OPENING CHAPTER

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Psychological illusions at work

How our intuitions play tricks on us at the office

A colleague who doesn't say hello, a boss who closes the door, a slightly curt e-mail, and our brain has already concluded: *'He's got it in for me.' 'They're hiding something from me.'*

These conclusions feel obvious, yet they are rarely proven. The working world is full of attractive ideas, repeated in meetings, on training courses or around the coffee machine, that are nonetheless false or greatly exaggerated. They influence the way we work, the way we judge our colleagues and the way we organise a team. That is where this book begins.

THE GUIDING PRINCIPLE

An observable behaviour is generally not enough, on its own, to establish an intention, an emotion or a personality trait with any certainty.

This first chapter sets out a rule that will guide everything that follows: **separate intuition from evidence**. Psychology does not give us the power to read the minds of our colleagues or our boss. It offers something more modest and more useful: tools for forming better hypotheses, putting a behaviour (US: behavior) back into its context and resisting hasty certainties.

01 EIGHT STUBBORN MYTHS AT WORK

‘Hard work is all it takes to succeed’

This is one of the most deeply rooted myths: working hard, being competent and deserving would guarantee success. Effort matters, of course. But opportunities, networks, support from above, the visibility of what we achieve and sometimes sheer chance also weigh on promotions and recognition. Psychologists speak of a ‘belief in a just world’: we like to think that everyone gets what they deserve, and that results faithfully reflect effort[1].

Confusing time spent at work with productivity is just as misleading. An economic analysis published in 2015 shows that output per hour falls beyond about fifty hours a week; beyond 55 hours, additional hours add almost nothing[2]. Fatigue and mistakes take over. Working hard matters; working usefully, making one's work visible and seizing the right opportunities matter too.

55 h

a week: beyond this, extra hours add almost nothing to output.

'Multitasking makes us more productive'

Juggling e-mails, a report and a meeting gives the impression of being particularly efficient. Yet for tasks that require thought, the brain does not work in parallel: it switches from one to the other, and every switch costs time and increases errors[3]. Interruptions make matters worse: after a phone call or an e-mail notification, part of our attention remains stuck on the previous task, which researchers call 'attention residue', and we resume more slowly and less accurately[4]. A study at Stanford University even found that people used to juggling several streams of information (e-mails, messages, videos) were more easily distracted, were worse at filtering out irrelevant information and switched less well between tasks than those who dealt with one at a time[5], although later studies have produced more mixed results[6]. Listening to music during a routine task is hardly a problem; it is competition between two demanding activities that is costly. Grouping similar tasks together and protecting periods of concentration is often more effective than scattering one's attention.

'Pay is the main driver of motivation'

A good salary matters, and pay that is seen as unfair is strongly demotivating. But money explains job satisfaction far less than we think: a

meta-analysis of nearly a hundred studies shows that the level of pay is only weakly linked to it[7]. Interesting work, autonomy, good relationships and the feeling of being recognised often count for more, as self-determination theory shows by placing autonomy, competence and relatedness at the heart of lasting motivation[8].

Employees also compare their pay with that of their colleagues as much as with their own needs. When staff at a large university discovered their colleagues' salaries, those earning less than the median in their department reported being markedly less satisfied, and more inclined to look for another job[9]. It is not only the amount that matters, but what the salary seems to say about our worth in the eyes of the organisation. We will return to this in Chapter 2.

'Stress and pressure are necessary to be effective'

The idea that a good employee needs constant pressure is still widespread. It contains a grain of truth: a meta-analysis distinguishes 'challenge stressors' (a demanding workload, responsibilities), which tend to be associated with better performance, from 'hindrance stressors' (ambiguity, role conflict, red tape), which are clearly associated with poorer performance[10].

Moreover, intense or prolonged stress impairs precisely what intellectual work needs: working memory, judgement and flexible thinking[11], before it damages health. The right question is not 'how much pressure?' but 'what kind of pressure?'.

