

Evaluate

By the Book

This is the next in our 'By the Book' series, short appreciations of books which have something useful to offer for understanding and using one of VoicePrint's nine voices. **The book I recommend for the Evaluate voice is *Factfulness* by the late Hans Rosling, Swedish doctor, academic, statistician and public speaker.** Co-created with his son Ola and his daughter-in-law Anna, the book's subtitle is '*Ten Reasons we're wrong about the world - and why things are better than you think.*' This might leave you still wondering why I've chosen it. What has this got to do with VoicePrint's Evaluate voice?

To Evaluate is to assess, to come towards a decision through carefully weighing up the evidence. It's an essential voice, if you want to exercise good judgement and arrive at sound decisions.

We know, both from VoicePrint research and from painful, first-hand experience, that this is a voice that's prone to be fragile when we're under pressure. Then it regresses all too easily into personal criticism, its dysfunctional counterpart. We also know that, to be effective, evaluation needs to be objective, thorough and balanced. The good use of the Evaluate voice is *considered* rather than *instinctive*.

This is where *Factfulness* has so much to offer. Rosling and his co-authors have produced not just a book but an approach to forming views on issues, which is fact-based, systematic and, crucially, genuinely informative. **Its ten principal chapters focus in turn on ten human instincts, ten bad habits that impair how we tend to think and judge.**

I'm not going to explain them all here. The purpose of this series of blogs is to encourage you to read and think about each of the recommended books for yourself. So here's no more than a brief look at some of his points in the hope of igniting your interest.

Although they're not the first instincts Rosling exposes in the book, Blame and Urgency are two which have immediate relevance when it comes to monitoring and managing the effectiveness of the Evaluate voice. Both tendencies are liable to push the voice across the line into Criticising. Blame, as Rosling describes it, is '*the instinct to find a clear, simple reason for why something has happened...over-simplistic finger-pointing, which distracts us from the more complex truth and prevents us from focusing our energy in the right places.*' (pages 206-7).

The Urgency instinct, as he concedes, may have served us well in the past, when we were more generally vulnerable, '*but now that we have eliminated most immediate dangers and are left with complex, and often more abstract, problems, the urgency instinct can also lead us astray...it makes us stressed, amplifies our other instincts and makes them harder to control, blocks us from thinking analytically, tempts us to make up our minds too fast, and encourages us to take drastic actions that we haven't thought through.*' (p.228)

One of *Factfulness*' most useful warnings is against the Single Perspective instinct. It's a common tendency. This is partly because simple ideas often feel attractive because they're easy to grasp. But it's also because we do much of our evaluating as a solitary activity, alone in our own minds, rather than collaboratively in thoughtful, joint discussion. It requires patience, self-discipline and

skilful facilitation to use the Evaluate voice well as a group rather than as a solo speaker, but the enriched and higher-quality outcome generally repays the effort. Rosling's Single Perspective trap helps to explain why.

Over-simplicity is the problem at the root of all ten of the failures of reasoning that are explained in *Factfulness*. The value of the book is that it takes that general indictment and breaks it down into a more useful set of specific charges that need to be kept in mind and taken into account.

The Destiny instinct is *'the idea that innate characteristics determine the destinies of people, countries, religions or cultures'* - that they have always been this way and will never change. (p.167)

The Gap instinct and the Generalisation instinct are further variations on categorical, often either-or thinking, which is too narrow and too inflexible to be of value in understanding or acting on complex realities. As the author pithily observes, *'The Gap instinct divides the world into "us" and "them", and the Generalisation instinct makes "us" think of "them" as all the same.'* (p.147)

Possibly the single most powerful idea in the whole book is the indication of how much more informative it is to shift our thinking about the world from a simple, binary 'developed/developing' framework to a '4 levels of income' model. It's a potent reminder of how small differences in thinking and behaviour can make big differences in impact and outcome.

However, this idea about the power of the adopted framework also raises my biggest reservation about Rosling's hypothesis. If you replace his 'levels of income' frame with an alternative framing, such as ecological well-being in the context of global over-heating or the over-utilisation of finite resources, you might well challenge his proposition that things are getting steadily better.

Nevertheless, we could still use his approach to assessing the attendant issues, and we should certainly take care that our evaluating avoids the thinking traps laid by our instincts.

The other instincts that he highlights relate to the existence and consequences of Negativity, Fear, Straight Line extrapolations and Size without due consideration of context or proportion. There is practical guidance both within and neatly summarised at the end of every chapter, to benefit anyone who wants to use their Evaluate voice well.

If you're still not convinced that you need to add another book to the pile that already awaits your attention, let me tease your curiosity with these final thoughts...

- If you care about good design and the informative presentation of data, get the book for no reason other than the illustrations and references inside its front and back covers.
- If you admire people who are personally committed to making the world a better place, get the book for that reason. It's vividly illustrated by Hans Rosling's life experiences and personal humility as well as by its graphics.
- If you want to understand why he dedicated the book *'to the brave barefoot woman... who saved me from being sliced by a mob of angry men with machetes,'* read it and find out.

- If you want to measure your own understanding of the world and understand why human judgement is generally poorer than that of the metaphorical group of chimpanzees, get the book and do your assessment.

Then do what I'm doing and work on raising the quality of your Evaluating voice to a more evolved level.

Factfulness

by Hans Rosling with Ola Rosling and Anna Rosling Ronnlund
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