Business Sense: Putting Your Intuition to Work
“Intuition is how you turn experience into action.”
– Gary Klein, The Power of Intuition
Whether you realize it or not, intuition helps shape the decisions you make every day, in every area of your life — including on the job. Some people argue that relying on hunches or gut feelings in the workplace is irrational. After all, in a world of hard deadlines, high stress and bottom lines, something as abstract as intuition may feel like a risk.

But you might be surprised to learn how important intuition really is. Eighty-eight percent of administrative professionals we surveyed said they often make decisions based on gut instinct. What these workers have recognized is that good judgment sometimes comes down to following your instincts, especially when they are backed by wisdom and experience.

Employee … or Mind Reader?

How often do you make decisions based on a gut instinct?

- 56% Somewhat often
- 32% Very often
- 12% Not very often

Source: OfficeTeam and IAAP survey of 3,503 administrative professionals
By fine-tuning your intuitive skills and learning how to apply them in the workplace, you can:

- Learn to read your boss and coworkers and respond appropriately to even subtle cues
- Anticipate needs
- Predict the likely outcomes of your own and others’ actions
- Make better decisions
- Identify solutions to business problems
- Increase your value to the organization
- Advance your career

Now, this type of intuition isn’t the same as extrasensory perception (ESP). It’s more about using the abilities you already possess — such as observation and analysis — to anticipate and address the needs of those you work with.

In this booklet, we’ve gathered advice from experts and support staff about how intuition plays a role in career success. We’ve also included data from surveys of more than 3,500 administrative professionals and 1,300 senior managers conducted by OfficeTeam and the International Association of Administrative Professionals® (IAAP®).

We invite you to take our brief online quiz at www.officeteam.com/intuition to strengthen your intuitive skills and improve your on-the-job “mind reading.”

What’s Your Intuition Style?

Take our brief online quiz at www.officeteam.com/intuition to put your intuitive abilities to the test.
Eileen Behr, CAP-OM, trusts her instincts. A senior administrative assistant at SRI International and winner of the 2010 OfficeTeam Administrative Excellence Award, Behr could sense trouble was brewing when her division began considering upgrading their suite of desktop products.

After reading about the user interface and realizing how different it was from the previous version, Behr asked the information technology team to install it on her computer a few months ahead of the divisionwide rollout. “After using it, I knew this transition could be a major obstacle to productivity,” she says.

As a result, she brought in someone to train staff members on the new software. “That session, plus a couple of cheat sheets, allowed everyone to adjust to the change without losing valuable time,” Behr notes.

Behr continues to remain current on office productivity software to head off future issues. She keeps her eyes open for new hardware and software that is being used successfully both inside and outside SRI. Then, she considers how these products might make her team more successful.
Some people are naturally attuned to the needs of those around them and may easily anticipate the actions that will help them — and their colleagues — to thrive. For others, developing this ability requires more work. The effort is well worth it, however: A majority (97 percent) of administrative professionals we polled said anticipating their manager’s needs is at least somewhat important to their career growth. And 94 percent of executives we surveyed agreed.
Following are tips that can help you anticipate others’ needs more easily:

- **Apply reasoning.** When working with your supervisor or coworkers, reflect on past interactions. What concerns do they typically raise? What types of questions do they usually ask? Where have problems occurred and how were they resolved? It’s likely there is a pattern, and using your reasoning skills to identify it will serve you well. Nearly one-third (32 percent) of administrative professionals we polled said they use their reasoning skills when trying to anticipate someone’s needs without asking that person directly.

- **Understand work styles.** Getting to know the individual preferences of your manager and colleagues is essential to anticipating their needs. Your boss may like to make decisions quickly, while your teammates prefer to carefully analyze. Some people plan in advance, and others complete things at the last minute. Observe the behavior of your coworkers or ask individuals how they prefer to do things.

- **Know your organization’s business cycles.** At most companies, there are business activities that occur at the same time every year. Make the most of this predictability when you’re setting up time frames and deadlines. For instance, if you’re aware that several major projects must be completed the same week the executive report for your company’s annual meeting is due, you can plan ahead more effectively — and help reduce stress on others.

- **Conduct a post-mortem.** After a project ends, analyze what worked well and what went wrong. This enables you to strategize and come up with measures to anticipate — and prevent — future headaches.

In your opinion, what is the most effective way to anticipate the needs of someone you work with without directly asking him or her?

