Fear Instinct

Idea In Short

The Fear Instinct is the 4th among the 10 instincts identified in this book. This instinct describes our tendency to pay more attention to frightening things. The fear instinct is a powerful force that can override rational thought and lead to poor decision-making. The fear instinct is hardwired into the human brain and is designed to protect us from danger, but it can also cause us to overreact to perceived threats and ignore evidence that contradicts our fears. To counteract the fear instinct, it is important to cultivate a fact-based understanding of the world, use critical thinking and rational analysis to evaluate risks and opportunities, and be open to new ideas and approaches. By doing so, we can make informed decisions and develop effective strategies that will help us navigate the challenges and uncertainties of the business world.

Fear is a powerful instinct that has the ability to overwhelm rational thought and action. In the book Factfulness, authors Hans Rosling, Ola Rosling, and Anna Rosling Rönnlund describe how fear often distorts our perception of the world, leading us to overestimate the prevalence of rare but vivid events, such as terrorist attacks or natural disasters, and underestimate the progress and positive trends in global development. Understanding the fear instinct and learning how to counteract it is essential for making informed decisions and creating effective strategies. One of the key factors that make us susceptible to fear is the way our brains process information. The human brain is wired to respond more strongly to negative stimuli than positive ones. This is because in the course of evolution, our ancestors who were better at detecting and avoiding threats were more likely to survive and pass on their genes. As a result, our brains are more attuned to danger than opportunity. This is why we tend to pay more attention to bad news than good news, and why fear often trumps reason.

> The fear instinct is a natural, hardwired response that humans have evolved to protect themselves from danger. When our brains perceive a threat, such as a predator or a physical danger, the amygdala, a small almond-shaped structure in our

> brain, releases a surge of hormones that trigger the fight, flight, or freeze response. This response is designed to help us survive by quickly reacting to the perceived threat, either by confronting it, fleeing from it, or freezing in place.

While the fright, fight, friend, flee, or freeze responses are important survival mechanisms, they can also lead to irrational decision-making when they override our rational thought processes. This is because the fear response can be triggered by stimuli that are not actually dangerous, such as a spider or a public speaking engagement. In these situations, the fear response can cause us to overreact to perceived threats and ignore evidence that contradicts our fears. The fear instinct can also be influenced by our personal experiences, cultural beliefs, and biases. For example, someone who has had a negative experience with dogs may develop an irrational fear of all dogs, even if the dog in question poses no actual threat. Similarly, cultural beliefs and biases can shape our perception of certain groups or situations, leading to unfounded fears and prejudices. As humans, we fear a lot. Our minds are hardwired to pay more attention to frightening things. To quote Hans Rosling:

> Critical thinking is always difficult. but it's almost impossible when we are scared. There's no room for facts when our minds are occupied by fear.

Case - Ebola Outbreak

To illustrate this point, consider the example of the Ebola outbreak that occurred in West Africa from 2014 to 2016. Ebola is a deadly virus that causes severe bleeding and organ failure. The outbreak started in Guinea and quickly spread to Liberia and Sierra Leone, causing widespread panic and fear. The media coverage of the outbreak was extensive and often sensationalistic, leading many people to believe that the virus was spreading uncontrollably and could soon become a global pandemic. However, as the authors of Factfulness point out, this perception was not based on the actual facts. In reality, the Ebola outbreak was contained relatively quickly, thanks to the efforts of local health workers and international organizations such as Doctors Without Borders. While the outbreak did cause significant harm, with over 11,000 deaths recorded, it was not as catastrophic as many people feared. Moreover, the measures that were put in place to control the outbreak, such as contact tracing and quarantine, were effective and can serve as a model for future disease outbreaks. The fear of Ebola, however, had far-reaching consequences that went

beyond the immediate impact of the outbreak. For example, many countries imposed travel bans on West Africa, even though the risk of transmission was low. These travel bans had a negative impact on the economies of the affected countries, as well as on the delivery of aid and medical supplies. Moreover, the fear of Ebola led to a diversion of resources from other health issues, such as malaria and HIV, which are much more prevalent but do not generate the same level of media attention. The Ebola outbreak is just one example of how fear can distort our perception of reality and lead to misguided decisions. In order to counteract the fear instinct, it is important to have a fact-based understanding of the world, and to use critical thinking and rational analysis to evaluate risks and opportunities. This requires a willingness to seek out and examine evidence that may challenge our preconceptions, and to avoid the temptation to rely on anecdotal evidence or emotional appeals.

Fear and coercion

This is why fear is not only destructive, but also persuasive as a coercive, compliance mechanism. When people are afraid, their ability to differentiate facts and fiction dramatically diminishes. Because fear occupies so much of our attention, it also can misguide our priorities. As Edmund Burke wrote in England twenty years before the American Revolution:

> No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear.

