

'Blink' versus 'Think'

Authors explore different ways to make decisions

By Shelley Widhalm
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The covers look nearly the same — a simple white background, a one-word title. "Blink" is already a best-seller, urging readers to trust their intuition. Now comes "Think," suggesting it's sometimes better to mull things over before making decisions.

Malcolm Gladwell, author of "Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking," promises to show the reader ways that quick judgments can be educated and controlled and how to avoid those moments when instincts are "thrown off, distracted or disabled" and poor decisions result.

"Just as we can teach ourselves to think logically and deliberately, we can also teach ourselves to make better snap judgements," Mr. Gladwell writes. A staff writer for the New Yorker, Mr. Gladwell is not currently doing interviews, his publicist said.

But Michael R. LeGault — author of "Think: Why Crucial Decisions Can't Be Made in the Blink of an Eye" — says Mr. Gladwell only looks at one side of decision-making without taking into account the critical-thinking process.

"Blink" claims that the best way to make decisions and solve problems is very rapidly and using instinct and intuition," Mr. LeGault said. "The scientific public record shows just the opposite."

Mr. LeGault — an American living in Toronto, where he writes for the National Post — says his purpose is to show "that critical thinking, which is thinking using logic, rational thought and evidence, is far superior in terms of producing good, positive results."

"Blink" became popular, Mr. LeGault said, because people claim that they do not have enough time and have to operate on "blink-like processes."

The United States, he said, is morphing from an Age of Reason

to an Age of Emotion. He points to a decline in testing scores and educational performance at the nation's schools; a focus on the self as opposed to the outer world as seen, for example, in the therapy-crazed era of "knowing thyself"; and the rise of political correctness, a zero-tolerance for risk, and a favoring of litigation over innovation from fear of being sued.

"When you don't have the ability to think critically, your tendency is to avoid risk," Mr. LeGault said. "We are calling for higher and higher levels of protection from risk. . . . That's the reason the size of the government has continued to grow."

In addition, the U.S. has become politically polarized, a sign that Americans are giving up on using logic and reason in favor of relying on ideology, Mr. LeGault said. Americans think something is true because they believe it, not because there is evidence to support it, he said.

"Critical thinking is our only safeguard against delusion and deceit. Intuition and emotion can give you unreliable information about the world," he said.

Yet, Mr. LeGault does not exclude emotion or intuition as important aspects of the decision-making process, which involves many different mental faculties. A decision, he said, is a three-step

process that requires the gathering of evidence, deciding what the evidence means and reaching a conclusion, using the information gathered to make a decision or solve a problem. A fourth step is acting on the decision, he said.

Decision-making is viewed by psychologists as a two-step process, said Kent Norman, associate professor of psychology at the University of Maryland in College Park. He is the lead scientist at the Laboratory for Automation Psychology and Decision Processes at the university and teaches classes on solving problems and making decisions.

Fast decision-making occurs in situations and about things that do not hold much importance to the decision-maker or that require rapid judgments for survival, he said. For critical decisions, like deciding to buy a car or accept a new job, a quick evaluation occurs, followed by a more in-depth, analytical evaluation, he said.

"The problem is, we have this initial reaction, then we have to deal with it. Do we respond immediately with our initial intuition, or do we go to the second stage?" asked Mr. Norman, who holds a doctorate in experimental psychology. "We have an immediate response to something, then think it through."

