



BOOK REVIEW

Risk The Science and politics of Fear

Dan Gardner

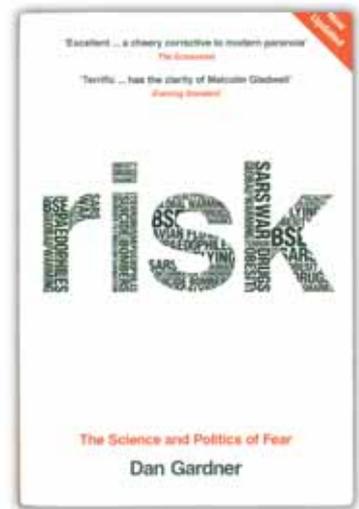
It could be argued that we live in unprecedented times. Our life expectancy has doubled even looking back only 100 years. We're mostly healthier, we have access to more technology and for most of us, despite the current economic climate, we're better off than countless previous generations. However, we seem to be living in a constant climate of fear if you pay attention to the media, and we seem to be afraid of everything from global warming, to the Y2K bug, terrorism, and the latest global pandemic and all this seems to be a great paradox to how well off we are. There's no suggestion that these fears aren't genuine, but *'The Politics of Fear'* suggests that our ability to judge how much threat they pose is irrational and illogical. It's all down to how we are wired, and how our biases play a significant part in our inability to judge risk.

Part of this paradox is driven by media frenzy. The unusual grabs our attention. Fear sells. Fear speaks to our *'gut'* and our primitive wiring that developed on the plains over thousands of years, which admittedly did a great job in keeping us alive. But fear doesn't speak to our *'head'*. Our intelligence should jump in and correct our rash instincts when our gut shouts *'panic, run'*. Gardener explains how such biases as the example rule and the rule of typical things significantly influence our ability to make intelligent decisions that weigh both the likelihood and impact of a risk and how this has wider ramifications for our day to day behaviour.

However just as it was all starting to make sense, adaptation jumps in and plays a contributing part in this equation of fear.

Without the ability to adapt we wouldn't be here now but it also fails to serve us. We're hard wired to be able to react to individual, perceived fast moving threats and we're very good at it. We've had plenty of practice. Where we are not so good, is at perceiving slow moving and potentially larger threats, or business trends until it's too late. This is one reason why organisational change and improving satisfaction is a challenge. It needs to be addressed, day in day out and most likely will never go away. If organisations achieve customer excellence, it won't be a one-time event that will then disappear. In order to keep themselves *'excellent'*, organisations will need to keep customer focus an elevated priority, almost as a daily fear to ensure focus and attention stays. The down side, again as part of our wiring is that once a perceived threat is over, it's easy and most likely that organisations will revert back to their old habits and so the cycle begins again.

Interestingly there's no suggestion that fear should be used to elevate an argument to motivate people to take action. However in lots of instances every day it can be seen. Anyone reading this book will gain far greater insight into how we are motivated by fear and why. Perhaps there is a case for understanding what would really frighten us by not delivering great levels of customer satisfaction. Certainly, if we feared that our actions and behaviours towards customers today could result in our going out of business tomorrow, it could be argued that we would do something radically different today. Fortunately or otherwise, this isn't the case, but the longer, slow moving threat is still there even if we can't run away from it. **S**



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