Broadbent's Filter Model

According to this model, our minds selectively decide what reaches it. The world contains vast amounts of information; we need such a mental filter to avoid sensory overload and separate signals from noise. We carry out all semantic processing [understanding] only after our mental filters have approved of the messages deemed worthy for further processing. So, we do not understand the messages that our mental filters reject. Consequently, we choose only those messages that we wish to hear / understand. A large proportion of information that gets through our mental filters tends to be the unusual or scary. Hence, we tend to make generalizations based on limited exposure. However, the more of the unusual we see, the more these events convince us of the unusual as the norm. Hence, the term availability heuristic. According to this heuristic, when we make decisions, we tend to be

swayed by what we remember. Many things, such as our beliefs, expectations, emotions, and feelings as well the frequency of exposure influence what we remember. Media coverage (e.g., Internet, radio, television) makes a big difference. When rare events occur they become very visible to us as they receive heavy coverage by the media. This means we are more likely to recall it, especially in the immediate aftermath of the event.

How fear shapes our behavior?

Fear and availability heuristic pose several challenges. However, the most concerning is that these phenomena mislead people into losing sight of the real dangers. For example, Professor Gerd Gigerenzer from the Max Planck Institute for Human Development conducted a fascinating study that showed in the months following September 11, 2001, Americans were less likely to travel by air. Instead, they were more likely to travel by car. It is understandable why many Americans would have been fearful of air travel following the incredibly high profile September 11 attacks. However, the unfortunate result is that many Americans died on the highways at alarming rates following 9/11. This is because highway travel is far more dangerous than air travel. More than 40,000 Americans die each year on America's roads. Fewer than 1,000 people die in airplane accidents. And, even fewer people die aboard commercial airlines.

Risk evaluation

Our minds constantly scan the sensory information we receive for any indication of danger. As soon as we sense danger, our attention shifts from whatever we were doing to assess the level of risk and the possible responses.

Risk = Danger x Exposure.

The risk depends not on how scared it makes you feel, but rather on:

1. How dangerous it is? And,
2. How much you are exposed to it?

Evolutionary baggage

Our forefathers lived in harsh, predatory environments for thousands of years. They constantly improved their ability to notice and respond to danger before it killed them. Hence, this instinct proved tremendously useful to our ancestors. Millennia of evolutionary adaptation has baked the fear instinct into our minds. Fear kept our ancestors alive; however, even though many of these dangers have gone, the perception remains. Hence, we tend to overuse this capability. We focus so much on potential dangers that we miss potential benefits. We also let our fears lead us astray into making bad decisions that leave us worse off in the long run.

Advantages

While the fear instinct can sometimes lead to irrational decision-making, it also has several benefits that have helped humans survive and thrive throughout history. Some of the benefits of the fear instinct include:

- **Protection from danger:** The fear instinct helps us avoid or respond to threats, such as predators, natural disasters, or physical harm. This allows us to protect ourselves and stay alive in dangerous situations.
- **Improved decision-making:** In some cases, fear can improve decision-making by focusing our attention on the task at hand and helping us avoid distractions. For example, a surgeon performing a high-risk procedure may be more focused and careful when experiencing a healthy dose of fear.
- **Motivation to take action:** Fear can also motivate us to take action to avoid or confront the source of our fear. For example, the fear of failing an exam may motivate a student to study harder and perform better.
- **Increased self-awareness:** Fear can also help us become more aware of our own limitations and vulnerabilities, which can lead to greater self-awareness and personal growth. For example, the fear of public speaking may prompt someone to seek out public speaking training or therapy to overcome their fear and improve their skills.

Examples of the benefits of the fear instinct can be seen in many aspects of our lives. For example, the fear of contracting a serious illness may motivate us to maintain a healthy lifestyle, such as eating a balanced diet and exercising regularly. Similarly, the fear of financial insecurity may motivate us to save money and invest wisely for the future. In both cases, the fear instinct is prompting us to take actions that can lead to positive outcomes.

The fear instinct has also played a role in historical events that have shaped the course of human history. For example, the fear of nuclear war during the Cold War era prompted world leaders to engage in arms control negotiations and diplomacy, which ultimately helped prevent a catastrophic nuclear conflict. Similarly, the fear of the rapid spread of infectious diseases has led to the development of vaccines and improved public health infrastructure, which have saved countless lives and prevented pandemics.

Shortcomings

The fear instinct, while important for survival, can also lead to shortcomings in our decision-making. Here are some examples:

- **Overestimation of risk:** The fear instinct can cause us to overestimate the likelihood of negative outcomes, leading us to make irrational decisions based on unfounded fears. For example, during the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, many people in other parts of the world were afraid of catching the virus and overestimated the risk of contracting it, despite the fact that the disease was not easily transmissible and was primarily affecting a specific region of the world.
- **Ignoring evidence:** When our fear instinct is triggered, we may ignore or discount evidence that contradicts our fears. For example, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, many people were afraid of flying and avoided air travel, even though statistics showed that flying was still a safe mode of transportation and that the risk of dying in a terrorist attack was extremely low compared to other risks, such as car accidents.
- **Biases and prejudices:** Our fears can also be influenced by our personal experiences, cultural beliefs, and biases, leading to unfounded fears and prejudices. For example, many people in Western countries have an irrational fear of sharks, despite the fact that the risk of being attacked by a shark is extremely low. This fear is often perpetuated by media coverage and popular culture, which portray sharks as vicious and predatory creatures.
- **Inaction:** The fear instinct can also lead to inaction, as we become paralyzed by our fears and fail to take action to address a problem or challenge. For example, during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries were slow to implement measures such as lockdowns and mask mandates, due in part to fears of the economic and social consequences of these measures. This delay in action likely contributed to the rapid spread of the virus and the high death toll.

