



Behavioral Decision Making Group Colloquium Series

is pleased to present



CHIP HEATH

Organizational Behavior,
Stanford Graduate School of Business

Friday, April 17, 2015 | 12:15-1:30 pm
Cornell Hall - D301

“Defining Moments”

ABSTRACT

People see some moments as more "definitional" than others--more meaningful, important, prototypical, or pivotal. A person realizes, "This is the person I'm going to marry," or "I can't take this job another day." Or, on a more day to day basis, "Wow, that was a great meal," or "Sheila is a really good friend," or "that salesperson really changed my mind about what I should buy." Suppose someone wanted to craft a defining moment--a teacher for a student, parent for a child, hotel owner for a guest--what tools would they have available?

One tool for creating defining moments is to engineer the peaks and valleys of an experience. Research on experienced utility says that satisfaction with an experience is less like a filmstrip of the unfolding experience and more like a series of snippets such as the emotional peak of the experience or the trend at the end. The experience of going to Disney World with small children is filled with relatively painful moment by moment events--tedious lines, rambunctious toddlers, crying babies--but Disney cleverly makes available beautiful locations for wonderful pictures of your smiling family in front of Cinderella's castle and those lovely, smiling pictures become how the trip is defined in memory. Automobile designers know that of all the aspects of driving a car, the BMW experience is more defined by the sound and vibration of the car when you first turn the key and the minivan experience is defined by the accessibility of a cup holder. Similarly, there are defining moments for service experiences. Taco Bell found that customer satisfaction scores increased when, instead of saying, "Welcome. May I take your order?", the drive-through attendant took the pressure off of customers who had just driven up beside a large, complex menu and instead said, "Welcome. Take your time. I'm here when you're ready."

Our ability to engineer peak experiences is limited because there are many gaps in our understanding of experienced utility. Decision research suggests that the end of a sequence matters a lot, but cognitive psychology has shown that primacy effects play a large role (consider also literatures on first impressions or initial hypotheses). Most customer experience work devotes itself to driving out minor annoyances, but which has more impact on an experience: filling a pothole or elevating a peak? People seem to have blind spots when they set out to create a defining moment. All hotels pay close attention to the check in regimen, but a study showed that successful hotels paid more attention to times when customers were walking out of the hotel during their stay (e.g., by having preprinted maps with easy directions to a great Italian restaurant or a wonderful dive burger joint) and at the very end (e.g., by providing a chauffeured black car back to the airport for the same price as a city taxi).

Another tool for creating defining moments may be to "connect the dots" in a way that helps people create meaning in their lives. Successful leaders script defining events that change a community's perception of how their past will intersect with the future. One researcher has characterized this skill of sensemaking as the rarest leadership competency in a large sample of managers, but the one that senior leaders would most like to develop in up and coming leaders. Research on personal traumas has shown that people can retrospectively turn a trauma into a defining moment by thinking about it in a way that creates meaning, in Jamie Pennebaker's work this can happen as quickly as four days of writing for 20 minutes a day. If during those four days a person's thoughts about the trauma become more organized and causally linked (e.g., they become more likely each day to use words like understand, recognize, because, so that), they are less likely to visit the doctor over the next six months. So connecting the dots may motivate people more and also make them healthier.

At present, this list of observations is probably incoherent but I'm working on a new book that would try to determine whether there is an underlying coherence. At present I'm collecting ideas for other examples of defining moments and for literatures that I should be reading that might describe why some moments are defining and some aren't.

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