Knowing and Overcoming Your Blind Spots Summary (based on her book BLIND SPOTS)

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Blind Spots

We make mistakes all of the time. When we look back at some mistakes, we ask “what was I thinking”. Equally, we look at other people’s mistakes and ask “what were they thinking” or “how could they be so stupid?” This book is about these sorts of situations, some of which are mildly funny and some of which are alarming. One example involved a trip to a drive through ATM with the author’s son-in-law, who was foreign born. She was explaining how sensitive Americans are and used the example of the Braille instructions at the ATM. He was led to ask if there were a lot of blind drivers in the town. It does seem like a curious place to put such a sign and you must wonder – what were they thinking?

The example above illustrates a blind spot in our thinking; something we may not notice the significance of, until it is pointed out. Everybody has blind spots and they are a side effect of a useful thinking pattern. For example, people are often given a test where they are asked to count the number of times they see the word “the” in a passage. This is very hard for English speakers, but easy for people who don’t speak English. Non-speakers are not distracted by the meanings of words, so have no problem. But for speakers, the ability to read almost unconsciously impairs our ability to treat the words in any other way. Another major blind spot is simple ignorance. We make mistakes when we don’t know what we don’t know and don’t know that we don’t know. If blind spots were only an “individual” problem, the impact might be limited. Blind spots also get involved in our attributions of what others do. When we observe actions that we do not like or understand, we imagine explanations for those actions and our blind spots guide that imagining. Consequently, misunderstandings can multiply and be difficult to resolve.

Many of the blind spots described impact our activities in the areas of business innovation, negotiation, and communication. The book suggests that there are ten common sources of these blind spots, and some simple ways to decrease their impact.

Not stopping to think*

Our society is action oriented and sometimes hectic. We lurch from action to action and most of the time this works very well. There are many things that would be hard to do if we stopped to think too often (think about riding a bike), but sometimes we rush right past a moment when we should stop and think about the situation and consider our options. The book used the phrase “this would be a good time to stop and think” as an example of what most of us struggle to do. We do not recognize when the time is now. Three actions to create a thinking pause include:

• Become aware of “crisis” feelings and use them as a cue. Recognition can prevent reflexive or panic actions.
• Stall, defer and deflect – Say “let me think about this and get back to you”. You may just need to moment’s pause.
• Plan for “thinking breaks” in your day. Don’t just rush from meeting to meeting. Planned thinking breaks inject some time to think instead of just “doing”.

What you don’t know can hurt you

Nobody knows everything, but we are especially ignorant about what we don’t know. In other words, we think we know more than we really do. And we can’t really afford to question what we know all the time; we’d be paralyzed. But the consequence of this is that we believe that almost everything that we think is true – and it is not. Decrease the problem of false knowledge by:

• Creating a question map. This is a mind mapping sort of approach. Put the topic in the center and write down questions about the topic. If questions lead to questions, write them as sub-questions.
• Create a know/need-to-know table. Create a table with three columns. In the left-most column write down what you know. In the right-most column write down what you need to know. Now examine the what-you-know column and determine which items you can prove to be true and which you think are true. Move the items that you
This blind spot has significant consequences. We tend to assume that everyone knows essentially the same things that we do. It is easy to demonstrate how much knowledge people share (language, traffic signs, basic arithmetic, manners, etc.). The experience of common knowledge blinks us to the differences in our individual knowledge. Once we assume that everybody knows the same stuff, when people act in an unexpected way, we assume they did this with full knowledge of the facts and therefore did it because they are stupid or malicious. In addition, when we are put in a position that calls for us to act on knowledge that we may not have, we use our well developed ability to fake it. We laugh at jokes that we do not get. We also demote the kinds of information that others have, but we don’t – in order to maintain our image of ourselves as intelligent. White collar people look down on blue collar skills, and blue collar people look down on white collar skills. Rather than accepting the limits of our knowledge, we demote other forms of knowledge that we do not possess.

Dealing with this blind spot has two aspects. The first aspect is essentially accepting that most people have good intentions, but have different knowledge than you do. In one respect, this is an acceptance of diversity issue. Other people know different valuable things than you do and that knowledge has a valid logic.

The other aspect applies when others confront you about your ignorance. The author suggests two questions to use.

• How would I know that? This reflects the fact that not all knowledge is obvious or commonplace.
• How did you learn that? This question points out that many things are learned and that not everyone has the same experience or specific education to create learning.

The questions work best when used in a calm way – not as a counter attack. They also work when reversed - how would they know that?

Not noticing

Things fade into the background. We get used to sounds and smells and no longer notice them. We ignore most of what is going on around us. We must tune a lot out to function. When driving down the road, you can’t pay attention to the flowers in every passing garden; your attention is required to monitor traffic. People have a limited amount of attention to expend and attention is very expensive, so we unconsciously choose not to notice a lot. And that is about the outside world. We are really tuned out of is what we are thinking. This is easy to demonstrate. We are generally unaware of whether we think in words, pictures, sounds or something else. We are generally unaware of how we solve problems (thus the common experience of solutions out of the blue). We do not know what we are thinking just before we think it. What we are actually (not unknowingly) thinking has a huge impact on our reactions to events.

