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The Scout Mindset

Why Some People See Things Clearly and Others Don't

Julia Galef • © 2021

From THE SCOUT MINDSET by Julia Galef Summarized by
arrangement with Portfolio, an imprint of Penguin Publishing
Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. • 288 pages

Life Advice / Psychology / Cognitive Psychology / Cognitive Biases

Take-Aways

- The “Scout” mind-set accepts the facts instead of engaging in wishful thinking.
- The “Soldier” mind-set regards admitting an error as defeat.
- People overestimate the importance of the social cost of the truth and of what other people think of them.
- Even people who want to have – and think they do have – a Scout mind-set can deceive themselves.
- Testing yourself for selective skepticism can reveal unwarranted credulity.
- People facing disaster often embrace “motivated reasoning” as a survival mechanism, but it works against them.
- People identifying with groups or ideologies put their objectivity at risk.

Recommendation

How should you think about thinking? According to cognition expert Julia Galef, people often make a decision before getting all the relevant facts, and then defend their choice against anything that does not support it. The result, all too often, she writes, is poor, sometimes disastrous, decision-making. Intel's history serves as a stark example of the advantages of what Galef calls the "Scout" mind-set, while France's disastrous Dreyfus affair exemplifies the pitfalls of a "Soldier" approach.

Summary

The "Scout" mind-set accepts the facts instead of engaging in wishful thinking.

The resolution of the Dreyfus affair exemplifies the "Scout" mind-set in action: In 1894, the French army discovered someone was selling military secrets to Germany. Investigators suspected Alfred Dreyfus. His rank gave him access to the secrets, and he was unpopular among his fellow officers because he was the only Jew on staff.

Investigators submitted handwriting samples to two experts, one of whom confirmed that the writing matched Dreyfus's; the other did not. The investigators discounted the skeptical expert because he worked for the Bank of France; Jews were powerful in finance and the investigators thought this swayed his judgment. Dreyfus protested his innocence, but faced a guilty verdict for treason and a life sentence on Devil's Island.

"The metaphor of reasoning as a kind of defensive combat is baked right into the English language, so much so that it's difficult to speak about reasoning at all without using militaristic language."

Shortly after Dreyfus went to Devil's Island, Colonel Georges Picquart became the French chief of counterespionage, with an assignment to gather additional evidence against Dreyfus. Picquart disliked Dreyfus and believed him guilty. But when new letters to the Germans surfaced, Picquart noticed the handwriting on these resembled that on the memo attributed to Dreyfus. The handwriting expert let slip that another agent had been trained to match Dreyfus's writing. Picquart immediately understood that whoever was sending secrets to the Germans mimicked Dreyfus's handwriting to frame Dreyfus for the espionage. Disturbed by the discrepancies, Picquart dug for the truth, making enemies in the French army.

After the army had sent Picquart on a risky mission that he unexpectedly survived, they arrested him for leaking information. He persisted, and, thanks to his efforts, years later Dreyfus received a full pardon and reinstatement. Picquart exemplified the Scout mind-set, which is predicated upon accuracy-motivated reasoning. Valuing accuracy is objective and intellectually honest.

The “Soldier” mind-set regards admitting an error as defeat.

People with a “Soldier” mind-set look for evidence to confirm what they already believe; they rationalize, deceive themselves and engage in wishful thinking. Adopting a Soldier mind-set can be more comfortable than facing facts, and you can feel better about yourself if you avoid unflattering realities.

Those who seem convinced and utterly certain can more easily persuade others to adopt their positions. When considering a claim, people implicitly ask: Who would believe this and if I choose to believe it, how will that choice shape other people’s impression or image of me? In psychology, this is known as “impression management.” Going along to get along may provide another reason for adopting a Soldier mind-set.

“Life is made up of judgment calls, and the more you can avoid distorting your perception of reality, the better your judgment will be.”

Social groups coalesce around the sharing of beliefs and goals. Members who disagree find themselves alienated from the group to the precise degree they expressed dissent. Not rocking the boat can be pragmatic, because the group could be right; but even if the group is wrong, many people find conforming is the easier path. Some groups are so restrictive they inculcate “tall poppy syndrome”: a bias against ambition. Members conform to the group’s expectations, even in their own thoughts. Tall poppy syndrome is an extreme example of the Soldier mind-set. Such motivated reasoning resists change, because it secures something the Soldier holds in high esteem, such as a worthy self-image or social acceptance.