- Use your reasoning skills: 32%
- Look for behavioral patterns based on past experiences: 25%
- Observe the person carefully to determine his/her likes and dislikes: 16%
- Look for scheduling patterns: 14%
- Ask others who know the person well for their input: 2%
- Other: 12%

Source: OfficeTeam and IAAP survey of 3,503 administrative professionals. Responses do not total 100 due to rounding.
As you try to strengthen your ability to anticipate others’ needs, beware of the tendency to make decisions based on blind assumptions. After all, we all know the familiar adage about what happens when you assume.

How can you tell the difference? Anticipation is based on facts, reasoning and an objective analysis of the situation; you’ve considered all available information before making a decision.

Assumptions lack this rigorous check. Typically, you resort to assumptions when there are gaps in your knowledge.

Here’s a quick litmus test to determine if you’re making an assumption:

- "Everyone says the new director is ..."
  - You’re basing your decision on gossip, rumor or unsubstantiated opinions.

- "Well, she didn’t say not to ...
  - You’re jumping to conclusions.

- "It seems like she wants to ..."
  - You’re trying to guess someone’s motivation.

- "I’m usually right, so ...
  - You never question your own judgment or doubt the validity of your conclusions."
Kathleen Sjovall, CAP-OM, an executive assistant at Booz Allen Hamilton and runner-up for the 2011 OfficeTeam Administrative Excellence Award, has proven she’s developed a knack for meeting her boss’s demands before they’re vocalized. For instance, when Sjovall sees an email about a business proposal, she begins the legwork on the project in advance of being asked. Once she even arranged for an energy drink to be delivered to her executive’s hotel conference room upon hearing how tired he was during the meetings.

For Sjovall, anticipating her boss’s needs requires visualizing what it’s like to be in his shoes. When scheduling travel, for example, she imagines this scenario:

*Picture yourself getting off a plane in an unfamiliar airport. The calendar invite says the car service will pick you up, but it doesn’t say where. Curbside? Baggage claim? What do you do?*

“I envision my boss becoming frazzled as he’s making his way through the crowds, going to baggage claim and then outside, looking up and down the curb,” Sjovall says. “I try to put myself in his position and think about what questions and concerns I would have if I were him.”

Any administrative professional can fill in a time slot on a calendar, she notes, but not everyone considers the what-ifs that might prevent that meeting or event from going smoothly.

“You also must be able to think outside the block of time,” Sjovall advises. “That means giving your executive a buffer between appointments to answer email or to get from one meeting to another, or providing him directional guidance in an unfamiliar location.”
Trust your gut. It’s common advice, but few of us feel confident enough to actually put this approach into practice — at least, to any great extent.

That’s a shame because relying on your instincts can have big benefits. For one, you can make better decisions. A study from University College London found that people are more likely to perform well if they don’t overthink situations and simply trust their instincts instead.

Going with a gut feeling also allows you to make quicker decisions, a useful skill when stress is high and deadlines are short.

Here’s how you can learn to trust your instincts more:

**Become an expert.** Professionals who have good instincts collect information. They realize that the more they know about a certain subject — whether it’s the organization’s corporate culture, a senior manager’s work style or a new software product — the better their decisions will be. Whether they’re gathering facts consciously or not, they’re able to draw on this well of knowledge and move forward with a firm foundation.
Become an information collector yourself by remaining up-to-date on new developments impacting your industry, your company or your profession. Ask questions and seek clarification whenever you’re unsure of something. Tap other experts throughout your network to round out your knowledge.

**Read between the lines.** Very often, people mean much more than they say. For example, when your boss remarks, “The third-quarter report is due to the finance committee by close of business,” that probably means, “Be sure to have it on my desk by noon so I have time to review it.” Go beyond the surface and analyze the true meaning behind a colleague’s statements or actions.

**Start small.** Trusting your gut requires you to let go of a certain amount of control. You must have confidence that you know the right answer, even when you can’t explain why. So take baby steps until you become more comfortable with the process. Should you forward an unknown caller to your boss’s extension or take a message? Go with the first business-sensible answer that pops into your head, and evaluate the success of your decision afterward. Yes, you’ll make the wrong choice sometimes. But the more you use your business instincts, the more refined they’ll become — and the better your choices will be.

**Explore your options.** When making a decision, pause to plot several possible courses of action. Ask yourself the following types of questions about each one: Are the risks involved acceptable? Do the costs outweigh the potential benefits? Will this option have the support of management? By exploring every possibility according to these criteria, you’ll be able to quickly eliminate choices that will not yield the best results.