In all of these examples, the fear instinct led to suboptimal decision-making and outcomes, highlighting the importance of counteracting this instinct with a fact-based understanding of the world and a rational, evidence-based approach to decision-making.

Overcoming This Instinct

To counteract the fear instinct, it is important to cultivate a fact-based understanding of the world. This involves using data and evidence to challenge our assumptions and update our beliefs. By doing so, we can gain a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the world, and develop effective strategies to address the challenges we face. It is also important to use critical thinking and rational analysis to evaluate risks and opportunities. This involves weighing the potential benefits and costs of a given action, and considering the likelihood of different outcomes. By taking a rational and evidence-based approach, we can make informed decisions and avoid being swayed by irrational fears and biases. Finally, being open to new ideas and approaches is essential to counteracting the fear instinct. The world is not a static, unchanging place, and the challenges we face today may not be the same ones we will face tomorrow. By being willing to adapt and innovate, we can stay ahead of the curve and develop effective strategies to address the challenges and uncertainties of the future.

Factfulness Strategies

One of the most effective ways to overcome fear and gain a more accurate perspective on the world is to practice what the authors of Factfulness call "factfulness." Factfulness is the habit of using data and evidence to challenge our assumptions and update our beliefs. This involves seeking out reliable sources of information, such as scientific studies, government statistics, and reputable news outlets, and using them to test our hypotheses and refine our understanding of the world. For example, if we are concerned about the risk of terrorism, we can look at the data on terrorist attacks and fatalities over time, and see that while the number of attacks has increased in recent years, the number of fatalities has decreased. This suggests that counterterrorism measures are having an effect, and that the risk of being killed in a terrorist attack is actually quite low compared to other risks, such as car accidents or heart disease. Another example is the global trend of decreasing poverty and increasing prosperity. While it is easy to focus on the persistent poverty and inequality that still exist in many parts of the world, it is important to also acknowledge the progress that has been made. According to data from the World Bank, the global poverty rate has declined

from 36% in 1990 to 9.2% in 2019. This is a remarkable achievement that should be celebrated and built upon, rather than dismissed or ignored. Factfulness also involves recognizing that the world is not a static, unchanging place, but is constantly evolving and improving. This means that the problems and challenges we face today are not necessarily the same ones we will face tomorrow, and that the solutions and strategies that worked in the past may not be effective in the future. To stay ahead of the curve, we need to be open to new ideas and approaches, and be willing to adapt and innovate. The fear instinct is a powerful force that can distort our perception of the world and lead us to make irrational decisions. To counteract this instinct, we need to cultivate the habit of factfulness, which involves using data and evidence to challenge our assumptions and update our beliefs. By doing so, we can gain a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the world, and develop effective strategies to address the challenges we face. The Ebola outbreak serves as a reminder of the dangers of fear, but also as an example of the power of rational thinking and evidence-based action. By learning from this example and others like it, we can build a more resilient and sustainable future for ourselves and for future generations.

Tips For Consultants

Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt [FUD] are emotions that plague consultants. In fact, the best consultants also tend to be tend to be insecure overachievers. In the article on FUD, I provide tips to deal with negativity and emotions that derail us. Most consultants that fall victim to FUD do so unwittingly. Often, they are overwhelmed by their drive to satisfy the client, deliver superior client outcomes, manage challenging client stakeholders, manage their billability, demonstrate value, etc. Working on survival mode, the consultant is most likely to abandon patience in favor of pressure. That's when FUD manifests itself and fear sets in. High-pressure consulting situations can be tricky to navigate in the heat of the moment. In the long run, consultants should learn to properly handle fear to deliver a lasting impact on the client.

Summary

Consulting is a high-powered profession. Not everyone is cut out for the consulting profession. Consulting requires going to the extremes, putting in long hours and the constant drive to excel. For those not prepared for this long-haul, the consulting profession

can lead to serious physical and mental health problems. As BBC quotes, if consulting isn't your calling:

> Don't persist in a job that doesn't suit you – quitting a job you “can't cope with” is not a sign of failure but a sign of good sense and emotional maturity

The fear instinct is a natural response that is hardwired into the human brain to protect us from danger. However, it can also lead to irrational decision-making when it overrides our rational thought processes. The fear instinct can cause us to overreact to perceived threats and ignore evidence that contradicts our fears. To counteract the fear instinct, it is important to cultivate a fact-based understanding of the world, use critical thinking and rational analysis to evaluate risks and opportunities, and be open to new ideas and approaches.