

## TRICKY PUZZLE NO. 4

“Judgement: Critical or Too Critical”

1. Judgement and Discernment are critical for Leaders
2. Suspending Judgement is critical for high performing Teams
3. Should leaders choose or lose Judgement?



Judging is a great cognitive ability of humans. Leaders who lack judgement cause lots of headaches and often enjoy short tenures. Judgement for leaders is based on expertise, experience and character. The best judgements are grounded in facts and solid research, canvas diverse views and interests, and follow sound reflective processes. Values play an important role too in leadership judgements, and are best applied transparently, consistently and thoughtfully. For instance, senior leaders often are involved in recruitment and promotion decisions, and research indicates that the prevalence of poor personnel choices regularly results from leaders having prejudices and ignoring more transparent human resource processes. Courage is important too, because judgement for leaders does not involve always choosing the best option or the easy option, but sometimes involves choosing the least-worst option.

Often leaders need to make judgements or strategic decisions faced with incomplete knowledge, a range of uncertainties and the unpredictability of chance. Leaders can learn from successful poker players, according to Psychologist and Poker Champion Maria Konnikova in her new book *Biggest Bluff*. It is those leaders who understand probabilities, who appreciate and can regulate their own emotional reactions, and who can resist hunches, who tend to make the best judgements in these circumstances. Donald Trump often justifies

momentous Presidential decisions on the grounds that he has a good feeling about them, but his outcomes are highly unreliable. Senior leaders also can tend to believe that their lengthy tenure guarantees more sound judgement. Ironically, academic research suggests that experience and professional expertise sometimes lead to more sloppy decisions and judgements. Senior leaders can back themselves too much, take short-cuts, ignore the tedium of step-by-step processes, and make whopping mistakes that a conscientious junior would never make. This is the problem of over-confidence, optimism bias and other well-documented deviations from quality thinking when it comes to judging.

But sometimes judging itself is the problem in leadership. Former colleagues at MIT, Bill Isaacs and Otto Scharmer, argue that leaders and others often need to “suspend judgement” in order to build productive relationships and high-performing teams. They contend that suspending judgement is one of the key leadership acts to help groups move beyond the sluggish performance of normative and positional ways of relating and operating. When I work with groups and leadership teams, I regularly find that there is a secret life of the group, which is teeming rather than teaming with judgments and opinions of each other and issues, and unhelpful norms and positionality. I use the word judgementalism to distinguish this phenomenon from the high-quality cognitive faculty of judgement – in fact, I think it is often sourced in ego and identity rather than cogitation. Even when it is thoughtful judgement, it can be applied too hastily and automatically, and it can stifle group dialogue and performance. And individual leaders at times can fail to act on their sound judgements in the face of their own and others’ judgementalism. There is often a lot of denial too, so it requires self-aware and courageous leadership to move oneself and a group beyond judgementalism, to operate in a more reflective, generative and high-performing space. Paradoxically, in this space debates over genuine differences of judgement can flourish constructively and creative solutions can start to emerge.

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