‘Monitoring employees improves their performance’

Activity-tracking software, checks on breaks, screenshots: digital surveillance has grown with remote working. It rests on an unspoken assumption: without control, people would do less. Yet a recent meta-analysis finds no evidence that electronic performance monitoring improves performance; it is, however, associated with more stress, all the more so when it is intrusive[12]. The same study shows that being transparent about what is monitored greatly changes how it is experienced. Performance comes more from clear objectives, autonomy and support than from control.

‘Conflict is always destructive and must be avoided’

The ideal team, supposedly, is one where everyone agrees. Yet a team with no disagreement at all often hides fear, disengagement or a conformity that impoverishes decisions. Research distinguishes two forms of conflict: one about ideas and methods, and one about people. The second is almost always harmful; the first can improve a decision, especially when it is expressed in a climate of respect and does not slide into personal attack[13].

‘You have to follow your passion to succeed’

‘Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life’: the saying is appealing, but risky. Passion does not necessarily match what the market values, and it can even be used to justify poor working conditions. Studies have shown that people find it more acceptable to ask for unpaid hours or extra tasks from an employee described as passionate[14]. Meaning at work does not depend only on a calling discovered

in advance: it is also built over time, as we gain competence, autonomy and usefulness. People who believe that interests can be developed also persevere more than those waiting for love at first sight[15].

'Remote working reduces engagement and productivity'

'Out of sight, out of work': remote employees are readily suspected of doing as little as possible. The large studies say otherwise. In an experiment involving more than 1,600 employees of a large Chinese company, two days of working from home a week changed neither productivity nor promotions, but cut resignations by a third[16]. Fully remote work produces more mixed results, particularly for how newcomers learn. The real issue is therefore not the place, but clear objectives, the quality of management and keeping people connected.

1/3

fewer resignations with two days of working from home a week, with no loss of productivity.

Other, more discreet, received ideas weigh every day on our relationships with our colleagues, our boss or our team.

'If he doesn't answer my e-mail, he must be ignoring me.' This reasoning illustrates the correspondence bias: we readily explain other people's behaviour by their character or intentions, while underestimating the circumstances[17,18]. Another error is often added: assuming that the behaviour is about us. Yet when we are the ones slow to reply, we know perfectly well why: a meeting, an emergency, an overflowing inbox. On its own, a delay means almost nothing; it is the pattern in the relationship that tells us something.

‘I remember exactly what was said in the meeting.’ In 2018, researchers showed more than 3,000 people a series of news stories, two of which were entirely fabricated. Almost half ‘remembered’ at least one of these false events, sometimes with details that appeared nowhere, and all the more readily when the story fitted their own convictions[19]. If simply reading something is enough to create a memory, two colleagues acting in good faith can hold two incompatible versions of the same meeting. Hence the value of written minutes.

1 in 2

people or so ‘remember’ an event that was entirely made up.

‘The most self-assured are the most competent.’ Self-assurance impresses in meetings, and that is precisely the problem. Researchers at Berkeley observed that people who overestimate their abilities are judged more competent by their group and gain more influence in it, even when their performance does not justify it[20]. Confidence tells us about a person’s style, not about their level.

‘The best specialist will make the best manager.’ Promoting the best performer seems fair and logical. Yet a study of more than 200 sales companies showed that the best salespeople, once promoted, became on average poorer managers: their teams’ results fell[21]. Excelling at a job and helping others to progress are two different skills.

‘A good boss must have an answer for everything.’ Admitting ‘I don’t know’ seems to weaken a team leader’s authority. Research suggests the opposite: those who acknowledge their limits, value other people’s skills and welcome feedback have more engaged teams that are more willing to learn[22]. Humility is not weakness; it leaves others room to contribute.

‘My team knows what I expect of them.’ We greatly overestimate how clearly we come across. Psychologists speak of the ‘illusion of transparency’: we believe our intentions are far easier to read on us than they

really are[23]. A manager thinks they have been clear because they know what they meant; their team has only heard what was actually said. Rephrasing, writing down priorities and asking 'What have you taken away from this?' prevents many misunderstandings.

54%

average accuracy in detecting lies: barely better than a coin toss.