Some actions that can help us notice better include:

• Learning what senses we pay most attention to and practicing using other senses.
• Looking at the ordinary more closely. Re-examine what you think you know.
• Meeting strangers that have different views of the world. Through the lens of their experiences, things can look quite different.
• Learning more about how we learn. Noticing is a kind of temporary learning. If we know how we learn, use the same approaches to improve noticing.

Not seeing yourself

We all have opinions about how people “should” behave and are happy to point out their bad behavior, assuming that we never would do the same thing. We are not always aware of how our own behavior fails our own standards because we
do not watch ourselves in the same way that we watch others. Feedback or suggestions from others can illuminate this
blind spot. It is important to see this discrepancy as a blind spot instead of hypocrisy. In the end, the goal in dealing with
this blind spot is recognizing what is in the blind spot and accepting it. This can be a slow process, and it ultimately
involves a combination of feedback and self-reflection.

**My-side bias**

We experience the world through our own perspective and its limitations. It is hard to put ourselves in others’ position
and see the world like they do. We intellectually know that others have different perspectives, but ignore the real
consequences of this knowledge. In a confrontation, however mild, we strongly associate with our own perspective; we
stick to “my side”. This blind spot is rooted in a failure of empathy. Empathy requires a combination of a genuine caring
about the other person and the ability to see the world through the other person’s eyes. We can care about someone, but
not perceive their perspective. We can understand their perspective, but not care about them.

Developing empathy that combines caring and perspective creates a possibility of being in “their” position and seeing
their world. This is a real understanding. It can also be dangerous. Imagine being able to place yourself in the mind and
perspective of a mass murderer or terrorist. The empathy that you feel for that person clashes with your own sense or
right and wrong. The greater the empathy, the harder it is to pass judgment on their actions. They are now
understandable and hard to condemn.

**Trapped by categories**

Our ability to sort things into categories is a great and useful simplification, but it creates the risk that we fail to see the
diversity present within a category. Stereotyping is the prime example of inappropriate assumption that membership in a
group defines all the features of a member of the group. When we think that something is “merely” or “just” an example of
a group, they have reduced that thing to only that thing. “That is just a ritual” has discounted this ritual and diminished its
value. One of the most damaging sorts of over-categorization relates to people. We know that people are much more
than any single identity. Being described as American or French may be accurate, but what about French-Americans?
Are they American or French? What about Americans that like wine and French that like beer? Are they somehow no
longer in their national category because they prefer the “wrong” beverage? The child we classify as male or female,
African American or Caucasian or Hispanic or Asian won’t be diminished by that label unless we reduce that child to
nothing but that group – and reduce that group to nothing but a caricature of it. The same is true of customers,
competitors, products, services, and processes. Very few things are merely members of some category. Excess
categorization (thinking inside the box) prevents us from seeing the nuance and variation in things. Clearly, learning to
assign objects to many categories simultaneously is one way to increase creative thinking.

**Jumping to Conclusions**

Logic is a funny thing. Very young children are surprisingly literal and logical (in a formal sense) and become more
interpretive and a bit less logical (and more creative). As they learn, one of the things that they learn is that the
apparently logical answer is not always right. In fact, adults learn a wide variety of thinking patterns that allow many
implicit and explicit logical deductions to be made. This learning process differs between individuals, so what is logical
may differ between those people. Logic is not absolute, in this sense. What makes logic even more difficult to understand
is that not all logic is conscious. Intuition is best thought of as unconscious logic. The unconscious logic allows you to
jump to a conclusion.

Given a set of information, you may be able to draw a logical conclusion but be unable to explain how you reached the
conclusion. However, you may be able to reconstruct the logic by reasoning backwards from the conclusion to the origin.
This is commonly observed in fields where logic and intuition are used together – like the sciences and marketing.
Whether we conclude something through intuition or logic, we can’t evaluate that conclusion until we can see the
assumptions and intermediate choices. The author proposes a set of questions to help illuminate the “jump to the
conclusion”. With better insight into the process, alternative conclusions can be considered.

- **What are my reasons?**
- **Is the reason relevant?**
• Is this thinking logical?
• Is this reason a false dilemma? Does it present me with a false choice?
• Is this reason an appeal to my emotions?

It is important to recognize that intuition can be completely valid, but the assurance that intuition accords with logic provides a defense against bad decisions – not immunity.

