

# Causes of Career-Defining Moments: Development of a Typology

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research was to develop a typology of career-defining moments in order to better understand the nature of this phenomenon. A career-defining moment is a point in time that substantially alters the trajectory of one's career. We conducted interviews with a diverse group of 18 executives to learn about their career-defining moments. A typology of five distinct categories of career-defining moments and their respective subthemes emerged from the interviews. The five major types of career-defining moments are as follows: (a) anticipated transition events, (b) unanticipated transition events, (c) insight experiences, (d) relationship experiences, and (e) spiritual experiences. This study adds to the theoretical understanding of career experiences and provides a foundation for a largely untapped stream of inquiry for future researchers. Career-defining moments are important as they influence future career decisions and have a tremendous impact on the individuals making those decisions and their organizations.

## Keywords

careers, career development, career-defining moments, defining moments

Although I'd financed much of Zappos myself during its early days, we had raised tens of millions of dollars from outside investors. As with all VC's Sequoia expected a substantial return on its investment but the recession and credit crisis put Zappos and our investors in a very precarious position. In early 2009 we were at a stalemate. I controlled the majority of the company's shares, so the board couldn't force a sale of the company. But on the five person board, only two of us were committed to Zappos's culture. This made it likely that if the economy didn't improve the board would fire me and hire a new CEO who was concerned only with maximizing profit . . . However Zappos wasn't just a job—it was a calling.

Hsieh, 2010, para. 7

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Displaying a determination to navigate through difficulties fueled by a deep sense of purpose, Tony Hsieh deconstructed a career-defining moment faced during his tenure as CEO at Zappos. In general, a defining moment is a crucial decision point or intense transformational experience (Bennis & Thomas, 2007; Ensher & Murphy, 2005; Steinbaum, 2011). Nonacademic sources provide two other nuances that are helpful for the current study. First, a defining moment is “the point at which a situation is clearly seen to start to change” (Dictionary.cambridge.com, 2015). Second, a defining moment is “a point at which the essential nature or character of a person, group, etc. is revealed or identified” (Dictionary.com, 2015). Drawing from these definitions, we consider a career-defining moment *as a point that substantially alters an individual’s career trajectory*. The change in career trajectory can mean an accelerated or decelerated trajectory along the current career path or it can lead to a career pivot, taking the individual in a different career path. Past research has found that like Tony Hsieh, many professionals encounter career-defining moments (Badaracco, 1997; Bennis & Thomas, 2007; Thomas, 2008; Steinbaum, 2011).

Career-defining moments often serve as catalysts for future career decisions and have a remarkable impact on the individuals making the decisions as well as their coworkers and organizations (Shaw, 2010; Steinbaum, 2011; Thomas, 2008). In the past decade, there has been a burgeoning interest among leadership researchers studying the impact of defining moments on leaders and their career decisions (Avolio & Luthans, 2006; Bennis & Thomas, 2002, 2007; Dahlgren & Longman, 2010; Quinn, 2005; Useem, 2006). While interest in this concept is growing, there have been few academic studies examining career-defining moments in depth. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to better understand career-defining moments through the development of a typology. This research is important as it provides a lens for understanding career-defining moments, so they can be anticipated or recognized as important when they arise.

Additional exploration of career-defining moments is important for two reasons. The first reason is the increased prevalence of these moments when careers are considered in the context of three popular theories related to career development: (1) the protean career (Hall, 2004), (2) boundaryless careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), and (3) happenstance learning theory (Krumboltz, 2009). Both protean and boundaryless career theories move away from traditional career arrangements, or boundaries, and put the individual at the center of defining career success. Among the core assumptions of happenstance learning theory are that careers are a culmination of several decisions (a process) instead of a singular choice. Taken together, these theories point to careers in the 21st century for many individuals being the result of a series of career-defining moments.

The second reason is that career-defining moments are consequential, as they serve as catalysts for future decisions that impact individuals’ lives and careers (Jones, 2014; Shaw, 2010). Based on previous research in careers, callings, and work–family balance, it seems likely there will be a spillover effect: What happens in spheres outside of work can lead to defining moments in one’s career. In fact, it has been well established by the work–family balance literature that changes or events that occur in one area of life, such as one’s personal life, can spill over to another area of life such as career (Allen et al., 2005; Cho, Tay, Allen, & Stark, 2013). Also, research from career decision-making indicates the importance of considering one’s personal life and family members when making career decisions (Grzywacz, Almeida, & McDonald, 2005; Voydanoff, 2004). Research on callings also indicates various spheres of one’s life intersect as those who perceived their work to be a calling rather than just a job were more satisfied with both their professional and personal lives (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009).

Badaracco (1997) first introduced the consideration of difficult ethical decisions as career-defining moments for managers. He drew from diverse literatures, including business case studies, to develop the concept of defining moments that affect one’s career. Badaracco (1997) explained that difficult decisions faced by managers can represent defining moments for their careers which reveal, shape, and test a manager’s values. According to Badaracco (1997), career-defining moments influence the character of leaders and impact their own and their organizations’ future paths.

