just information. Gut feel is the result of data plus experience, colliding and combining to create a remarkable reaction, not unlike the nuclear reaction that occurs when atoms collide. All of the most successful investors had learned and understood this. They also had learned to develop, harness, and activate their gut feel. But what about everyone else, I wondered?

So, post-2012, post-dissertation, I expanded my research to include leaders, managers, organizers, trailblazers, seekers, and aspirers to test whether my hypothesis—that the most successful people in the world (outside of investors) are those who have learned how to develop, harness, and activate their gut feel—would hold.

I interviewed thousands of individuals in the workforce, asking them how they define success, trying to figure out what made (makes) them successful and whether they would mention gut feel. Were there certain qualities that they shared, clusters of characteristics that were indicative of those who were “successful” versus those who fell short?

I interviewed those who have achieved both traditional definitions of success (Olympic athletes, world-record holders, Pulitzer Prize winners, CEOs of companies, entrepreneurs who have taken their companies public), as well as those who might be considered nontraditional successes (formerly incarcerated individuals who have gotten back on their feet; women successfully returning to the workforce after leaving for decades to raise their children; rock stars making comebacks after major accidents, addictions, and trauma).

The first factor every single person credited was hard work. What was intriguing, however, was that the more I dug under the surface, the more I found that they each seemed to believe, deep down, that hard work was a bit of a farce. Hard work was the “right,” expected answer. What they actually believed was that even though hard work is critical, hard work alone is not enough. You can take two different people who work equally as hard, and one will inevitably be much more successful than the other. Why is that?

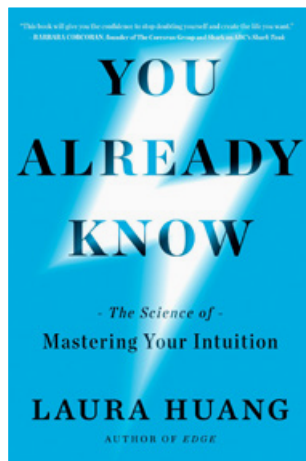
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The truly successful ones figured out what gave them an edge. They could take signals, perceptions, cues, and even stereotypes and flip them in their favor to create an advantage. This was the equivalent of taking their hard work, and making it work harder for them. Based on that research and those findings, I wrote my first book, *Edge: Turning Adversity into Advantage*.

My second book, *You Already Know*, is about the (only) other factor that 100 percent of the successful people interviewed mentioned: gut feel. But their descriptions weren't straightforward. Some gave their gut feel an almost mystical quality. Others attributed it to their emotions; still others attributed it directly to their brains, claiming that their gut feel was the result of a rigorous, expertise-driven set of schemas, mental models, and prototypes—conceptual ways of organizing that I get into in the book. **Some talked about how they trusted their gut feel. Others shared how their gut feel was dangerous and led them down the wrong track and totally derailed them. Most could not explain or articulate their gut feel. But once they understood how their personal experience and external data interacted in transcendent ways, and learned to listen to what whispers and not what screams, they could recognize, diagnose, trust, and rely upon their gut feel.** 📖



Info



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Laura Huang is Distinguished Professor of Management and Organizational Development at Northeastern University, and has held faculty positions at Harvard Business School and the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. A Kauffman Fellow, she was a recipient of the 2020 Cozzarelli Prize given by the National Academy of Sciences, and was named one of the world's best 40 business school professors by *Poets & Quants*. In 2021 she was included on the Global Thinkers50 Radar list as one of the top thinkers with the potential to change the world of theory and practice. Her speaking and consulting clients include Google, Microsoft, McKinsey, Lululemon, Sanofi, Pandora, and Asana. She is the author of *Edge: Turning Adversity into Advantage*.



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