Mr. Gladwell and Mr. LeGault

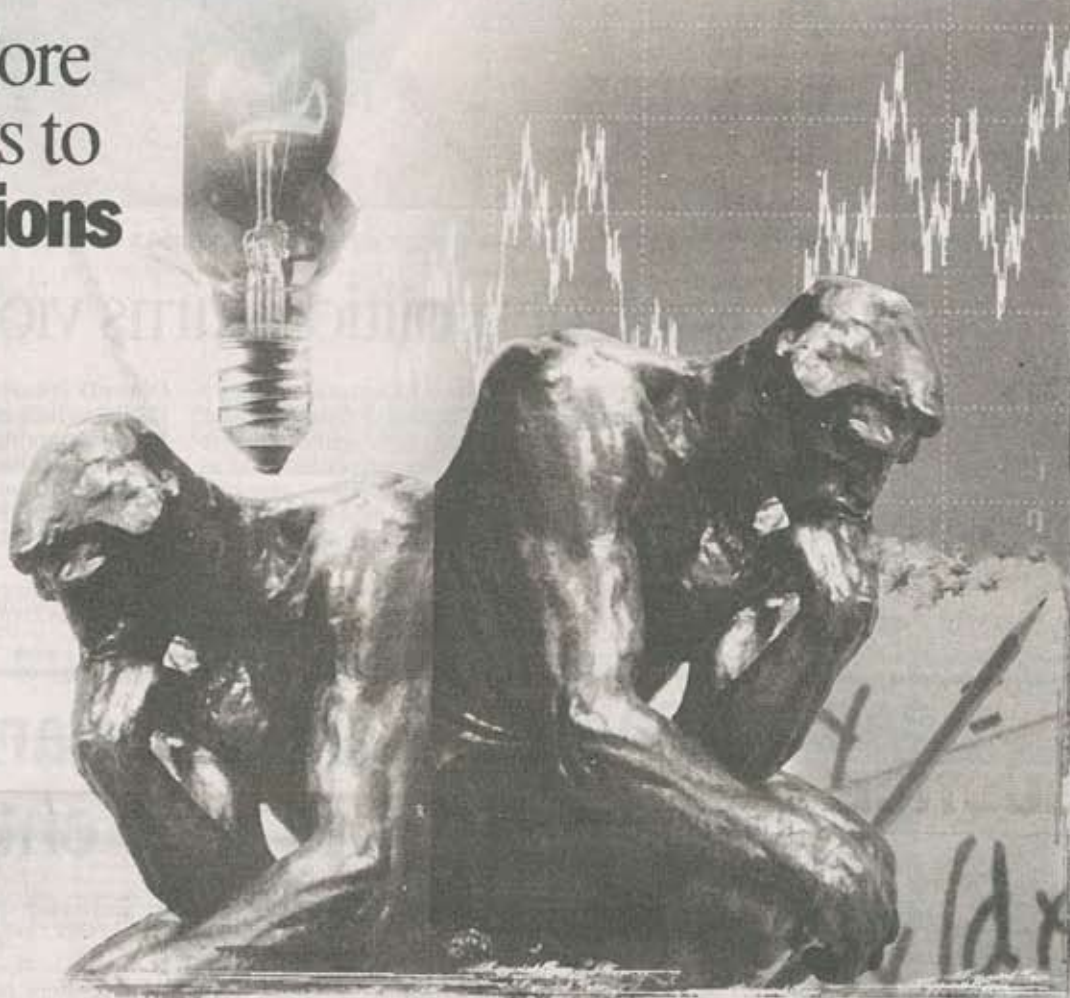
are both correct to a certain extent about how decisions are made, Mr. Norman said.

"The bottom line is that both of these authors have a good point and are raising our awareness of these two issues," he said.

People in different cultures have a different sense of time and of timing, which can affect their decision-making processes, said Charlotte Twombly, chairwoman of the sociology, anthropology and criminal justice department at Montgomery College in Rockville. People may be socialized to mull over things or to make decisions quickly, she said.

In addition, the groups with which people identify, such as those based on sex or age, the communities in which they live and their ideologies can come into play, she said.

"There are personal things that make people think more quickly. It doesn't have to do with instinct," said Ms. Twombly, a sociology professor. "When you're raised in a society, you can learn something so well, you don't have to think twice about how you're going to respond, or a culture may teach that decisions need to be deliberated."



Karen Peacock/The Washington Times

blink

THE POWER OF THINKING WITHOUT THINKING

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The Power of Thinking Without Thinking

Malcolm Gladwell

Seeing American culture and society, now raised at a time.

Th!nk

Why Crucial Decisions Can't Be Made in the Blink of an Eye

Michael R. LeGault