Bennis and Thomas (2002, 2007) and Thomas (2008) collected data to further investigate the importance of defining moments in shaping leaders' careers and decisions. Bennis and Thomas (2002, 2007) conducted interviews with two sets of successful leaders they labeled geeks (leaders under age 35) and geezers (leaders over age 70). These authors found all of the leaders in their study had undergone at least one crucible experience which represented a defining moment that forced their choices, shaped their character, and affected their careers. Thomas (2008) explored these ideas further by interviewing 198 leaders about their defining moments and how they navigated through them. Thomas suggested career-defining moments and their ensuing decisions required managers to pay special attention to these experiences and to develop specific coping skills to deal with them effectively.

More broadly considered, the concept of defining moments has growing appeal, as evidenced by the recent number of trade books, media articles, and scholarly publications exploring their impact (Dahlgvig & Longman, 2010; Jones, 2014; Stanley, 2004; Thomas, 2008, Quinn, 2005). Support for the importance of career-defining moments as catalysts for career and leadership decisions has been found among women Christian leaders (Dahlgvig & Longman, 2010), genetic counselors (Veatch, Bartels, & LeRoy, 2002), and mentor–protégé pairs in technology, media, and entertainment (Ensher & Murphy, 2005). Career-defining moments influence professionals and leaders throughout their careers. Prior research also suggests certain types of career-defining moments that we would expect to surface in the present research and become part of our typology.

### *Career-Defining Moments: External Events*

Past research demonstrates career-defining moments are often related to external events. Schlossberg's transition theory of adult development incorporated both anticipated and unanticipated transitions (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). Steinbaum (2011) interviewed approximately 40 top leaders about their career-defining moments and found some of these moments were expected while many others were unanticipated events. Bennis and Thomas (2002) suggested societal movements and historical events have a sizable impact on the various generations in the workforce and can be catalysts for career-defining moments as such societal factors may significantly affect an individual's dominant paradigms. For example, consider how the U.S. recession of 2008 had a tremendous bearing not only on the housing and financial markets but also on the careers of professionals in those and related industries (Oreopoulos, von Wachter, & Heisz, 2012). Personal events, both positive and negative, can also lead to career-defining moments. Personal hardships, such as heart attacks or bouts with depression, or happy events, such as the birth of a child, were mentioned by executives in past literature as such moments (Bennis & Thomas, 2002; Shaw, 2010; Zacks, 2006). Veatch, Bartels, and LeRoy (2002) edited a special issue of articles that described the defining moments of 17 genetic counselors. They found personal and professional defining moments overlapped and were frequently connected. They also found defining moments were both positive and negative and often led to a significant transformation in professional identity, approach, or behavior. Thus, beyond organizational events that may trigger career-defining moments, we also argue unexpected events in our personal lives or society can lead to career-defining moments.

However, other times the external events that are career-defining moments can be anticipated (Shaw, 2010; Steinbaum, 2011; Veatch et al., 2002; Zacks, 2006). For example, consider the array of anticipated career decisions and transitions individuals face throughout their careers. Graduating from college and deciding on next steps is often the first anticipated transition event that can lead to a career-defining moment. College students frequently struggle with finding not just a job but a true calling (Hunter, Dik, & Banning, 2010). As individuals continue through their career journeys, other challenges arise such as the need to find a new job due to loss of interest or termination (Krumboltz, Foley, & Cotter, 2013; Saks, 2008). Other common anticipated events are starting or balancing a family, relocating, or seeking additional education (Grzywacz & Marks, 2000).

### *Career-Defining Moments: Internal Insights*

External events, such as anticipated and unanticipated transitions, refer to actual concrete occurrences. However, past treatments on the career-defining moments of executives also suggest internal experiences, such as a compelling insight or a moment of clarity, can be a career-defining moment (Shaw, 2010; Steinbaum, 2011). Similarly, recent research on career decision-making has found the roles of emotion and intuition as forms of insight and guidance are important in career decisions (Brown, George-Curran, & Smith, 2003; Sadler-Smith & Shefy, 2004). Likewise, the research on callings has found that many people experience the feeling of whether a vocation is right for them as a moment of insight (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009).

Reflection is an important tool used by professionals and leaders that often leads to such internal insights. Lowney (2003, 2013) has written about the importance of self-awareness and reflection as powerful tools for leaders. Avolio and Luthans (2006) analyzed Gallup data and drew from past meta-analyses of leadership to develop the idea that leaders are impacted by defining moments in the course of their experience.

Similarly, in a study of women Christian leaders, authors Dahlgvig and Longman (2010) found insight and reflection were important tools in the identification of career-defining moments. Grounded theory was used to analyze 16 interviews with women Christian leaders about how their defining moments impacted their leadership. One type of common career-defining moment that emerged was the experience of confronting a situation, such as injustice, which compelled them to speak up. The leaders mentioned that these types of experiences led them to reflect on the insights gained from these events which caused them to recognize a career-defining moment and step up as leaders. In sum, insight and reflection are internal experiences of both the mind and the heart which can lead to career-defining moments.

