

## What Else Could It Mean? You Choose!

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What does gasoline at over \$4 a gallon mean to you? Has it changed your behaviors? I offer this as an example because rising gasoline prices are affecting all of us. (At least it was in July, 2008!)

Many times, we underestimate our power in making choices. We all make decisions in three vastly different but related areas:

- “What meaning do you make of the situation you’re now facing?”
- “Where will you focus your limited time and energy?”
- “What action will you take in response to the situation you’re now facing?”

This week, I focus on “making meaning.” Next week, I’ll address how to choose where to focus your time and energy. Last week, I looked at your choices for taking action--and the options you forego in doing so. (Look for “It’s Your Choice--What Will You Do?” on [buildingfutureleaders.com](http://buildingfutureleaders.com).)

Back to my example--we often make snap judgments about circumstances, and it influences our behaviors. You and I “make meaning” of every situation we face, even when we don’t understand all the implications! For example, I’m hearing many complaints about the high price of gasoline.

Higher fuel prices may cause many of us to curtail travel. Less traffic, however, means less pollution, lower insurance premiums, and fewer deaths on the highway. To reduce energy consumption, some organizations will transition to a four-day workweek. Some individuals will eat out less and walk or bike more, so our national obesity rate may drop. That’s not all bad!

Further, you might decide to pursue an entrepreneurial venture involving research and application of alternative fuel use, providing breakthrough technology for all of us. Aside from you paying more at the pump, what else could higher gasoline prices mean? As noted, there are some beneficial effects of higher prices, right? We each make our own meaning of every situation we face.

Last week, my wife was uncharacteristically quiet. I couldn’t imagine why she was upset with me. Occasionally, as I went about my business, I’d see a look of disapproval cross her face. The more I tried to figure out what I had done wrong, the more bewildered I became.

Finally, I asked. Turns out that she was thinking about a big project she’s been working on, and the looks of disapproval were her disappointment with opportunities she had overlooked. She wasn’t thinking about me at all! I was attributing erroneous meaning to her facial expressions!

Avoid my mistake. Communication is essential. Jumping to conclusions about your colleagues and employees will only bring trouble. Instead, ask. You might be surprised by what you learn. Create an environment where those you influence feel safe in revealing what’s really on their minds.

Reading Viktor Frankl’s 1946 book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, provides great insight into your freedom to choose your response to any situation. Frankl was an Austrian psychiatrist interred in a Nazi concentration camp. He observed prisoner responses to the abysmal conditions.

Some inmates settled into apathy. Many lost hope and slowly withered and died. A few used their limited energy to serve the others. Frankl wrote, “Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become in the next moment.” You decide what meaning you give to the comments and actions of your customers, your employees, and your suppliers.

From that meaning, you then choose what actions you will take to respond to current and future situations. It never hurts to ask yourself, “What else could this mean?” Next week, I will explore your power to consciously choose where you focus your limited energy and time.

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[Added after publication] Martin Seligman, in his 1991 book *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*, identifies that optimism or pessimism lies in the way you explain the events that happen to you. We all have the capability of being optimistic or pessimistic, yet most of us unconsciously rely on our habitual way of categorizing events.

Seligman suggests you first recognize the automatic thoughts flitting through your consciousness. If you choose, you may dispute those thoughts by marshalling contrary evidence. What else could the situation mean? What else might have caused what's happening? What else might be implications of what's occurred? What else might result from what's happening?

Seligman (along, presumably, with Viktor Frankl) would say that you have far more control—and certainly influence—over what is done (that is, what you decide to do) about what is happening!

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