Short-term consequences may weigh more heavily on a person’s decisions than long-term consequences. The Soldier mind-set fosters this “present bias,” even though it can sabotage goals and plans. Excessive, unjustified optimism can be an immediate motivator. But it can also discourage you in the long-term should future events or outcomes fail to live up to your early, irrational optimism. Since lies add up, self-deception carries risks and contradictions that may surface inconveniently. Thinking like a Scout helps mitigate this fallout.

People overestimate the importance of the social cost of the truth and of what other people think of them.

Surveys show that most people do not tell their doctors the truth about whether they are taking their medications correctly or whether they understand what their doctors tell them. The usual reason is that they fear embarrassment and want the doctor to think well of them – even though what the doctor thinks of them is of little importance compared to that of exchanging accurate information regarding the best possible medical care.

Worrying about what other people think exaggerates the importance of social costs – how other people’s opinion of you might affect you socially. Intuition and instinct tend to prompt people to worry about and focus on the short term; reason is more effective in securing long term benefits.

People find immediate rewards tempting, despite high long-term costs. They underestimate how false beliefs can hurt them in the long term and overvalue other people's judgment. In this way, they incline toward a Soldier mind-set, even when a Scout mind-set would serve them better.

However, a Scout mind-set is gaining greater acceptance in today's world as businesses everywhere shift from a hierarchical command-and-control structure to more participatory management systems. Clarity of vision, thinking and planning long term, and forging your own path regardless of what others think will serve you well in today's "Scout's world" that places greater value on independent thinking and imaginative – though reasoned – responses to crises, issues and everyday problems.

Even people who want to have – and think they do have – a Scout mind-set can deceive themselves.

The ability to make what seems to be a rational and compelling argument in favor of your position doesn't count for much. Thinking of yourself as objective and rational can do you a disservice because you then discount how your various biases and irrational motivations shape your thoughts and actions. For a Scout, actions – not words or beliefs – have significance. The willingness to admit mistakes exemplifies the Scout mentality, because Scouts never regard their own reasoning – or even irrational conclusion-drawing – to be flawless. Another indicator of the Scout mentality is being open to and acting on criticism.

People with a Scout mind-set recognize justified criticism. For example, when someone published a negative review of *On the Origin of Species*, the book's author, Charles Darwin, wrote a letter praising the critic for his accurate summary of the book and fair criticism.

"But the biggest sign of Scout mind-set may be this: Can you point to occasions in which you were in Soldier mind-set?"

A willingness to double-check to see whether you erred in an assumption or conclusion characterizes the Scout mind-set. For example, a woman opened two replies to her requests for interviews. One, from a man, addressed her as "Ms." The other, from a woman, addressed her as "Dr." She tweeted about what she saw as a pattern in her correspondence: women were far more likely than men to address her by her proper title: "Dr."

Thousands of people "liked" her tweet and affirmed her impression that the imbalance indicated gender bias. However, she tested this impression by going through her correspondence carefully. On doing so, she saw that 8% of men and 6% of women had addressed her as "Dr." She returned to Twitter to admit her initial statement had been an error.

Andy Grove, the co-founder of Intel struggled against his market competitors to buy the company's mainstay, memory chips. Amid the fight, he asked his co-founder, Gordon Moore, what would happen if the board pushed them out and hired a new CEO. Moore's answer: "He would get us out of memories"; that is, a new leader would find a way to avoid using memory chips. The solution was so obvious that Grove and Moore decided to do it themselves. This "outsider test" means asking what an outsider would do. Grove's and Moore's decision saved Intel.

Testing yourself for selective skepticism can reveal unwarranted credulity about statements and arguments that support your position.

You may like an article that supports your politics, offers boneheaded quotations from the other side and says that such quotations are perfectly characteristic of their thoughtlessness. However, what if an article from the other side similarly cherry-picked quotations? Would you consider it fair and representative?