### *Career-Defining Moments: Relationships*

While personal reflection and insights can become career-defining moments, sometimes it is difficult for individuals to arrive at those insights on their own. Often, the influence of another person such as an organizational leader or a mentor can be the catalyst for a defining moment. Bennis and Thomas (2002, 2007) found relationships with others were often a necessary component of a crucible experience. Moreover, Dahlgvig and Longman (2010) found in their study of women leaders the experience of “someone speaking potential” (i.e., providing strong encouragement) often spurred a career-defining moment.

Providing strong encouragement is one of the key functions of a mentor along with instrumental support and serving as a role model (Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). Ensher and Murphy (2005) interviewed mentor/protégé executive pairs in technology, leadership, and politics. They found for many of the pairs, a career-defining moment was caused (or sometimes resolved) by their relationship with their mentor. For example, an international business machines corporation (IBM) protégé revealed to his mentor that he was gay. Both the mentor and the protégé identified this self-disclosure as a career-defining moment for the protégé, as the protégé had previously hidden his sexual orientation for 16 years at work. In turn, his mentor encouraged him to reveal his sexual orientation to the CEO and the protégé became a leader not only within the internal IBM gay and lesbian community but nationally as well. In this way, career-defining moments can be caused by relationships with other people, such as bosses and mentors.

Career-defining moments are unique career phenomena that significantly influence professionals' careers although they may not occur with great frequency. The purpose of this study is to qualitatively explore the major types of defining moments and develop a framework for understanding them. This study adds to our theoretical understanding of career experiences and provides a foundation in a new stream of inquiry for future researchers.

## Method and Procedures

### Participants

We conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with senior leaders (i.e., vice presidents, senior vice presidents, presidents, and chief executive officers) from a variety of industries including higher education, medicine, law, retail, cosmetics, banking, and the automotive industry. There were 10 men and 8 women in the sample. Five of the 18 interviewees were non-Caucasian ( $n = 2$  for Asians,  $n = 2$  for Hispanics, and  $n = 1$  for African Americans). The participants' ages ranged from 38 to 70 years of age, with the average age being approximately 56 years old ( $SD = 9.9$  years). Participants were recruited in a variety of ways and used a purposeful sampling method (Polkinghorne, 2005), in that interviewees were recruited specifically because they had successful and multifaceted careers, thus increasing the likelihood of them experiencing multiple career-defining moments. The interviews with 10 senior leaders were obtained through the first author's professional network and university affiliation. The remaining eight leaders were recommended by colleagues as executives who had experienced career-defining moments or were recommended using the snowball approach (e.g., Babbie, 1986) from existing interviewees. The university with which these professionals are affiliated, Loyola Marymount University, is a highly reputable Catholic university with strong religious traditions. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed, was conducted with two interviewers, and lasted a minimum of 1 hr. Prior to the interview, the participants were sent a copy of the interview questions along with a standard consent form that assured them of anonymity.

### Measures

The interview guide was developed by first immersing ourselves in the existing literature related to defining moments (i.e., Badaracco, 1997) as well as related literatures such as how leaders are formed by crucible moments (Bennis & Thomas, 2002) and past research on the impact of defining moments in mentoring relationships (Ensher & Murphy, 2005). Bearing in mind the purpose of this study, 10 core interview questions were developed along with associated probes to enable participants to reflect on their responses. In some cases, the interview questions were addressed sequentially and in their entirety. In other cases, the interview questions were used as a guideline to accommodate speaking style preferences, as some interviewees were very concise in their responses while others used a more circular storytelling style. Interviewees were asked to share examples of their career-defining moments, and probes were used throughout the interview to enable participants to reflect more deeply. Interview questions included the following: (a) Please describe in detail several of your most pivotal career-defining moments, (b) What were some personal experiences that impacted your career and your career-defining moments? (c) What were some events in society that impacted your career and your career-defining moments? (d) How did a mentor or other important relationship impact your career-defining moment? (e) What are key lessons you learned from your career-defining moments? (f) What have we not asked you about career-defining moments that would be helpful for us to know? A complete interview protocol can be obtained from the first author.

### Data Collection

Each of the interviews was conducted face-to-face by the first author and in some cases a graduate research assistant. Three of the interviews were conducted in the first author's office following on-campus speaking sessions. The remaining 15 interviews were conducted primarily in the interviewee's office or home. Each interview was at least 1 hr in length and in some cases exceeded that minimum. Prior to the interview being commenced, the overall purpose of the study was described, a short consent form with assurances of anonymity was provided, and permission was obtained to record the

interviews. All of the participants agreed to have the interviews recorded. The interviews were professionally transcribed and notes were taken by the interviewers as well.