'Body language gives liars away.' Shifty eyes, crossed arms, a hand touching the nose: 'experts' in non-verbal communication promise to unmask deception at a glance, in interviews as in negotiations. Yet a review of more than two hundred studies shows that we detect lies in about 54% of cases, barely better than chance[24], and that no single cue is the signature of lying[25]. Nervousness, shyness or discomfort produce exactly the same behaviours. Mistaking a candidate's or a colleague's stress for a sign of dishonesty is the most common error, and the most unfair.

'A competent person knows what to do without having to ask.' We readily associate competence with complete independence, and hesitate to ask for advice for fear of appearing less capable. Studies show the opposite: asking for advice on a difficult task increases the competence perceived by the person being asked[26]. Expertise guarantees neither a clear view of one's own limits nor the quality of every decision. Knowing how to ask for help is part of competence.

'It is better to hide your mistakes so as not to put yourself at risk.' The fear is understandable, and in some environments admitting a mistake carries a real risk. But we also have a natural tendency to credit our successes to ourselves and our failures to circumstances, all the more so when our self-image is threatened[27]. A now classic study conducted on hospital wards showed that the best teams reported more errors, not because they made more, but because they dared to talk about them, and could therefore correct them[28]. A mistake acknowledged early can be repaired; a hidden mistake grows.

03 WHEN A REAL DISCOVERY BECOMES A LAW

Some myths grow out of a genuine discovery or a sound practice, gradually turned into an absolute rule.

'Believing in your team members is all it takes for them to succeed.' The Pygmalion effect grew out of a real discovery: at the end of the 1960s, pupils presented to their teachers as promising made more progress than the others. The effect also exists at work: a manager who believes in the potential of their team members helps them to progress, especially those of whom little was expected[29]. The drift lies in turning it into a magic formula. Expectations work through concrete behaviours (more time, more interesting challenges, more frequent feedback) and replace neither training nor resources. They also work the other way: a manager who judges a team member to be weak gives them less, encourages them less, and gets what they expected.

'It takes 10,000 hours to become an expert.' In the early 1990s, Anders Ericsson showed that the best violinists at a Berlin music academy had accumulated, by the age of about twenty, some 10,000 hours of 'deliberate practice', training focused on their weak points[30]. This average became a law supposedly valid in every field, something Ericsson himself disputed. A meta-analysis shows that practice explains a large share of the differences in skill in games or music, but less than 1% in professions[31]. At work, expertise comes less from length of service than from the quality of practice, the feedback received and the variety of situations encountered.

'I'm more of a left-brain person' or 'I'm a visual learner'. Some functions depend more on one hemisphere than the other, such as language, and everyone has preferences in the way they approach information. Rigid profiles have been drawn from this: the 'analytical left-brainer', the 'visual learner'. Yet a brain-imaging study of more than a thousand people found no 'left-dominant' or 'right-dominant' individuals[32], and tailoring training to a person's declared learning style does not improve their results[33]. The right medium depends on what has to be

learnt, and combining words and pictures usually helps everyone[34]. These labels persist because they are flattering: they give everyone a 'profile'.

'Anything that takes less than two minutes should be done straight away.' This rule comes from a time-management method, *Getting Things Done*: dealing with small tasks immediately keeps them from cluttering the mind. Useful for sorting one's tasks, it has drifted into a demand to be available at all times. Yet every interruption costs far more than two minutes, and participants asked to check their e-mail only three times a day felt markedly less stressed[35]. Dealing with small tasks in batches, at chosen times, respects the spirit of the rule without paying its price.

'We have to tell each other everything in order to improve.' Feedback is essential for learning, and some companies have turned it into a culture of constant, unfiltered comment. Yet a large review shows that while feedback improves performance on average, it lowers it in more than a third of cases, especially when it targets the person rather than the task[36]. What helps people improve is feedback that is precise, useful and well timed, not feedback that never stops.

04 THE INTENTION TRAP

Beyond the big myths, our everyday working life is cluttered with automatic shortcuts in interpretation. They all take the same form: an observed behaviour, followed by a conclusion about what the other person is thinking.

