



talking about...

November 2008

... designing better relationships for better outcomes

Our Expectations Define Our Experience

"Remember, our conduct is influenced not by our experience but by our expectations."

... George Bernard Shaw (1856 - 1950) Irish dramatist & critic

Do you remember the cola wars from the 1980s and 1990s? At the time, Coca-Cola and Pepsi staged a titanic struggle to establish a greater share of the cola drinking market. As part of their involvement, both companies conducted taste tests, which both claimed they won. As with any comparative subjective tests, the way in which these tests were conducted had a lot to do with the results. Pepsi conducted blind taste tests where the participants were unaware of the product they were drinking. On the other hand, Coca-Cola indicated to participants which cola they were drinking – Pepsi or Coke. The key difference was that in one taste people knew what they were drinking and in the other one they did not. In other words, there was a different context for the two sets of tests. In many ways, the results would have given a warm feeling to the advertising industry as, at the time, Coke had a much higher recognition rate than Pepsi and the results seem to indicate that this brand recognition impacted on how people rated their taste when comparing the two.

You might think this is purely a matter of how people assessed something rather than it changing their actual experience of tasting. Yet this does not appear to be the case. In often repeated experiments where placebos have been tested, people have consistently felt better. Indeed, when people are told of the supposed cost of a placebo, the more expensive placebos seem to generate greater results. It appears that people feel better if they think the cure is more expensive – an interesting insight into the cost of our health care system!!

What does all this mean for people in leadership roles or those who are trying to influence others? I suppose we could draw many conclusions about these observations. The one that showed up most strongly for me was that people will often get the experience they expect. Hence if we are seeking to engage others in something, it is vitally important to understand their expectations related to it. It may be that we may need to work on their expectations by seeking to creating a different context before we jump into whatever action is specifically needed.

These ideas came to me whilst listening to an audiobook of "Predictably Irrational" by Dan Ariely – see our You Tube link below for more thoughts from Dan Ariely on placebos. You can also explore his work further at www.predictablyirrational.com.

"I know not anything more pleasant, or more instructive, than to compare experience with expectation, or to register from time to time the difference between idea and reality. It is by this kind of observation that we grow daily. ..."

... Samuel Johnson (1709 - 1784) English lexicographer & critic

The Blindmen and the Elephant ...

By John Godfrey Saxe

Thanks again to Julie for this one ...

It was six men of Hindustan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind)
That each by observation
Might satisfy the mind.

The first approached the Elephant
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side
At once began to bawl:
"Bless me, it seems the Elephant
Is very like a wall".

The second, feeling of his tusk,
Cried, "Ho! What have we here
So very round and smooth and
sharp?
To me 'tis mighty clear
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a spear".

The third approached the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,

Talking About Pty Ltd

PO Box 6652,
St Kilda Rd Central,
Victoria, 8008.

Ph: +613 9507 2464

info@talkingabout.com.au
www.talkingabout.com.au

Then boldly up and spake:
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant
Is very like a snake."

The Fourth reached out an eager hand,
And felt about the knee.
"What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain," quoth he;
"'Tis clear enough the Elephant
Is very like a tree!"

The Fifth, who chanced to touch the ear,
Said: "E'en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an Elephant
Is very like a fan!"

The Sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Than, seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant
Is very like a rope!"

And so these men of Hindustan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right
And all were in the wrong.

So oft in theologic wars,
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
And prate about an Elephant
Not one of them has seen!

"Our environment, the world in which we live and work, is a mirror of our attitudes and expectations."

... Earl Nightingale (1921 - 1989) US voicist

ON YouTube

Listen to Dan Ariely speak in more depth on placebos.

Go to <http://au.youtube.com/watch?v=bHBwHVbUwig> or hold the CTRL button and click on the link.

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ACN 112 307 892
info@talkingabout.com.au
Telephone: +61 3 9504 3558