### Data Analysis

The analysis of the interviews used a blended approach consisting of thematic analysis based on previous literature for the expected types of career-defining moments. In the first phase, each transcribed interview was read in its entirety by the authors. Second, based on previous literature, the authors agreed on several key themes that emerged with respect to determining the various types of career-defining moments. For example, we expected respondents' career-defining moments would be caused by external events, such as organizational transitions or personal life changes. We also expected to find some career-defining moments would be caused by internal experiences such as a moment of personal clarity or reflection upon the wise words of a mentor or some other influential relationship. In this phase, a graduate-level research assistant coded the interviews according to these predetermined categories. Specifically, the authors determined the thematic categories and the graduate student coded all of the transcripts according to the coding protocol. Once that was done, the authors met with the graduate student to discuss and reach consensus on the coding of the categories. However, we realized as a result of these discussions that the data required a finer grained analysis, as there were rich ideas that were not being captured by the initial main themes. Therefore, the data were analyzed a second time and this time a grounded theory approach was used allowing for a more inductive process (Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The authors reread the transcripts and made note of secondary or subthemes that emerged. Upon discussion, a revised subtheme protocol was designed and a second research assistant used this revised protocol to code the data.

At times, there was disagreement regarding what events were indicative of what theme and in those cases, discussion was engaged in which sometimes resulted in creating new themes or subthemes, such as deciding to include spiritual experiences as separate major theme. Discussion with the author team continued until consensus was reached. The objective of the data analysis discussions was to reach consistency in the sense that there was general agreement of experiences being coded in a particular way to the point of saturation, consistent with recommendations of proper qualitative analysis techniques (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Unfortunately, we were not able to calculate a standardized measure of interrater reliability as recommended by Goodwin and Goodwin (1999), as different coders were used to code the major themes and the subthemes due to turnover of the graduate research assistants. The secondary analysis and subthemes are discussed in detail below.

*Career-defining moments: External events.* We originally coded for two categories of external events that were mentioned frequently as career-defining moments: anticipated transition events and unanticipated transition events. In some cases, respondents indicated they had anticipated their career-defining moments, whereas in other cases, the career-defining moments caught them completely by surprise. The data were analyzed looking specifically for the frequency of these two types of career-defining moments. In addition, using a grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), subthemes emerged within each of these two categories. Unanticipated transition events ranged from positive and negative experiences that included personal tragedy such as the death of a child to an opportunity to join a prestigious board of directors. In some cases, experiences had both a positive and negative aspect to it, so we decided to code for a specific subtheme such as "personal problems impacting work" rather than a bimodal positive or negative determination.

*Career-defining moments: Internal insights and relationships.* As expected, we found in some cases respondents indicated career-defining moments were caused by a moment of insight or the dawning realization that something important was happening in their careers. Insight and reflection were coupled

together, as this moment of insight was often gained through careful introspection. In this category, the data were examined again for subthemes using a grounded theory approach, and these findings are displayed in the Results section. Another major cause of a career-defining moment was the influence of a significant person. Because we specifically asked interviewees about how mentors impacted their career-defining moments, this is not surprising. However, respondents also indicated the importance of their relationships with people other than their mentors, such as bosses, role models, or their loved ones as instrumental in their experience of a career-defining moment. Finally, another major category emerged unexpectedly because several of the respondents discussed a spiritual experience with a divine being as critical in experiencing a career-defining moment. In conclusion, a typology of five distinct categories of career-defining moments and their respective subthemes emerged: (a) anticipated transition events, (b) unanticipated transition events, (c) insight experience, (d) relationship experience, and (e) spiritual experience.

## Results

### Overall

The 18 interviewees shared 97 career-defining moments, resulting in an average of 5.4 career-defining moments per person ( $SD = 2.3$ , ranging from 2 to 9 experiences shared). In many cases, interviewees likely would have shared additional experiences, but time limits precluded further discussion. In general, career-defining moments were caused by external events (both anticipated and unanticipated), internal experiences (such as insight and reflection), important relationships (such as a mentor), and spiritual experiences (such as with a divine being). The qualitative data from the interviews revealed frequent spillover effects, such that events from nonprofessional domains heavily influenced some of the interviewees' career-defining moments. Career-defining decisions may often be precipitated by events that occur in one sphere, such as the professional, and become intertwined with events that occur in the other spheres, such as the societal or personal arenas. A summary table of types, frequencies, and exemplar quotes are presented in Table 1 at the end of this section.

### External Causes: Anticipated and Unanticipated Transitions

#### Anticipated transition events

So the defining moment was really what do you choose? Stay here and dedicate your time and effort to raising a family or try to fulfill your career path? I have learned to have a healthy disregard for the impossible. Ultimately, I believe it is attitude and not only aptitude that will bring you deserved altitude. (Sally, former president of a major cosmetics company)

Career-defining moments were caused by both anticipated and unanticipated transition events. In general, respondents indicated they experienced far more unanticipated transition events than anticipated. Specifically, among the 18 interviewees, there were 18 examples of career-defining moments caused by anticipated transition events, with three types emerging as the most prevalent: (a) planned job/career transitions ( $n = 10$ ), (b) planned education transitions ( $n = 5$ ), and (c) planned family considerations ( $n = 3$ ). Fifteen of the 18 interviewees experienced at least one anticipated transition event as a career-defining moment.

The experience of changing one's job or career path was the most frequently anticipated transition event that participants experienced as a career-defining moment. For example, one of our interviewees, Bruce, a senior HR executive, discussed his first career-defining moment as the decision of what to do after graduating from college. He characterized his career-defining moment as deciding between a safe and a risky choice.