Barriers to clear thinking may arise from common fallacies like confusing the source (person) with the “idea”, rejecting ideas because they are imperfect, thinking that the only options are to accept or reject an idea and confusing emotional information with objective information. Another barrier to clear thinking arises from the metaphors that lie behind many perspectives. These are similar to assumptions, but they are closer to frameworks that are used to organize or explain the context in which ideas are considered. People with different upbringings will see the world through different metaphors, and these support different logical answers to questions. This is one reason that exploration of metaphors can be so valuable in creative thinking or negotiations. Understanding the metaphors in use may permit the application of new metaphors that lead to new options.

**Fuzzy evidence**

Choices made on the basis of evidence are only as good as the evidence. You should evaluate the evidence that you use to be sure it is valid, but this is harder than it seems. It seems like most “real” decisions rest on information that is hard to validate – which is what makes the decision “real”. We have strong perceptual lenses that color what evidence seems valid. We trust data from familiar sources and distrust data from unfamiliar ones. For example, we ask our friends or members of our networks (professional, religious, scholastic, etc.) for information.

Improving validation might involve directly seeking counter-examples, contrary information or independent expert opinions. At this point, it may be valuable to ask “what would it mean if I was wrong”. We are often unconsciously attached to an outcome which biases our thinking. Asking what it would mean may reveal the bias and create space for better evaluation.

One of the biggest barriers to evaluating evidence to support a decision is that we must extrapolate into the future. On the one hand, we partly believe that the future will be like the present and partly know it will be different. But we know it will be different in different ways than we expect. That knowledge interferes with our ability to extrapolate for purposes of evaluation. We often respond by substituting a different question for the question in front of us. The substitute question is easier to answer, and we decide on that basis. Avoiding this blind spot depends on slowing down and insuring that the information being applied to the problem really applies to the problem. Automatic judgments are the sign of this sort of substitution.

**Missing hidden causes**

Humans are pattern seeking. If two events happen in proximity (pot luck dinner followed by stomach ache), we seek to explain the latter by the former. We prefer simple cause and effect. However, our pattern seeking leads us to find cause-and-effect relationships where just coincidence exists. We prefer simple explanations to complex ones and we prefer consistency. For example, when scientists first recommend one dietary change, and then contradict that advice later; we do not see this as evidence of complexity but incompetence. This simplifies the situation for us, but misleads.

Avoiding over-simplification involves a commitment to really challenge coincidence. It may be unusual that two events happen coincidently, but that does not mean that they are connected. Was the odd coincidence predicted or recognized afterwards? Is the coincidence really that surprising? Given a long life, a fair number of coincidences are certain. It may be fruitful to find some mechanism that explains how the “cause” created the “effect”.

4
Coincidences can be an important source of inspiration through our ability to create associations. Even if the facts do not immediately connect two events, the coincidence can inspire the deeper search that finds connective mechanisms and a greater understanding of a complex situation. It is the evidence that is developed that should persuade – not the initial coincidence.

**Missing the big picture**

It is easy to see an event in isolation – not indicative of any larger situation. In a busy world, we are tempted to deal with things one at a time. But some events are the result of systemic processes. Dealing with the symptom (trees) and not the root causes (forest) may mean that we’ll have to deal with this problem again.

Some tactics to see the whole situation better include:

- Creating drawings, flow charts, tables, models, diagrams, or videos to show everything together.
- Asking how this event connects to other events, whether events influence each other.
- Asking whether this is a new event and whether this is a change from the past.
- Looking ahead to imagine the consequences, intended and unintended, of making a particular decision.

Underlying each of these tactics is the need to think more abstractly about the situation. Generalization from specific events to a general pattern is not always easy and we risk extrapolating too far or in the wrong direction.

Another barrier to understanding the big picture is the difficulty of seeing the consequences of small actions. We expect big results to come from big actions, but some result from seemingly small actions. The book quotes a teenager in Harlem who worked in a fast food store. *I don’t think I could make it [in school] without a job, because that was my inspiration...if you have one thing going for you...it’s like a chain reaction. See, when I first started working, I didn’t like to go to school at all. But see, my manager told me “I wanna see your report card.” I was failing my first period class cause I was late...my manager said: “Well, I think I should cut your hours at work cause maybe you’re not getting enough sleep.” They just pushed me. If I wanted to keep this job, I had to go [to that class]. They tried really hard;[they’d] say “We don’t want you to work here forever. We want you to move on.”* Here is the counter-intuitive outcome that a desire to work is transformed into motivation to do well in school and directed at a desire for greater economic success as an adult.

The section ends with the observation that we learn how to think abstractly. Most small children know the story of the three little pigs. Very young children know the story but can’t answer the question ‘What is this story about?’ As children age, they develop better explanations.

All of the blind spots prevent us from seeing things the way they really are and thus may limit the quality of our decisions. Decreasing the impact of blind spots is both easy and hard. The entire book can be simplified as pause and think about it for a moment – this seems easy. It is hard because we are blind to our blind spots. They may be situational or vary from day to day. But taking that pause may help us learn to recognize situations better, be more empathetic towards others, and over time be less...