**Decide and take action.** When many individuals reach the action stage, they become paralyzed by the thought that their choice might be wrong. Be willing to commit to a direction and see it through.

Recognize that it is not possible to predict every probable consequence or foresee every contingency, no matter how thorough your research is. At some point, you must simply make a decision and move forward with it.
If you’re a manager, you’re not just interested in improving your own intuitive skills and judgment. You’d also like your employees to become better at anticipating needs and more comfortable trusting their instincts during challenging situations. Imagine how much more smoothly and efficiently the team would operate if everyone were always on the same page. And professionals who stay a step ahead of workplace needs are valuable to any organization.

In general, how long does it take you to know your manager well enough to anticipate his or her needs?

- Several months: 51%
- Several weeks: 31%
- One year or more: 18%

Source: OfficeTeam and IAAP survey of 3,503 administrative professionals
These tips can help your team members hone their intuitive skills:

- **Break the ice.** Invite employees to lunch or coffee to get to know them better outside of the office setting. At the same time, they can become better acquainted with you. Encouraging familiarity will lead to greater understanding of preferences and work styles.

  Just don’t expect everyone to be completely in tune with each other’s inclinations overnight, and don’t worry if your team isn’t immediately picking up on the unique way you prefer emails to be formatted. More than half (51 percent) of administrative professionals we surveyed said it takes them several months to get to know their manager well enough to anticipate his or her needs.

- **Encourage candid feedback.** Don’t force employees to become actual mind readers to understand what you and others are thinking. Make it clear that they should express their thoughts and opinions to each other and be candid when sharing feedback.

  Set the example yourself by not waiting until the annual performance review period to evaluate staff members on their work. Provide ongoing feedback throughout the year. And encourage them to be forthright with you, as well.

- **Support professional development.** Subsidize industry membership dues, conference costs or publication subscriptions so staff can find out about the latest trends in the field. In short, get them thinking about what’s just over the horizon, and they’ll learn how new ideas, technologies and products can benefit the business.

- **Give a sneak peek.** Keep your staff apprised of projects you’re working on. They might be able to offer a fresh perspective. Also, share your organization’s and department’s business goals so your team understands the most pressing priorities.
You can learn a great deal by watching the body language of your colleagues and managers. Say you’ve noticed that your boss tends to tug on the buttons of her jacket when she’s worried. She’s doing it right now as she approaches your desk. What should you do?

Facial expressions, gestures, posture and habitual movements like brow furrowing or throat clearing often speak volumes. In poker, such nonverbal signals are called “tells.” All players have their own unique tells — movements or gestures they tend to unconsciously make when they hold a particular hand — and these tells literally reveal to everyone at the card table what that person is thinking and feeling.
Back to our workplace example: What might be causing your boss to display this nervous habit? You suddenly realize she has a high-stakes meeting with a potential client in one hour. To help calm her nerves, you remind her of a major deal she successfully closed last month. As she rushes by, you smile and say, “Remember ABC Corporation” (the name of that client). Her face relaxes slightly. She smiles back and whispers, “Thanks.”

You read her body language and responded intuitively. This was much more effective than asking “What’s wrong?” or offering empty advice like “Don’t be nervous.”

The good news is you can learn to read body language. Here’s how:

► **Look for contextual clues.** Crossed arms are a classic sign a coworker is closed off and resistant to your ideas, right? Not necessarily. If the office AC has been running all day, a colleague with crossed arms could simply be cold. The point: Don’t jump to conclusions before considering other factors that might be influencing a person’s body language.

► **Understand individual quirks.** Your boss scowls whenever you talk to him. It looks like he’s angry, but you’ve worked with him long enough to know his expression really means he’s listening attentively. When trying to interpret someone’s gestures or facial expressions, don’t put so much stock in “classic” cues that you overlook personal differences.

► **Be aware of changes.** Often, variations in body language are more important than the gesture or action itself. For example, if a coworker who seemed relaxed throughout your conversation with her suddenly stiffens in her chair, it’s likely you said or did something that caused her emotions to shift.