- *He says nothing in the meeting, so he doesn't support the project.* Perhaps he is thinking, or doesn't dare to speak up.
- *He replied to my e-mail with just 'OK', so he's annoyed.* Perhaps he was between two meetings.
- *He's looking at his phone during my presentation, so he's not interested in what I'm saying.* Perhaps he is expecting an urgent call.

– *My boss has closed the door, so he's plotting something against me.* Perhaps he simply needs to concentrate.
– *My colleague didn't copy me in, so she wants to sideline me.* Perhaps she simply forgot.
– *He leaves at 5 p.m. every day, so he isn't committed.* Perhaps he starts at 7 a.m., or collects his children from school.
– *The new recruit asks no questions, so he has understood everything*. Perhaps he doesn't dare to yet.
– *My boss didn't congratulate me, so he hasn't noticed anything*. Perhaps he isn't in the habit of saying so.

In each case, intuition jumps straight from the behaviour to the intention. This leap happens in a fraction of a second, and it is what turns a silence into disagreement and a clumsy moment into a conflict. Yet we can learn to slow it down.

A. Describe the fact, without interpreting it. 'He hardly said anything during the meeting', rather than 'he's against the project'.

B. Look for two other explanations. Fatigue, overload, shyness, a disagreement he doesn't dare to voice: if these come to mind easily, your first reading was only one hypothesis among others.

C. Check with an open question. 'You didn't say much earlier, what do you think?' invites the other person to speak; 'Why are you blocking the project?' forces them onto the defensive.

IN PRACTICE · THREE STEPS BEFORE CONCLUDING

A. Describe the fact, without interpreting it.

B. Look for two other explanations.

C. Check with an open question.

This method draws on what psychologists call cognitive reappraisal: changing the interpretation of a situation changes the emotion it provokes, and proves more effective than trying to suppress that emotion[37].

At work, it keeps a five-minute misunderstanding from turning into a five-month conflict.

WHY SOME BELIEFS REASSURE US

A belief is not only an idea about the world. It can also give us something: a sense of control, a reassuring explanation, a feeling of belonging to a group or protection against uncertainty. Believing that self-assured people are competent spares us the effort of assessing their abilities at length. Believing that our boss ought to guess our needs spares us the difficulty of expressing them. Believing that hard work always pays off in the end reassures us about our future.

This is also why a belief can resist the facts: questioning it can touch our professional identity, our habits or our psychological safety. The deepest of these beliefs may well be this one: **our personal worth is not measured by our professional success.** Status, responsibilities, promotions and recognition easily become yardsticks of personal worth. But when our identity rests too heavily on work, a failure, a redundancy (US: layoff) or retirement can be experienced as a challenge to our whole self.

Understanding a belief is therefore not only a matter of asking: 'Is it true?' It also means asking: 'What does it give me, and what does it spare me?' **A belief can be psychologically useful without being accurate. And an uncomfortable idea can be true without being easy to accept.**

INTUITION IS NOT THE ENEMY

The aim is not to distrust our intuition systematically. It can condense a great deal of professional experience and quickly spot useful patterns: the technician who 'senses' a fault, the manager who picks up on tension in the team. But it can also reproduce our fears, our prejudices and our past experiences. **An intuition is a signal to be examined, not a conclusion to be imposed.** The more important a decision (a hire, a

promotion, a formal warning), the more useful it is to distinguish between what we feel, what we observe and what we actually know.

05 SO, WHAT NEXT?

This book rests on a simple idea: understanding a few well-researched psychological mechanisms helps us to better understand our colleagues, our boss and our team, and to improve working relationships. The same mechanism is, moreover, experienced from both sides: the team member sees a threat in the boss's closed door, the boss sees disengagement in a team member's silence. Only the position changes.

The following chapters start from what we look for in work, then examine what we do to obtain it, the way we communicate, take action and work together, each time testing received ideas against the research. Psychology is not a crystal ball but a compass: it does not tell us what others think, but it teaches us to observe with more nuance and fewer hasty certainties.

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