Malcolm Gladwell wants you to stop ignoring your hunches.

It's all in the first two seconds: That's when we see something, or someone, and feel right—or wrong. We get only one chance to have a first impression, and that impression often forms almost immediately. Society and business have trained us to automatically reject those snap judgments as uninformed and reflexive—and *that*, argues Malcolm Gladwell, is a mistake. In *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (Little, Brown), Gladwell warns that a hunch—the first thing that pops into your head, before you learn all the facts—can be a powerful thing, something to be acknowledged and factored into your decision-making. It turns out that sometimes, the less you know about something, the better your judgment about it.

A *New Yorker* staff writer and author of the best-selling *The Tipping Point*, Gladwell, 41, spoke by phone from his New York apartment with *Across the Board* managing editor Matthew Budman.

Are you telling us to trust our first impressions?

Not exactly. We should take our first impressions seriously—which is slightly different than *trust*, because sometimes those first impressions are misleading. The danger is in thinking that what's going on in that first two seconds doesn't matter. Sometimes it matters in a really good way, and sometimes it matters in that it misleads us. But we *must* pay attention.

Do we spend too long making decisions?

We tend to think that the more time we've spent making a decision, the better that decision necessarily is—and that's simply wrong. Now, there are certain situations, when we have the luxury of time and decision-making aids and a lot of data to sort through—sure, take your time. But when we're talking about the most common kind of decisions—those made in the moment, based on necessarily limited information—we have to be more respectful of the part of our brain that works really, really quickly. In certain ways, we're smarter than we think, and it's foolish to overlook that faculty of decision-making; it's an enormously valuable tool.

But most of us make bad snap decisions—isn't that part of why we *don't* trust our first impressions?

Yeah, we do make bad decisions. Sometimes this faculty is fantastic, and sometimes it's not. We have to be smarter about knowing how to distinguish between those two states. Making good snap judgments isn't a natural faculty that all of us are born with—it's something we need to work on. As we become expert at something, the ways in which we make decisions changes. We become a lot better at understanding why we're making decisions the way we are, and a lot more resistant to some of the biases that impede the rest of us.

But experts have their own biases and make their own mistakes, right? *Blink* opens by discussing a museum's experts who fail to recognize a statue as a fake.

Well, the people at the Getty Museum were blinded by their desire—they so wanted that sculpture to be real! We need to recognize cases in which we're not objective and bring in outsiders to come and take a look. They should have been smart enough to ask an outsider—someone without a vested interest—for a snap judgment.

The corporate world has been trying to take snap judgments *out* of decision-making, to make it more of a formal process. Do all the flow charts and matrices get it wrong?

It worries me when people try to systematize a lot of this stuff, because something is lost in the translation. We've got to take a step backward and respect the mystery of human decision-making.

It happens more quickly than we think, right?

That's where what I call "thin-slicing" comes in. The truth about something can very often be found in a little sample; we are capable of making rel-

Brooke Williams

atively sophisticated judgments based on far less evidence and information than we think. We think we're gathering from here, there, and all kinds of places. We're not. And researchers have shown this experimentally, by having students fill out teacher evaluation forms. You can have them sit in the classroom all semester long, or you can have them look at ten minutes of the teacher on tape, or only five seconds—with the sound off!—and they make the same judgment all three times. What that says is that we're using a very thin slice of experience to make a conclusion about a teacher. We don't use a lot of data to draw conclusions about people. That principle is the reason why snap judgments can be so accurate.

In conducting job interviews, HR experts often recommend spending hours or even days with candidates. Is that a waste of time or even counterproductive?

It depends on what you're interested in. If you're trying to hire someone to sell perfume on the main floor of Saks Fifth Avenue, your snap judgment is going to be really, really important, because you want someone who can immediately communicate warmth and energy and helpfulness and honesty and attractiveness. So how you feel about them when they walk into your office, in that first instant, completely matters.

But if you're hiring someone to write software code in a back room, your first impression is not important at all, because the kinds of things you're interested in can't be discovered in that first instant. In fact, you'd make a better decision if you never meet the candidates at all. Whether they're attractive, warm, friendly, extroverted—does that matter? No. You want to know: Can they focus on a task, in a smart way, for hours on end? That's a very different quality.

Do certain human characteristics overwhelm what's important? Do we look at the wrong things in job interviews?

Blink tells a story about a trombonist who won an audition with the Munich Philharmonic, but when she came out from behind the screen, the conductor couldn't get past the fact that she was a woman; she had to spend years in court to take the seat she had won. It's a case in which they *were* looking at the wrong things. In job interviews, we need to be aware of precisely what we are interested in finding out about this person—and what is irrelevant. And we need to remove the source of the irrelevant information, because that's only going to mess us up.

Can interviewers learn to block out what's *not* important?

Maybe twenty years from now, our social stereotypes will have changed to the point where a conductor can look at a female trombonist and not have the same hangup. We've progressed to the stage where if the doctor who's treating us is a woman, or an African-American, we're not worried. We would have been worried fifty years ago; a lot of us have come a long way in dealing with that source of unconscious bias. Movement is possible, but it's tricky—it requires society to reconfigure the way it talks and thinks about people in various roles.

Now, thin-slicing is much more broadly applicable than just in personality assessments. I was particularly struck by your discussion of Cook County Hospital's unusual handling of people complaining of chest pain—producing superior diagnoses by giving doctors *less* information about the patients. How do people react to that idea?

Badly. Nobody wants to hear that. We're in love with maximizing information. We now have this wonderful tool, the Internet, which allows us to gather enormous amounts of information at the drop of a hat, and we have computers, which can store every conceivable piece of data. We've wedded ourselves to the idea that more information is always better, and that's just not true. In fact, with decisions made on the spur of the moment, it's demonstrably false.

At the hospital, factors that one would assume to be crucial, like age and medical history, turn out to be irrelevant in making a diagnosis. In other contexts, is there a best way to learn which information to eliminate?

That's where the hard work is. At Cook County, they sat down and figured out statistically what mattered and what didn't and then went back and changed the spur-of-the-moment decision-making process. I think that's a good model for what we have to do. Part of taking decision-making seriously is learning what information to throw out. In *Blink*, I write about a car salesman who sat down and figured out that he needed to throw out his impressions of the way people look. They were not helping him to be a good salesman.

Last: A lot of our readers will be interested in what you learned about CEOs and height. You surveyed Fortune 500 companies—

—and found out that their CEOs were all tall. I'm not the first person to notice that as people earn more, they get taller.

Not in that order, I assume.

Right! But height plays an enormous role in one's ability to succeed in the world. And I find that really disturbing. If someone's height is playing more than the most trivial role in our assessment of their fitness for the executive suite, then we're in trouble. There's too much at stake to let something that's utterly irrelevant creep into the picture. How many other things are we unaware of that we're letting bias our hiring decisions?

Is there anything that can be done to help the 85 percent of businessmen who are under 6 feet tall?

Sure! Have job interviews where they don't see how tall you are.

Behind a screen, perhaps?

It's actually not a bad idea. ♦