**Table 1.** Major Subcategories and Exemplary Quotes of Career-Defining Moments (CDM).

| CDM Type/Subcategory                     | Frequency | Exemplary Quote  |
|--|-----------|--|
| Anticipated transitions                  |           |  |
| Job/career transitions                   | 10        | Every day in my job I felt like “dead man walking” so I decided to leave the job I had and open my own practice  |
| Education transitions                    | 5         | I decided to go to medical school and become a surgeon   |
| Family considerations                    | 3         | I decided to adopt my daughter from China as a single woman  |
| Unanticipated transitions                |           |  |
| Tough decision/challenge at work         | 13        | I was in charge of a squad where they were all men. I had to get men who didn't like me because I was a woman or an African-American woman to respect me   |
| New opportunity / professional success   | 12        | I was asked to join the Board and it was a defining moment for me as I just had the feeling that there was something important here for me   |
| Job disillusionment / departure          | 6         | I realized that my job was going to consist of firing a lot of people over the next three years and I walked away from that meeting literally thinking I have to leave now   |
| Personal problems impacting work         | 5         | My father got cancer and passed away. So all of a sudden I was facing the realization that I needed to get the family business back on track and had to decide what to do about my own job   |
| Internal insights                        |           |  |
| Work versus personal life issue          | 6         | 9/11 led me to a defining moment as I realized my entire identity was about work and I wanted a child. So I decided to adopt a child and become a single mother  |
| Moral obligation/call to conscience      | 5         | While I worked at Morgan I had to travel a lot in the developing world. I kept having the experience of being driven from the airports to these nice hotels and passing these shanty towns and I felt like it didn't make sense. I asked myself what I am I doing with my life here? |
| Discerning right career path and clarity | 3         | When I came back from Fordham, I was directing the master catechist program and felt that there was something further I was called to do such as pursue doctoral studies. I spent a lot of time with my spiritual director trying to decide what to do                               |
| Acknowledge burnout or disillusionment   | 3         | The decision to leave the district attorney's (DA) office was a defining moment. At that point, I was disillusioned with some of the things I saw there  |
| Overcoming fear                          | 2         | The first three months of that job I used to throw up almost every morning because I was so concerned about the responsibility of not only supporting myself but also supporting other people  |
| Relationships                            |           |  |
| Significant role model                   | 8         | The reason I am doing what I do is because there was a friend of our family who was a big designer in Beverly Hills and he had a huge effect on me   |
| Mentor                                   | 8         | My greatest mentor was Dr. Robert—he was head of oncology and the kindest man I ever knew  |
| Family member influence/ considerations  | 4         | I became Chief Executive of Ford in Ireland when I was 39. I was offered a promotion and I sat down with my wife and three sons and weighed it out. If I took the promotion it would have been very prestigious but at the end of the day we said no and so I stayed home            |
| Help from third party                    | 3         | Sister Carmel Marie found out about my condition and she and the San Francisco nuns started praying for me. The next week I found out I was cured  |
| Spiritual experiences                    |           |  |
| Divine assistance/sign                   | 8         | I asked God do you want me become a priest? All of a sudden I felt like I was hit by lightning—it was so powerful  |

(continued)



**Table 1.** (continued)

| CDM Type/Subcategory  | Frequency | Exemplary Quote  |
|-----------------------|-----------|--|
| Spiritual recognition | 6         | I had a new job opportunity and really grappled with how to make the decision. I used some Ignatian discernment practices such as I mentally pretended that I accepted the job and lived with that decision as if for 48 hours. Then, I prayed and reflected on how I felt emotionally and spiritually |

There are always some things in life you miss out on. If I were to look back and do something differently, I probably would have taken a year or two out of school to be a ski bum. But I took the safe route. I got a job and started a career. Then, I kind of fell into Human Resources.

Bruce went on to relate he felt this early career-defining moment and ensuing regret was important because after that experience, he consciously chose to make riskier career decisions, which ultimately helped him become successful.

The second most prevalent anticipated transition events were experiences related to education. For example, one of the interviewees, Carlos, a political activist and prominent restaurant owner, spoke of his experience moving from a local to a national university as being pivotal in raising his consciousness politically.

When I moved to a national university, I found people who were dedicated to change. After so many years of dictatorship we were dedicating to creating a new system. This experience helped me to become connected to some incredible leaders in Mexico and Latin America and was defining for me as it changed my thinking and made me become politically active.

Other interviewees spoke of deciding to pursue graduate study, even though it represented a significant departure from one path to another.

The third major theme that emerged as a type of anticipated transition event causing career-defining moments was family considerations. For example, Sally, the former president of a cosmetics company, spoke of her experience:

I was given the opportunity to interview for a national position based in New York. And at that point we were living in Los Angeles and I was finding it limiting career wise. And the defining moment was really what do you choose? It was a very difficult moment. It involved becoming bi-coastal. I made my decision to pursue the opportunity in New York and since the kids were in high school I commuted between New York and Los Angeles. And sometimes my children and husband would meet me in the middle of the country such as St. Louis. Also, I negotiated a package with the company trying to hire me and I learned that organizations are willing to make all sorts of concessions if they want you such as the freedom to take Fridays off and maximum flexibility and accountability.

