

Chapter 10

The Art of Sustainable Performance: The Zeigarnik Effect



Abstract Why does one organization remain successful while others are falling apart or just disappear? Why is one person successful over and over again, while no one expected him or her to be? The secret of winning persons and teams seems to lie in performance indicators and personality traits, on which—strangely enough—many organizations just do not select their employees.

Keywords Personality traits · Performance indicators · Recruitment · Selection · Sustainable performance

10.1 The Brilliant Waiter

Huh, the Zeigarnik effect? You might be wondering what that is. And what does it have to do with the study on performance indicators and personality traits so far? In order to answer these questions, we have to take a trip back in time. It is the mid-twentieth century. Near Berlin University, a large group of university staff decides to have dinner in a local restaurant. Among them are the legendary professor Kurt Lewin, founder of Positive Psychology, and a doctoral student of his called Bluma Zeigarnik. A holiday that would go down in history as the moment when a new scientific phenomenon “emerged” that would later be known as the Zeigarnik effect. The story led to a theory that explained why some soccer players become legends, why some musicians become stars, and some scientists become geniuses. Their secret? The Zeigarnik effect!

Bluma Zeigarnik, her professor and her doctoral thesis supervisor Kurt Lewin, and the other scientists were celebrating in a Berlin restaurant. They ate, drank, and ordered all their drinks, starters, mains, and desserts from the same waiter. Yet he never wrote anything down, he just nodded and went on his way. Nevertheless, every time, he returned with the right drinks and dishes for everyone. Zeigarnik and Lewin were amazed at this impressive feat of memory. How did he do it? Would they, as highly educated individuals, have been able to flawlessly memorize the orders and serve them to the right people? No, they finally concluded. This man must be a genius!

After everyone was finished eating and had left the restaurant, Bluma Zeigarnik realized that she had left her purse. She walked back and when she returned to the restaurant she greeted the waiter in question and asked him to help her find her purse. The waiter looked at her glazily. Who was she and where had she been sitting? He did not seem to have a clue. Zeigarnik was amazed, again. But this time for very different reasons. How could he not know? All night, the man had served her and her party without making a single mistake, never writing anything down. How could he have forgotten her face, just ten minutes after they had finished their dinner? What was going on here?

When asked how he could have forgotten her and her party so quickly, the waiter answered that he forgot all his orders as soon as he had delivered them to the table. And he forgot all about the check as soon as it had been settled. He apologized politely. His task had simply been completed and he had to fully shift his attention to the next task; new diners with new orders. He needed to completely shut himself off from everything but the orders that he was responsible for at that moment. That was the only way for him to do it. His uncompleted tasks were all that mattered!

Years of training and deliberate focus had given the waiter a memory that allowed him to flawlessly remember orders. Subconsciously and without writing anything down. He did not need to; his brain developed a system that easily processed orders. After they were paid, his mind would delete the bills in his head.

Zeigarnik and her mentor, the then already influential thinker Kurt Lewin, could not let this experience and the waiter's explanation go. They wondered if this phenomenon could be linked to a more general psychological principle. Do we all have a similar subconscious way to remember tasks yet to be completed? Could human memory make it possible to unconsciously distinguish between completed tasks and uncompleted tasks? (Zeigarnik 1927; Atkinson 1953; Baddeley 1963; Loffin 2014).

10.2 Memory Experiments

Zeigarnik decided to test the phenomenon using a large number of experiments in her laboratory. Her studies and hypotheses were confirmed, and the phenomenon of the use and possibilities of uncompleted tasks was born: The Zeigarnik effect. Once you know what you need to know and have a plan, a system, in place that you can first consciously and later subconsciously use, you can relax. You get into a flow, and you will have the unconscious competence to achieve sustainable performance. The Zeigarnik effect is the secret to the art of sustainable performance. Conscious, unconscious ... competence!

The Zeigarnik effect is still very relevant today, even though so few people are aware of this phenomenon and the opportunities it offers. The Zeigarnik effect and its theory show that uncompleted tasks keep going through our mind until the moment they are completed. Think of the waiter. As soon as the orders had been served and the party had settled up, he could cross them out.

Our brain will not let us rest before we can cross out these uncompleted tasks. Naturally, these tasks have to be relevant in order to be of use to us. After all, the Zeigarnik effect can also lead to negative results. For instance, think of all the messages popping up on your phone. Those are uncompleted tasks imposed on you by others (Heimbach and Jacoby 1972). More on that later.

