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In an increasingly noisy world, a decision-making expert says our clearest guide might very well be the voice within.

Thought Leader Interview:

# Laura Huang

*Interview by Brett Hendrie*

*Portrait by Susan Hinojosa*

**Brett Hendrie:** Many of us rely on ‘gut feeling’ or intuition in our daily lives. In your book, you argue that they are not one and the same. Please explain.

**Laura Huang:** Gut feeling gets a bad rap. Many people think of it as some mystical, magical quality that, for example, enables you to look at a **Van Gogh** painting and immediately know whether it’s real or fake. Others believe our gut feel is biased, based on heuristics and shortcuts — and that we need to be very careful in applying it.

The reason there is so much disagreement about gut feel is that we have confused it with intuition and use the terms interchangeably. Although they are related, the two are quite distinct from each other, because intuition is a process and gut feel is an outcome.

Intuition is a mode of processing nonsequential information. It can be either a short or long process during which information is accessed and external data interact with our personal knowledge and experience to enable us to form a judgment or make a decision.

Data and intuition are often perceived as opposing forces in decision-making—data being objective and quantitative while intuition is subjective and based on feelings and instincts. However, in my research I have found that data plays a significant role in informing and shaping our gut feel through the intuiting process. The outcome of the intuiting process—gut feel—often

feels like a flash of clarity, but it is actually the result of the interaction that has taken place between our personal experience and external data.

**Describe what happens during the intuiting process.**

I’ve found in my research that lots of things are happening during intuiting: we are taking in data; we’re reviewing our personal experience, our expertise, our background, our culture; we can even include data points and observations that we’re not consciously aware of but that we have absorbed over time. Then, all of this gets aggregated and culminates—almost like an executive summary — in that flash of clarity I mentioned, which is our gut feel.

**How should we distinguish intuition and gut feel from our emotions?**

One mistake we often make is, we think emotions are our gut feeling. We might feel a strong sense of urgency and think, ‘Oh, I’ve got to act on this right now.’ Or we might feel nervous and think, ‘Oh no, I really don’t want to touch that.’ Emotions are a part of it, to be sure, but they are just one of the factors embedded in the intuiting process.

To make an analogy, you can think about your emotions like children: You wouldn’t let your kids drive the car, because they would crash it. But you also don’t shove them in the trunk,

## Gut feel is the result of an interaction between our personal experience and external data.

because they could die. You want your children — and your emotions — to be in the back seat, where they can be seen and heard, but are not in control.

Here's something I have executives do when I coach them: The next time you're feeling any strong emotion — a sense of urgency, nervousness or excitement — just pause for a moment and ask yourself, 'Would I be making this same decision if I wasn't feeling this current emotion?' Then, wait two hours—or even a whole day. If you still feel the same way and want to make the same decision, it is probably your gut feel. If not, it was probably your emotions trying to climb into the front seat.

You have said that our gut feel is very dependable— but only if we use it for the right type of decisions. Please explain.

Broadly, there are four types of problems in life and work that require decisions: simple, complicated, complex and chaotic. *Simple* problems are those where there's a clear answer — a yes/no, right/wrong, probabilistic answer. Think about flipping a coin — it's always going to be heads or tails. We should never use our gut feel for simple decisions, because at best, it will be redundant.

*Complicated* problems have multiple factors and variables and may be unfamiliar, yet they still have a knowable cause-and-effect relationship. They can be considered as 'simple problems with multiple steps,' because there is still a set of rules that will lead you to the solution. For example, coordinating the ability for all employees in an organization to work remotely through the use of **Zoom** or other platforms is a complicated problem. It requires careful planning, integration, project management and coordination among multiple departments including IT, finance and other teams. The solution is clear and achievable, but it demands a structured approach and requires multiple steps. We shouldn't use our gut for these problems, either.

*Complex* problems involve so many interdependencies and nuances that you will never be able to have all the information. At best, you might get 70 to 80 per cent of what you need. Cause and effect can only be deduced in retrospect and thus, there are

|        |   | PRIORS   |  |
|--------|---|--|--|
|        |   | ✓  | !  |
| PROMPT | ✓ | <b>Eureka</b><br>A feeling of <b>Connection</b><br><i>The prompt aligns with my priors.</i>              | <b>Jolt</b><br>A feeling of <b>Displacement</b><br><i>The prompt dislodges my priors.</i>  |
|        | ! | <b>Spidey Sense</b><br>A feeling of <b>Dissonance</b><br><i>The prompt doesn't align with my priors.</i> | <i>The prompt doesn't align with my priors but I'm still intuiting. I need more data. I need to continue to experience more.</i> |

no right answers. The solution or answer only comes after the interaction of multiple elements, so it is unpredictable. For example, addressing performance issues on a team is a complex problem. Some of the causes may be easy to identify, while others may be completely hidden. Addressing a problem like this may require trial and error, experimentation and learning as you go. These are the type of situations where we have to rely on gut feel.

With *chaotic* problems, cause and effect is often unknowable; we not only struggle to define the problem itself but to grasp when it has actually been solved. It might even be impossible to definitively solve the problem. For example, for a company responding to a major cybersecurity breach, cause and effect are unclear. There are too many possible solutions to list and properly compare with each other, so the company might choose to isolate affected systems, deploy emergency security measures and conduct a forensic investigation to understand the origin of the breach. But whether the chosen measures will fully contain the breach or prevent further damage is not certain. That's why gut feel is required here.

