**Thinking, Fast and Slow** by Daniel Kahneman

Reviewed by Capt Ben Griffiths AAC

Daniel Kahneman is a Nobel Prize winning psychologist and this book is firmly within the compass of his expertise. Indeed, it explores much of the findings over his career, particularly in conjunction with a friend called Amos Tversky. This is the first time I've read a book about psychology but Kahneman manages to pitch all his work in such a manner that is accessible and extraordinarily easy to digest. The book is broken down into parts that slowly build up his model, point out some, often unavoidable, pitfalls but then suggests some pointers and ways in which we can mitigate some of the less helpful elements of human evolution. In any case, I’d wager that regardless of your understanding about how the human mind functions, you’re going to find some pretty stunning ideas in this book.

It's also worth noting that *Thinking, Fast and Slow* was first published in 2011 and over a million copies have been bought worldwide. It's on best-selling lists, 'Must Have' lists, won awards and is generally highly regarded and well reviewed. As such, I will keep this review in the context of leadership.

We start our journey with an introduction to the ‘Characters of the Story’ – System 1, our subconscious and System 2, our ‘somewhat more conscious’. To use Kahneman’s illustration, if you were to do the sum 2 + 2 you will automatically come back with 4. That
was System 1. If, however, I ask you to do the multiplication 17 x 24, you've engaged a far more active part of your mind. That's your System 2. It's important to stress two things: firstly, "consciousness" is my simple description of Kahneman's more complex ideas and, secondly, that the two systems are only a model or aid to help us understand how we think; as Kahneman explains, '...there is no one part of the brain that either of the systems would call home.'

With the two systems established, new concepts are introduced through the remainder of the book with some really standing out for me. For example, 'What you see is all there is' or WYSIATI. We often fight for information to make informed decision, but System 1 doesn't care and is extraordinarily good at jumping to conclusions. Kahneman argues, therefore, that the challenge is not about trying to find more information because it is not the quality or quantity of data that matters to our brain, just the development of a coherent story so that we can form a conclusion. Indeed, less information makes it easier to fit all the pieces together into a narrative. So, WYSIATI is less about not knowing something, but not knowing that we don't know it in the first place. As Kahneman says, '...we can be blind to the obvious, and we are also blind to our blindness.'

Elsewhere in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, the author discusses our fondness for finding causation. This wasn't a new concept to me, and I'm sure neither is it to you, but I was surprised by how engrained it is in our psyche. 'System 1 is highly adept in one form of thinking' Kahneman argues, 'it automatically and effortlessly identifies causal connections between events.' Without our asking, or even knowing, our mind is permanently trying to find reasons behind something. Causation almost forms a basis of how we understand the world, and as a result '...a large event is supposed to have consequences, and consequences need causes to explain them.' With an appreciation of causation, it's easier to understand a couple of other topics spoken about in the book.

If there is in fact less actual causation than our mind credits there is, then luck has a bigger role in our lives than we are inclined to believe. That's a somewhat simplistic summary, and Kahneman has plenty of studies and anecdotes to explain his position. Either way it convinced me, as did Kahneman's thesis, that luck has some bearing on leadership, a point he makes in the form of a warning. 'A few lucky gambles' the author suggests, 'can crown a reckless leader with a halo of prescience and boldness.' The issue isn't really that
luck affects outcomes, but more that we don’t appreciate it does and it some cases downright deny that it has.

_Thinking, Fast and Slow_ also discusses our biases at some length, for instance the ‘Halo Effect’. Everyone is generally familiar with what biases are, however this book doesn’t talk about biases that are learned or cultural but ones which are engrained into how our mind works. Some of them are subtle, but have a no less profound effect on how we think. Perhaps the more concerning element of psychological biases, though, is where Kahneman provides evidence that actually being taught about them doesn’t seem to help us. Writing with reference to an experiment that demonstrated individuals relieve themselves of responsibility in groups, Kahneman explains, ‘Changing one’s mind about human nature is hard work and changing one’s mind for the worse about oneself is even harder.’

So what will I take away from this book? I’ll echo all the sentiments of the other reviewers out there: _Thinking, Fast and Slow_ has opened my mind to psychology in a way that nothing else has done before. If you’re looking for a book centred around leadership with obvious lessons, this isn’t it. This book is far broader than that and an arguably vital addition to one’s bookshelf. It’s worth noting that a lot of Kahneman’s examples hail from the world of business and he also regularly talks about statistics and economics; however, even then it doesn’t take too much of a stretch to apply his principles to our line of work. Indeed, our own leadership doctrine lists behavioural science as a professional competence. Reading _Thinking, Fast and Slow_ makes it clearer why. Even with a basic understanding of the topics discussed, it can be seen that they influence every decision we make as leaders, as teams and indeed that subordinates make.

The book is full of concepts but thankfully Kahneman’s writing style makes taking everything in easy. He has not only successfully enthused me with an appreciation of psychology, he’s done it by taking advantage of some the very ideas he discusses.

Daniel Kahneman

_Thinking, Fast and Slow_

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