10.3 A Plan Is Crucial

Over the years, there have been several theories (Atkinson 1953; Baddeley 1963; Heimbach and Jacoby 1972; Kiebel 2009; Loflin 2014) about how the Zeigarnik effect works, with two competing hypotheses dominating the debate. One theory said that the brain subconsciously tracks our goals so we can achieve them. That would mean that our random thoughts are actually a good sign; our subconsciousness remains vigilant until we achieve the goal.

Today, there is a different explanation for the Zeigarnik effect, which we have several recent experiments by Masicampo and Baumeister (2011) to thank for. Masicampo is a post-doctoral employee of the Florida State University who often works with Baumeister. For one of his studies, he had students think about how they were going to pass their most important upcoming exam. Half of the exam group got the assignment to make clear study plans indicating where and when they would study. However, during the experiments, nobody actually got to study. Instead, they were given a variety of other tasks. Afterwards, they were asked how well they had been able to focus and in what way their thoughts might have strayed.

The biggest difference the results showed was in the planning; a kind of unwritten cheat sheet. The participants who were asked to make a plan, a system, remained relatively focused. The students without a plan or system turned out to be stressed and they showed little focus on their main task, the exam. Despite what had been assumed for decades, the Zeigarnik effect turned out not to be a kind of alarm that keeps beeping until a task is completed. Rather, the subconscious mind urges the conscious mind to make a plan with details, a location, and circumstances. As soon as the plan was formed, the subconscious mind no longer had to bother the conscious mind by urging it, allowing one to relax (Masicampo and Baumeister 2011).

How great would it be if we—like Zeigarnik's waiter—could develop a plan, a system, that could help us to complete our most important tasks. First consciously, later subconsciously, and eventually leading to sustainable performance? A “cheat sheet” that you would never have to look at because you know exactly what you have to do in order to make yourself, your team, or your organization successful again. This plan, this cheat sheet for sustainable performance, is what I want to hand to you with this study. As a professional, on what personality traits should you focus to remain winning? Which personality traits really matter when it comes to sustainable performance?

Our child prodigies did not turn into geniuses by accident. When it comes to self-management they often have one thing in common: The unconscious competence to

apply the Zeigarnik effect. They set goals for themselves that matter and that suits who they are. They make a plan to achieve the goals, and cannot stop until the job is done. Then they can move on to the next goal, the next uncompleted task that will help them achieve their “why”, their whakapapa. “To leave the jersey in a better place.” They are able to gain unconscious competence. The highest stage of competence.

Abraham Maslow

According to Maslow, there are four stages of learning, basically moving from unconscious awareness to conscious awareness. Maslow is most famous as a humanist psychology specialist. He developed a groundbreaking theory on human needs; Maslow’s pyramid. Related to consciousness, competence, and learning phases, Abraham Maslow provided us with the following steps that will help us reach sustainable performance.

Stage 1: Unconscious Incompetence

Becoming consciously aware is one of the most important phases in the process towards sustainable performance. We are often not aware of our behavioral performance and its effects. We simply live our lives, without being aware of why we are not performing as well as we could. When that happens, you could consider yourself unconsciously incompetent. You react, act and behave as if you were on auto-pilot and do not understand why you keep running into the same issues. When you truly become aware of that, you can take back control of your life. That is when the Zeigarnik effect starts to develop. There are uncompleted tasks and goals waiting for you.

Stage 2: Conscious Incompetence

Once you realize that you have uncompleted tasks waiting for you and know that you are not doing what is needed to complete them, you have become consciously incompetent. You understand that more is required in order to achieve your goals and sustainable performance, but you do not feel competent or able enough to do anything about it. For the first time, you are directly confronted by the often undesirable consequences of your current behavior. During this stage, you develop insight. Insight that has not yet been followed by action and a willingness to change. The Zeigarnik effect is born.

Stage 3: Conscious Incompetence

Changing, adapting, and pursuing new goals is a continuing process. Sustainable performance is like a lemniscate figure-eight symbol, going from thinking to doing, from action to reaction. Both poles need each other and keep each other balanced in order to fully develop. Lemniscate thinking is based on the idea that nothing exists without its counterpart. It is an ancient philosophy that can really help us think and act. There are many examples of contradictions like these. No happiness without misery. The same is true for sustainable performance. You first have to be unconsciously incompetent, before you can become unconsciously competent. By developing a plan, a system, that can help you compel your performance. Later, you might not even need the plan anymore; it will have become part of you.

Stage 4: Unconscious Competence

Once you are able to apply new behavior without consciously thinking about it, you will have reached unconscious competence. You automatically use your new, more effective behavior. It almost becomes second nature. There will no longer be a difference between intent and result. You will be in full control. You will have embraced the Zeigarnik effect: The art of sustainable performance! (Maslow 1943).