Intentional changes to career trajectories—a career change, the pursuit of additional education, and a family focus—all represent anticipated transition events and a major cause of career-defining moments. They offer the benefit of advanced planning and reflection and a sense of decision-making control, which can result in feelings of empowerment (made a good decision in hindsight) or regret (made a poor decision in hindsight). However, more career-defining moments resulted from unanticipated events than from those that were expected to occur.

*Unanticipated transition events.* I got cancer and had complete kidney failure and was told I was going to die. (Tony, attorney).

The interviewees in our sample were no strangers to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Interviewees often spoke of being “gobsmacked” or completely surprised by unanticipated transition events that became career-defining moments. In fact, interviewees experienced double ( $n = 36$ ) the number of unanticipated transitions as they did anticipated ones ( $n = 18$ ). Four major subcategories of career-defining moments related to unanticipated transition events emerged from the data as represented in Table 1.

For a specific example of a tough decision or challenge, consider the case of international embezzlement as experienced by Denise, the president of a major interior design company. She related her experience in expanding her business to China early in her career. She entered into this expansion with a trusted local business partner and enjoyed tremendous support from the Chinese government.

When we opened up our business in China we had unbelievable support from the Prime Minister, the President, and the Vice-Minister. I met the Mayor of Beijing and the King and Queen of Spain, who attended a party in our honor. When it comes to business, I don't like to micromanage and so I left everything pretty much up to my Chinese partner and our staff in Beijing.

Unfortunately, Denise's high hopes were dashed as she confronted a growing sense something was amiss in her Chinese operations:

I suspected it for about six months so one day I went into the office when I knew the head bookkeeper wouldn't be there. I opened the cabinet, and then the bookkeeper came in. The bookkeeper lost her temper and started yelling at the woman who had given me the key to the cabinet. And it was at that point I knew that there was something wrong. And there was too much money that could not be accounted for.

Indeed, Denise found that her trusted Chinese business partner had embezzled money from the organization. Denise experienced this stunning betrayal as a career-defining moment leading to a number of decisions about how to cope with the embezzlement, the financial loss, and the future of her business in China and the United States. Ultimately, she decided to close her company's Chinese operations. The experience of betrayal is difficult to anticipate. However, Denise was philosophical and felt she learned a number of valuable lessons. Today, Denise and her business are thriving. She recently opened an impressive new showroom and her worldwide roster of clients continues to expand.

### *Career-Defining Moments: Internal Insights*

And when the event, the big thing in your life, is simply an insight—isn't that a strange thing? That absolutely nothing changes except you see things differently and you're less fearful and less anxious and generally stronger as a result: Isn't that amazing that a completely invisible thing in your head can feel realer than anything you've experienced before? (Franzen, 2001, p. 302)

Participants shared career-defining moments in which their perceptions of current situations changed significantly even though nothing in their external circumstances had changed. In fact, among the 18 interviews, there were 19 examples of career-defining moments related at least partly to an insight experience. An insight experience is defined as an experience that provides an important sense of clarity and truth for an individual. An insight experience can develop over time gradually and involve substantial reflection and introspection or it can be experienced as an illuminating lightning bolt that provides instantaneous clarity.

Five subcategories of insight experiences that were mentioned as career-defining moments as experienced by our interviewees are displayed in Table 1. Sometimes, an insight comes out of a sense of despair; other times, it arises from a growing awareness in spite of things going well. This was the case

for one of our interviewees, Nina. She is the founder of a children's foundation and producer of a kids television show. Nina discussed how the need to create an identity apart from being a wife propelled her into her career. She reflected at one point in her life she was enjoying a very satisfying personal life and did not have an external pressing need to focus on her career. However, she found herself at a decision point, as she sensed a growing desire to make a contribution in the world:

The reason I started my talk show is that I began to feel that I was losing my identity as a woman and as a person. My husband and I were having all these cocktail parties, we went to races, Las Vegas, Europe, etc. We had the most incredible marriage. My husband and I had been together for 24 years. My husband had kids, but we never had any kids of our own together. And I thought to myself that every day passes and I am not really putting anything into the world or life. Then I made my first TV show. I started the show as it was a way to give voice to the ideas of children.

Today, Nina is internationally known as a television producer, philanthropist, author, and a motivational speaker. Her example demonstrates internal insights can stem from a sense of unfulfilled needs or from not making enough of a difference in an existing career path. Unlike the other types that emerged in this study, internal insights originate from inward processes rather than environmental stimuli.

### *Career-Defining Moments: Influential Relationships*

Dr. Martin Luther King was the most influential person in my life and one of the greatest human beings that ever walked the planet. (Denise, interior design business owner)

Respondents indicated career-defining moments were sometimes precipitated by an encounter or experience with an influential person in their lives. The person involved might be a mentor, a role model, a childhood influence, or even an influential third party. Interviewees spoke frequently ( $n = 23$ ) of the importance of their relationships in causing their career-defining moments. An analysis of the data revealed there were four main types of relationships that emerged related to career-defining moments as represented in Table 1.