**Say a bit more about what it takes to deal with complex and chaotic problems.**

Solving these problems requires a deep understanding of the problem itself as well as your unique role in it, based on your lived experiences—which I call your ‘priors.’ It demands a multi-faceted strategy that is fine-tuned as it is implemented—one that can only be accomplished by going beyond pure rational, hard data to include all the patterns, schemas and mental models that you’ve harnessed along the way.

When data and analysis are available and applicable, by all means, rely on those. And when you can calculate the probability of the outcome with reasonable confidence, don’t use gut feel. But for complex and chaotic problems, you need data plus intuition based on your experience to navigate them.

**Tell us about the three ways that gut feel manifests itself: Eureka moments, ‘spidey sense’ and jolts of realization.**

In my research I have found that universally, we all experience ‘aha’ moments and spidey-sense moments — those ‘uh-oh’ moments when something really doesn’t feel right. And we all experience jolts — those ‘whoa’ moments, where we fundamentally shift how we see something. Your eureka moment might feel like nervous energy; mine might feel like something in the pit of my stomach. When we start to recognize our unique cues — physical, emotional, cognitive — we can better spot when we’re experiencing a gut feel.

Eureka moments fit what we already believe — ‘Aha, that’s the solution!’ Spidey sense signals incongruence — something doesn’t fit. Maybe a candidate looks great on paper, but something feels off. A jolt is when our perspective shifts entirely — ‘Wow, I’ve been seeing this all wrong.’

**You have said that “Priors + Prompts = Gut Feel.” Please unpack that equation for us.**

You can figure out what is triggering each of the three sensations we just discussed by recognizing how your personal experience

| How to Solve...             |   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| <b>Simple problems</b>      | Beware. Identify the rule. Employ the rule. Don’t overthink.  |
| <b>Complicated problems</b> | Be strategic. Break it down into a series of simpler problems. Solve each simple problem. Add more people (experts) to help with each simple problem, if needed.                                      |
| <b>Complex problems</b>     | Be reflective. Recognize that there are too many possible solutions to list and properly compare with each other in a rational manner. Separate problems from symptoms. <b>Rely on your gut feel!</b> |
| <b>Chaotic problems</b>     | Be tactical. Recognize that there are multiple dynamics and no clear right or wrong solutions. <b>Rely on your gut feel!</b>  |

and the external data are engaged during the intuiting process. As indicated, your experience is in the form of ‘priors’—things you know, things you don’t know and things you don’t know you know. The data comes in the form of prompts. These are things you don’t know. When there is a match between your priors and the prompts, Eureka! When there is a prompt that is a mismatch with your priors, you get a spidey sense. And when your priors are being disrupted entirely, that’s a jolt. The sensations we feel come from how our priors and our prompts ‘collide.’ This is why it’s so important to prioritize your priors, because they shape your prompts. And in the prompts lies the power to shape your path.

**What can we do to improve our intuiting process?**

I’ll give you an example, but there are lots in the book. Let’s say you’re interviewing someone who looks really great on paper, but for some reason, something just feels ‘off.’ In the book I talk about ‘the rule of three’: I never hire anyone unless I’ve

met them three times in three different contexts. This doesn't have to be time-consuming—you can do it all in one 30-minute interview. Start the interview in your office — that's context one. After 10 minutes, take the individual for a walk — context two — where you will bump into colleagues and see how they interact. Then, grab a coffee downstairs — context three — where you can observe how they treat others, like baristas. By doing this, you are expanding your schemas and training your intuiting process by noticing new cues across contexts.

**You advise leaders to never become such an expert that they stop learning. Why is this so important with respect to gut feel?**

Gut feel is about situational awareness as much as it is about avoiding situational arrogance. *Situational arrogance* is a mindset where individuals rely on (what they believe is) their gut feel and have an erroneous sense of confidence and superiority in particular situations. This can happen when we rely on patterns from one domain in a new context. People perceive themselves as having highly competent, knowledgeable or successful schemas and mental models, leading them to ignore the prompts that might point them to a different intuition altogether. The key is to draw from our experiences while reigning in our situational arrogance to sharpen our intuition and gut feel.

One way to train your intuition is to adopt a novice mindset. For example, if you always brush your teeth with your right hand, try doing it with your left. You'll notice new things. The same goes for experts: stay open to new cues, even in familiar territory.

**At the end of every course you teach, you provide your students with a final nugget of wisdom. Please share it.**

I tell them this: The difference between success and failure in life is seeing the endless subtle distinctions between the things that matter, the things that are supposed to matter but don't, and the things that may or may not matter, depending on other factors.

Gut feel is not a lightning bolt that strikes at random. It is the outcome of an entire intuiting process: your experience, your pattern recognition, your emotions, your body, your environment, all simmering together. The beauty of our intuiting process is that it mines the entirety of our lived experience and draws on what we already know and what we didn't even realize we knew to produce a gut feel.

**Is there one piece of advice you'd give leaders for using intuition and gut feel to make better decisions?**

I'll try to squeeze in two. First, we each have individual intuition, but there is also collective intuition — at the team or organizational level. As leaders, we need to master our own intuition while integrating it with those around us.

Second, as indicated, our gut feel often whispers to us; it's not loud. But the world is loud — filled with sirens, machines, algorithms and recommendations telling us what to do. Often, when making a decision, we call someone we trust and ask, 'What would you do?' That's fine — but it's like inviting everyone to a dinner party and forgetting to save a seat for yourself. Remember, that whisper inside is your perspective. Don't let it get buried by the noise. The more we listen to what whispers — not just to what screams — the more we will master our intuition. **RM**

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