► **Don’t overdo it.** Reading body language is a subtle art. Be aware of how you respond to the cues you’re interpreting. The more you focus on small shifts in posture or position, the more your own body language will be affected — showing signs of nervousness or awkwardness, for example — and that will influence your coworker’s impression of you.
A Nod and a Wink

Although each person has his or her unique nonverbal quirks, sometimes we’re all “speaking” the same body language. Here’s what common gestures usually mean:

**Head**
- Cocking the head to one side — “I’m a little confused.”
- Lowering the head — “I’m really sorry to have to tell you this.”
- Nodding — “I understand, but I don’t necessarily agree.”
- Nodding excessively — “I’m on autopilot.”
- Tipping the head back — “I don’t quite believe you.”
- Glancing at the clock — “I need to wrap this up.”
- Looking down at the floor — “You intimidate me.”
- Looking past you — “I’m starting to tune you out.”
- Looking you in the eye — “You have my full attention.”
- Narrowing the eyes — “Something seems a little fishy.”

**Eyes**
- Patting you on the shoulder — “Good work. Gotta go.”
- Placing hands behind the head — “I’m the one in control.”
- Touching the face or hair — “I’m really nervous right now.”
- Crossing the feet — “I’m comfortable and relaxed.”
- Tapping the foot — “I’ve got nervous energy to burn.”
- Quickly tapping the foot — “I’d really like to finish this conversation and get out of here.”
- Leaning forward — “I’m very interested.”
- Mirroring your gestures or posture — “I’m trying to connect with you.”
- Standing up — “We’re done here.”
Moving a 70-person team and all the necessary printers, copiers, computers and supplies from one office building to another is a daunting task, but it’s one that Susan Walsh, CAP-OM, a program administrator and executive assistant at Fidelity ActionsXchange, coordinated without missing a beat. Not only did she successfully manage the move, but she also made sure there was no downtime that impacted the team’s productivity.

To accomplish the task, Walsh developed a plan and consulted with the facilities team about logistics. Instead of simply telling her contacts in facilities what she needed, she adopted their perspective.

“I asked what I could do for them to ensure the move went smoothly. They said they’re not asked that question often,” she notes.

Walsh’s ability to view the logistics from all angles, anticipate possible challenges and proactively solve them made the move smooth and hassle-free. Her team said it was “seamless” and the facilities group told Walsh’s manager that it was one of the easiest transitions they’d handled.

Learning as much as she can about another person’s perspective and preferences is one of the ways Walsh anticipates the needs of her manager, too. When she first begins working with a new boss, she asks a lot of questions. Then she follows up with a “check-in” meeting to determine what’s working and what needs to be changed.

Although most administrative professionals use such strategies, Walsh takes it a step further: She sets up a profile with all the information she’s gathered so it’s easy for another assistant to cover for her when she’s out.
Using Your Intuition for Advancement

By now, you’ve probably realized that using your intuition isn’t so irrational after all. When you’re using your intuitive abilities, you’re actually calling upon some very rational powers: observation, analysis, critical thinking, judgment and predictive reasoning. These are skills that definitely belong in the workplace. They’ll make you more valuable to your organization and more effective when interacting with your coworkers. Your mind-reading abilities also will allow you to anticipate needs, make better decisions and develop solutions. Ultimately, they can help you advance in your career.

To get a read on your current intuitive skills, take our online quiz at www.officeteam.com/intuition.
Survey Methodology
OfficeTeam, a division of Robert Half International, worked with an independent research firm to conduct the manager survey, which included 1,314 senior managers at North American companies with 20 or more employees. OfficeTeam partnered with IAAP to conduct the online survey of 3,503 career-minded administrative professionals within the association and living in the United States or Canada.

About OfficeTeam
OfficeTeam is the world’s leading staffing service specializing in the temporary placement of highly skilled office and administrative support professionals, ranging from executive and administrative assistants to receptionists and customer service representatives. Throughout the year, we compile the data, trends and insights we uncover through our daily contact with clients and candidates and our extensive research on employment and workplace issues. We offer this information in the form of complimentary guides, articles and other materials. We have more than 300 offices worldwide and offer online job search services and career resources at www.officeteam.com. Please call 1.800.804.8367 for the office nearest you.

About IAAP
The International Association of Administrative Professionals (IAAP) is the world’s largest association for administrative support staff, with more than 550 chapters and 22,000 members and affiliates worldwide. For 70 years, IAAP has provided up-to-date research on office trends, cutting-edge publications, outstanding seminars and conferences, leadership development, global networking opportunities, and top-notch resources to help administrative professionals enhance their skills and become more effective contributors to their employers. For more information, please visit www.iaap-hq.org or call 1.816.891.6600.