One specific example of a career-defining moment caused by an influential relationship was from Maureen, senior managing director and cofounder of a highly successful consulting and public affairs firm. Maureen relates one of her most important career opportunities came from her relationship with a trusted mentor.

One of the most important career moments I experienced was with the former Mayor of Los Angeles. I was the first woman in the history of the city to serve as the Commissioner of XXX and it was an extremely powerful position. I remember being very reluctant to take this position. I felt totally unprepared for the job! I went to the League of Women Voters office and picked up a book on city government so I could figure out just exactly what the responsibilities were. After about three visits with the Mayor about this position, the Mayor just went ahead and sent out a press release saying I had accepted the job! And I thought that was pretty high-handed but I trusted him. I took the job because he was a good mayor, a good person, and he had a lot of integrity.

And in fact, in 7 years, I was able to lead with this enormous power to do the things that needed to be done. This job changed my place in the city and my vision of myself and of public service. It changed me from a person with no power to a person with great power. And since then, I've always felt that power within me.

After her appointment ended in 1987, she cofounded her own consulting and public affairs firm. From interactions with thousands of students over the years, and from our own career experiences, one of the more common mind-sets of early career professionals is they underestimate the importance of relationships to their career success. It is clear from the stories of these seasoned professionals that influential relationships lead to career-defining moments and help those individuals achieve success in ways they never imagined.

### *Career-Defining Moment: Experience With Divine/Spirituality*

I said give me a sign, God. I need a sign. I can't stay here in this place. There's got be another place for me in this world. (Cynthia, surgeon)

Ten of the 18 interviewees related that an experience with God was an important cause of a career-defining moment. There were 12 instances of this experience and 8 examples of respondents who felt they had been given a specific sign or that help emerged when they confronted a career-defining moment. There were six examples from respondents who had a spiritual experience that helped them to recognize they were experiencing a career-defining moment, and furthermore, how to navigate through it.

The following is a compelling example from one interviewee, Tony, a criminal defense lawyer, who shared his dramatic experience of an encounter with the divine as he made a life-or-death decision:

I was defending a Colombian cartel called the Grandma Mafia. I found out the government was investigating them through a friend of mine who was a DEA (Drug Enforcement Agency) agent. She also told me that they were in the middle of an internal investigation as agents had been stealing millions of dollars. So, I turned all of this information over to the guy who was the head of the DEA taskforce, Garcia, and it turned out that Garcia was actually the head of the crooked DEA agents! So soon after that, one of my clients told me that I was being set up and was going to be indicted for obstruction of justice, conspiracy to distribute cocaine, etc. At that time I was completely convinced that I was going to go down. This was a major cartel distribution of drugs I was facing RICO charges (racketeering, influence, corrupt organization law) and income tax evasion. That was one of the most defining moments of my life.

Tony went on to share what he refers to as his “demented thought process as an attorney” and his ensuing decision-making process. He employed his research skills as an attorney and found an obscure law about dueling that dates back to the 1800s. The statute indicates that if you duel and kill someone, it is not legally a murder. Therefore, Tony decided he would use this statute to draw Garcia into a duel. Before taking action, he stopped by his church and confessed his plan to his pastor, who tried to dissuade him and offered to pray for him, but his mind was made up. According to Tony, there seemed to be some form of divine intervention at work:

I went to the bar in downtown Los Angeles and I saw Garcia sitting there. And he says, “Okay. What more have you got for me?” And I said, “This is what I have.” And I slid a 9-millimeter gun over to him that had the safety off. And I had another identical gun right in front of me. And I said, “It’s exactly what it looks like. And you’re going to have three seconds to go for that gun, because I’m going to kill you or you’re going to kill me. Because I know what’s happening now. All your agents and you are testifying against me—I’m coming down with a RICO charge. And I’m going to kill you, or else you’re going to kill me right now.”

Just then the barmaid, a very large lady, came over. She was wiping the bar because it was closing time. And she came over right when I was saying that, and she wiped by the bar and the skin of her arm hit his gun and knocked it onto the floor. Weird. And when his gun hit the floor, he got up, put his hands up in the air

and backed right out of the bar. And therefore I didn't shoot him. That moment in my life obviously changed everything. Because then I didn't kill him.

Tony later reflected on what he learned from his experience of "divine providence." For him, the lessons included the importance of seeing the light at the end of the tunnel in difficult situations and the value of learning to cope without resorting to violence.

## Discussion

This qualitative study had as its central purpose the discovery of major types of career-defining moments. The study revealed five important types of career-defining moments: unanticipated events, anticipated events, personal insights and reflection, relationships with others, and spiritual experiences. Within most of these five major types, the research revealed subcategories that are instructive as career-defining moments are considered. For example, unanticipated events can take the form of both jobs lost and opportunities found. This typology is important as a basis for future research, as each of the five types warrants additional attention to better understand their consequences. Each type also deserves additional study to learn the most effective strategies for successfully processing through such moments. The typology is the major contribution of the present research.