The “status quo bias test” asks whether you would choose the present situation if you were not already in it. For example, someone blogging about Brexit felt conflicted about which way to vote. She asked herself, “If we weren’t already part of the European Union, would I think it was a good idea to vote to join?” She decided she would not. Such thought experiments can indicate whether your reasoning might change with your motivations. They may also dispel the illusion your reasoning is objectively true.

“One study examined the autopsy results for patients who had been given diagnoses with ‘complete certainty,’ and found that in 40 percent of those cases, the diagnosis was incorrect.”

People frequently express undue certainty about their knowledge, and even more so about their opinions. This is not always due to motivated reasoning; sometimes, it’s a matter of wanting to feel sure. Anytime you think you are absolutely correct in your facts or opinions, question yourself. Such overconfidence may be a symptom of a Soldier mind-set.

People facing disaster often embrace motivated reasoning as a survival mechanism, but it works against them.

Turning to motivated reasoning amid crisis is logical, because uncertainty leads you to seek linear cause-and-effect thinking. People practicing the Scout mind-set have bad days and need coping strategies, too; but they don’t indulge in coping mechanisms that cloud their logic. They assess the situation, enumerate the positives and consider the progress they have made toward solving the problem at hand and toward formulating long-term strategies to cope with problems that will arise.

“The goal isn’t to attribute everything to luck. It’s to do your best to mentally separate out the role that luck plays in your results from the role that your decision-making plays, and to judge yourself based on the latter.”

According to the “self-belief model,” you must believe in your chance of success and ignore facts that undermine that possibility. Doing otherwise, so the thinking goes, brings negative results. The flaw of this model is that it allows no questions or risk measurement. Assessing the probability of success is important because it helps you to determine how much investment – whether emotional, temporal or financial – to make.

Low odds shouldn’t discourage you from trying if the initiative is worthwhile, however. For example, Elon Musk founded Tesla believing he had a one in ten chance of success. Recognizing the odds that your efforts

might not succeed can be freeing rather than undermining. Sometimes what matters is the attempt, not the result.

The logical analysis that a Scout mind-set supports can stimulate your ongoing effort. When Jeff Bezos conceived of Amazon, for example, he reckoned his probability of success as less than one in three. He warned potential investors of his calculation.

Two types of confidence exist: “epistemic confidence” and “social confidence.” The former measures specific facts or opinions; the latter refers to how you interact socially. They do not intertwine, but studies show that social confidence is more helpful than ironclad certainty about your facts. Soldiers who spout statistics backing up their position, for example, will never convince people as well as a Scout who understands the social aspects of the moment and knows best how to convey his or her beliefs to a particular audience.

People identifying with groups or ideologies put their objectivity at risk.

Holding identity lightly means not priding yourself on it and treating your identity as “contingent” upon shifting social situations, power dynamics and your own emotional or psychological state. The “ideological Turing test” requires explaining an ideology with which you disagree so persuasively that others think you believe it. People who strongly attach to an identity shy away from such a test because they find trying to understand an idea they think is wrong repugnant. To have real dialogue, much less persuade counterparties to re-examine their views, you must understand their opinions and perspectives.

“The more labels you have for yourself, the dumber they make you.”

These habits can help you shift from a Soldier to a Scout mind-set:

1. When making a decision, examine yourself for bias that may distort your judgment and apply one of the thought experiments discussed.
2. When you express certainty, check to see how sure you really are.
3. When a worry or potential problem vexes you, instead of dismissing it with a rationalization, plan what to do if it materializes.
4. Find and read content from a writer or news source with whom you disagree. Ensure it’s a source you respect enough that you can conceive of allowing it to change your mind.
5. Instead of writing people off as irrational, try to understand the reasons for their actions or speech.
6. Seek occasions to correct your beliefs or your degree of confidence in your beliefs.
7. When you disagreed with someone about a subject on which you’ve changed your mind, get in touch with that person.
8. Examine any subject on which you have strong feelings and try an ideological Turing test. Deal with someone from the side you oppose to judge whether you pass the test.

About the Author

Host of the *Rationally Speaking* podcast **Julia Galef** co-founded the Center for Applied Rationality; her TED talk garnered over four million views.



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