10.4 Subconscious Ability

When I was reading the story about Bluma Zeigarnik's discovery, it hit me. What cheat sheet did I wish I had in order to improve myself as a person? What cheat sheet did I wish I had as an entrepreneur in order to surround myself with the best professionals who could help me elevate my business to a higher purpose? And what cheat sheet did I want to give to my young children in order to help them?

Billy Beane's story (Lewis 2003) and Bluma Zeigarnik's concept about unconsciously competent performance came together and inspired me to carry out my own study on performance indicators and personality traits—my very own *Moneyball*. All in order to use it for potentially creating a plan, a system that would enable us to develop ourselves and our organizations to a stage of sustainable performance.

The art of sustainable performance is achieving your highest goals—your most important uncompleted tasks—in an unconsciously competent way, by using a structured approach based on today's most important performance criteria and personality traits. Remember, (some) talent is good, (the right) character is everything. Personality traits such as self-efficacy and adaptability make all the difference!

What goals do you want to pursue? How can you increase your adaptability, self-efficacy, and work engagement? Create awareness of your uncompleted tasks. As soon as you are focused on goals that are truly important to you, your brain will compel you to action and urge you to make a plan. Once you have that plan, that system, you can let go without losing focus.

10.5 Letting Go Without Losing Focus

Many champions also use the Zeigarnik effect to achieve their outstanding performance at the right time. It enables them to let go of their tension before a game or match and focus completely on the unfinished task (Baumeister and Tierney 2012; Loffin 2014). One takes away the tension from the other. Take Usain Bolt, for example. Right before his most important competitions, he plays video games. He deliberately leaves the final game unfinished so his brain will make him think of that instead of the built-up tension for the Olympic final. Before I give a big presentation, I try to think about a Netflix show that I have not finished yet. Or about an upcoming

long-distance run I am looking forward to. There are lots of uncompleted tasks we can think of to help us relax before we have to do something that makes us nervous.

I realized that I had not always competently used the Zeigarnik effect myself. I still do not always get it right today. Because the Zeigarnik effect also applies to uncompleted tasks that are far less important than our personal development or the performance of our teams or organizations. Consider your phone's screen lighting up when you receive an email, message, or tweet.

Your brain immediately wants to pay attention to it. It requires a certain ability to distinguish the importance of uncompleted tasks. So focus the Zeigarnik effect on your most important uncompleted tasks, your highest goals, your whakapapa. Discover and develop your crucial personality traits and learn to rely on the Zeigarnik effect. Engagement and sustainable performance will follow!

10.6 Recruitment and Selection

In order to strive for results, you need to select the right people. That much is clear. People with the right *mana*, as the All Blacks (Kerr 2013) say. Professionals with the right personality traits and performance indicators to perform, as Billy Beane might put it. People who strive for a collective goal, are engaged, can meet the mental and physical demands of their job, people who fit with the organization, and have the personality traits that are currently in demand. “Get the right people on the bus—you are the average of the people around you.” Selecting the right people is the most important thing you need to be able to do as an entrepreneur, leader, HR professional, or team manager. The most important thing after *finding your goal*, that is (Collins 2001).

The All Blacks always start their selection process with the most important thing they strive for: *whakapapa*—the higher purpose. There is one goal that transcends all others. The All Blacks don't just want to win at the cost of everything else. On the contrary, it is about the execution, the pride, and the enthusiasm with which the right goals are pursued. All leading to that one purpose that they want to achieve: *to leave the black jersey in a better place*. The black jersey is a symbol of excellence, hard work, and individual and team sacrifice, all in order to become the best in the world.

When asked how the All Blacks selected the players for its team, former All Blacks coach Wayne Smith simply and clearly answered: “Talent was irrelevant. We carefully picked the players. We used *matrices* to back intuition because there are certain *stats* in rugby that determine a player's character. So we picked high work rate, strong body movers, and guys that were unselfish and had a sacrificial mindset.” (Kerr 2013).

It is harder to hit closer to the inspiration for and results of my study than with the statement: “Talent is good, character is better.” Intrinsic motivation, adaptability, and self-efficacy are the keys to sustainable performance. Look for the candidates who display these performance indicators the most, and ensure the right culture of performance using the right goals with the optimal Zeigarnik effect.

“To leave the jersey in a better place” is the ultimate example of a Zeigarnik effect. It is hard to imagine a more perfect uncompleted task. “The score takes care of itself.”

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