With an open interview process, more than five career-defining moments on average were shared by respondents. This surprised us somewhat, as we expected such accomplished professionals would easily identify one or two career-defining moments but not five (and as many as nine for a couple respondents). The diversity of these moments reinforced the notion that careers are beautifully personal possessions and there is no one-size-fits-all formula for ensuring career success. The content of these career-defining moments also suggested an important relationship with individual perceptions of personal meaningfulness in life, striving for purpose in life, and the pursuit of worthwhile goals (Frankl, 1963; Wong & Fry, 1998), a relationship that deserves additional investigation in the future.

Related to the moments shared by respondents, an interesting finding of the study was that the number of unexpected transition events was double that of expected transition events. Many times respondents found even the most unanticipated transition events to be sources of valuable learning upon reflection in hindsight. The fact that both painful and enjoyable unanticipated events served as career-defining moments deserves emphasis and future attention (i.e., how do you process differing emotions from these unanticipated events). These successful professionals learned important lessons from these occurrences and those lessons shaped their subsequent careers. It is possible that the frequency of unanticipated events shared as career-defining moments may be a function of salience and perspective rather than what actually occurred over the course of an individual's career. It may be that events that are unexpected, because of their surprising nature, are perceived as more salient in defining one's career than planned events.

## Study Limitations and Future Research Opportunities

A few limitations of this current study are related to the characteristics of the interview sample. The interviewees were highly successful in their careers, consistent with most prior research on this phenomenon (Bennis & Thomas, 2002, 2007). Thus, the processing of career-defining moments is skewed toward positive outcomes that either maintained or accelerated an individual's career trajectory. Future research might consider different populations such as individuals who have been recently downsized, individuals guilty of white-collar crimes, or individuals who have been struggling in an unemployment status for some time. Another potential issue with this research is the interviewees were drawn from a population of persons affiliated with one of the authors' institutions. The institution is based on a set of religious values and beliefs that may have influenced their identification of types of career-defining

moments, specifically the spiritual experience type of moment. Therefore, future research that tests these constructs from leaders in a wider variety of settings using a more heterogeneous sample in terms of religious or institutional affiliation is an important next step for future research. A third limitation is the interviewees were all in mid-to-late career stages. This would certainly influence the average number of career-defining moments disclosed by each interviewee. It likely also affects the nature of the lessons learned from such moments. Future research that examines early-career professionals would add to our understanding of both causes and consequences of career-defining moments. It would also be helpful to incorporate more objective measures of career events such as number of distinct career paths or companies, perhaps gathered by an analysis of resumes or LinkedIn profiles. Given the nature of the research design of this study and our focal purpose to understand the types of career-defining moments, there are several other issues that warrant future research. Future researchers would be well advised to use this initial exploratory research as the basis for scale development, which would strengthen the validity of the conceptual idea of career-defining moments and reliability of the typology categories. Another potential research opportunity is how individuals process through career-defining moments and strategies for improving the likelihood of positive outcomes from these moments. Additionally, empirical research is needed to reveal how great managers and mentors help individuals become more aware of career-defining moments, and then how they help individuals work through them in positive ways.

### *Implications for Practitioners*

A typology of career-defining moments can be illuminating, as it can provide professionals with the ability to better anticipate their own career-defining moments or recognize them as meaningful when they arise and to process them in a way that leads to positive career consequences. A greater understanding of career-defining moments can be beneficial for three groups of professionals—the individuals themselves, their managers, and career counselors or executive coaches.

Consistent with the protean career theory (Hall, 2004), all working adults should, at least to some extent, manage their careers. However, it is our experience many individuals abdicate the management of their careers to fate or to their organizations, which typically results in higher stress levels and less satisfactory career outcomes. A deeper awareness of career-defining moments can offer comfort to professionals who confront their own moments. The knowledge that such moments are common career experiences can provide reassurance and practical examples to those facing them. One recommendation reinforced by this study is that individuals intentionally carve out time in their busy schedules to reflect upon their career circumstances. A second, related recommendation is to cultivate relationships with one or more mentors and to discuss career progress regularly with them.

The findings in this study reinforce the idea from previous research (Ensher & Murphy, 2005; Thomas, 2008) that managers and mentors can be influential in helping individuals recognize and cope with career-defining moments. Helping adults cope with transitions has been identified as a crucial aspect of development and growth and one not to be neglected (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Managers can help prepare employees for anticipated events, such as layoffs or organizational restructuring, or new transformative assignments such as rejuvenating a failing business unit. They can help employees recognize the importance of potential career-defining moments by holding regular career conversations with their employees. They can stimulate the personal insights and reflections of employees by asking thought-provoking questions and giving employees the time and space to reflect. Executive coaches can prompt leaders to contemplate past decisions more thoroughly and to achieve greater clarity in professional aspirations. Mentors and executive coaches often use their own networks to connect professionals who might help each other achieve greater success and resolve professional challenges. The importance of relationships related to career-defining moments suggests more of this intentional networking would likely be beneficial.

In conclusion, this study contributes to research on career-defining moments by identifying five specific types of these moments. It offers tangible examples of the catalysts for professionals altering their career paths and mentalities. It reveals defining moments in a career are more common than is usually thought or reported. Finally, it prompts additional research questions and opportunities to probe deeper into the reasons and processes by which some events and insights become transformational to our careers.

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