

# THE ZEIGARNIK EFFECT: WHY PURPOSE SUSTAINS INTEREST

The inherent power of purpose to focus and energize us on any given day and over a lifetime is explained, at least in part (I don't think we can fully explain it) by a phenomenon called the Zeigarnik Effect.

## **ZEIGARNIK EFFECT STATES THAT PEOPLE REMEMBER UNCOMPLETED OR INTERRUPTED TASKS BETTER THAN COMPLETED ONES.**

Russian psychologist Bluma Zeigarnik first noted this phenomenon in 1927. While dining in a Vienna restaurant, she noticed that her waiter could remember a rather long list of items ordered by his customers. But, once the waiter had delivered the orders to his customers, he no longer remembered what he had just served moments before, and he even forgot about the customer after the order was completed.

As Zeigarnik contemplated this sequence, she concluded that people remember the particulars of incomplete tasks, but once they complete that task, they forget about it and the details associated with it. So much for your refill of coffee after you have paid your bill.

What's going on here? Zeigarnik theorized that an incomplete task or unfinished business creates "psychic tension" within us. This tension acts as a motivator to drive us toward completing the task or finishing the business.

## **IN GESTALT TERMS, WE ARE COGNITIVELY WIRED TO SEEK "CLOSURE." ONCE CLOSURE IS ACHIEVED AND THE TASK IS COMPLETED, THE COGNITIVE TENSION DISSIPATES AND WE MOVE ON AND DIRECT OUR ATTENTION AND ENERGY TO OTHER OPEN, UNFINISHED BUSINESS.**

In reverse, you'll note that if you take the same test a few days later you probably will do worse, especially if you studied for a long time in anticipation of the test. Why?

You simply lost interest after the closure of taking the test.

So, how does the Zeigarnik effect help explain the power of purpose? As Zeigarnik discovered, to complete the order—or to accomplish a goal or resolve a story line in a book or movie—is to lose interest and thus to lose energy.

**BUT, AS ZEIGARNIK ALSO DISCOVERED, THERE IS AN INSTINCTIVE DRIVE WITHIN US TO KEEP PURSUING RESOLUTION AND CLOSURE. THERE IS A PART OF US THAT IS PROFOUNDLY ALIVE TO AND AT ODDS WITH UNFINISHED BUSINESS. AND SO, THE FACT THAT A TASK OR GOAL OR STORY LINE REMAINS UNFINISHED OR UNRESOLVED UNLEASHES ENERGY TO MOVE TOWARD RESOLUTION.**

Our mind works overtime to achieve at least a measure of closure. This release of energy focuses us and keeps us tuned in and engaged.

The Zeigarnik effect explains, at least in part, why the TV series “24” and “Lost” were such big hits. They leave you hanging every week, craving resolution

of the plot tension, hopefully to be found, at least at one level, in the next episode. As the plot grows more complex and even more layers of unresolved tension are added, people literally must tune in the next week and the next and the next in search of a more satisfying level of closure.

Purpose, like any good story—in fact, purpose is a good story—piques our interest, captures our attention and won’t let it go. It locates our daily life in a larger narrative with forward movement, plot twists, and unresolved tension.

**AND, LIKE A GOOD STORY, PURPOSE COMPELS US TO STAY TUNED IN AND ENGAGED AS THE PLOT UNFOLDS. IT INFUSES OUR DAILY LIVES WITH THE WILL TO STAY ENGAGED AND THE ENERGY TO COME BACK FOR MORE AS THE PLOT UNFOLDS OVER THE DAYS AND DECADES.**

Do you have a larger purpose that keeps your interest and sustains your effort?

1. The Art of Virtue-Based Transformational Leadership provides a discussion on the importance of transcendent purpose, faith and hope to one’s leadership. The book is available on this website. Leadership in a Changing World: Virtue and Effective Leadership in the 21st Century, by this author, provides a more thorough exploration of the relevance of purpose, faith and hope to leadership effectiveness. The book, published by Palgrave-McMillan, will come out December 2014 and you will be able to purchase it on Amazon.com in both hardback and e-book formats. Dan Taylor’s book Tell Me a Story provides a powerful discussion on the role that story plays in our personal lives and leadership.

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