

Conclusion

So let's tie this process all together. Making the best decisions about marriage is hard work as you cannot rely on your instincts or society for guidance. Your instincts tend to encourage you to focus decisions too narrowly on yourself. Historically, society established norms and expectations that forced people to consider the welfare of others when making decisions about marriage. Social norms no longer provide guidance for the complex decisions that you have to make. Adults have never had the freedom that they have today to make decisions about a range of choices including careers, leisure activities, partners, and children.

THE TRAPS

Because of this freedom, it is too easy to fall into traps and make poor decisions. While the high divorce rate has been attributed to a variety of forces, it has been suggested here that the primary cause of failed marriages is poor decisions. People enter marriage optimistically that theirs will be a success. A significant number of people eventually conclude that they were wrong. How can that be? Bad luck alone cannot explain those people's frustration. Ultimately, we have to realize that people make decisions and when they are disappointed about the outcome that often means that they made bad ones. Therefore, to improve the likelihood of marital success people have to learn how to make better decisions. Better decisions will assist people in avoiding a number of traps that can result in poor decisions.

THE EXPERIENCE TRAP

The first trap is the Experience Trap that occurs because people's prior experiences do not adequately prepare them for making the best decisions about marriage. Historically, people had a limited range of choices when they married. They often waited until men were able to support a family and then they married someone from a limited social and geographic pool. Having married, they assumed predictable roles that were dictated by society but were often based on necessity. Men did the things that men did and women had their own responsibilities. Children were important as a source of labor and old age support, so couples had numerous children. Having numerous children was important because so few of them survived past infancy.

All of this has changed. People have become much more geographically mobile and they are marrying when they are older. As a result, they have been exposed to a much broader range of potential mates. The biggest change in the roles available to adults has been the increase in employment opportunities for women, so that they are less dependent on men for financial support. People also have more options about whether they will have children, how many they will have and when they will have them. Dating and even living together have not adequately prepared people for the decisions that they have to make as a married couple. The Experience Trap occurs when people make poor decisions that reduce the potential welfare that they should expect from marriage. The impact of this Trap can be minimized by seriously considering the type of person that you should marry and what you hope to accomplish during marriage. A careful identification of the benefits and costs of alternatives is central to making better decisions.

THE EMOTION TRAP

The second trap is the Emotion Trap as the decisions about marriage—especially your choice of a spouse—is more likely to be influenced by your emotions than other decisions. This occurs because you will often be less aware of the costs associated with those choices. This was seldom a problem in the past in most societies, because choosing a spouse was usually viewed as too important to be left exclusively to the parties involved. Choices were made or strongly influenced by parents and other members of society.

Without those constraints, people are usually able to make their own choices relying on a variety of factors with love and physical attraction having a central role. This decision is different from most that we make as it can ignore or minimize the associated costs. The cost of choosing one person is the sacrifice of all others, which may seem insignificant to someone in love. Most other decisions require the use of our limited resources of time or money that will normally corral our emotions. Going on vacation in Mexico is going to require time and money that could be used to remodel your house. You can minimize the effect of the Emotion Trap by carefully weighing the benefits and costs of decisions.

THE SELF-INTEREST TRAP

The next trap is the Self-Interest Trap that can cause people to focus their decisions too narrowly on themselves. A substantial literature demonstrates that the primary motivating force behind people's decisions is their perception of their self-interest. Given the interactions that occur among people this may appear to be a destructive force. Society has historically placed restrictions on individual actions to limit its adverse effects.

People have more freedom today and as a result self-interest can induce people into making decisions that do not improve their welfare. This can occur when they are not adequately sensitive to the effect of their actions on others. Our welfare is usually enhanced by our interaction with others. We want to love and to be loved. Because the importance of reciprocity can be subtle, without social constraints people may be inclined to overlook it. This can be particularly destructive when it comes to marriage. It is not necessary to become altruistic to avoid the Self-Interest Trap. All you have to do is recognize that your welfare is dependent on the actions of others, so keeping them happy dealing with you is important to you.

THE UNILATERAL DIVORCE TRAP

The last trap is the Unilateral Divorce Trap as it discourages you from making the decisions that historically have been important for marital success. While love is probably the most common concept currently associated with a successful marriage, the most important in the past was probably commitment. People expected to be better off in a number of very tangible ways if they married, so they married. They married with the expectation that it was going to last as long as their joint lives. With that expectation, they really did not have any choice other than to make a commitment to it. That commitment has become weaker for many couples. Marriage is perceived as having become less important for increasing people's material well-being. Divorce has become more common.

The introduction of no-fault divorce laws that usually permit either spouse to dissolve a marriage unilaterally has significantly weakened the commitment that some people make to their marriage. Unilateral divorce coupled with limited compensation for sacrifices made on behalf of a marriage have discouraged some people from making those sacrifices and the associated commitment to their marriage. Because of the ease with which a marriage can be dissolved—even when one spouse strongly disagrees—people can be discouraged from making the necessary commitment to it. Hard times can lead to divorce rather than an increased commitment to make a loving relationship work. The way to avoid the Unilateral Divorce Trap is to question the choices that you make when there is a conflict between your and your family's welfares. Are your career choices improving the welfare of your family or are they primarily in your best interest, especially if you are divorced? It is easiest to avoid this trap if you chose your

spouse wisely and continue to believe that both of you are committed to the success of your marriage.

AVOIDING THE TRAPS

The key to avoiding these traps is to make better decisions, and guidance for those decisions can come from using a business framework. This framework has its roots in economics, which is the study of choice and how people can improve their decision making. Choices have to be made all of the time because of scarcity—wants exceed resources. People improve their welfare by making the choices for which the benefits exceed the costs. These choices are made by people acting as consumers and workers as well as by businesses. A focus on business decision making can help us improve our decision making as individuals.

Families and many businesses are more similar than you might think. People voluntarily agree to enter into a joint venture in both cases. They anticipate that by working together they will be better off than they would be working on their own. In both cases, they convert inputs into outputs with the goal of improving their welfare. For a business, this occurs as it converts raw materials into products with the goal of making a profit. In a similar fashion, a family takes the time, money and skills available to it and uses them to produce a variety of commodities with the goal of increasing its welfare. Just like a business does not survive if it is not profitable, families do not survive if they do not increase their participants' welfare.

WHO SHOULD YOU MARRY?

So the key decisions leading to a successful marriage have to focus on increasing a family's welfare. This process starts with finding the type of person who will work with you to accomplish that goal. This person will have important characteristics that go beyond being someone to whom you are physically attracted. The key characteristics of this person should be commitment to your marriage, compatibility with you and complementary skills and aspirations. A clear and unambiguous commitment is essential for marital success. This happens when you have done a conscientious search for a spouse and are now comfortable with your choice. Commitment is so important because it encourages personal sacrifices, while helping you to weather any down periods in your relationship. Compatibility should be obvious including values as well as activities. Less obvious is complementarity especially when people are misled into believing that love is the only important ingredient in a successful marriage. Complementarity is important for improving the family's productivity. People stay married because they feel better off in it than in any alternative arrangement. This improved welfare is the result of the production that occurs in families, with the

commodities produced ranging from meals to peace of mind. This production is often enhanced by the spouses assuming more specialized roles.

Finding people with the characteristics that you prefer can be frustrating. In the past, people often found their spouse in their neighborhood or in school. Potential spouses were numerous and readily available. Having now rejected those venues, some people find the process to be much more difficult. You have to think more about marketing yourself. Also, long-term relationships have become more common and so—if you are looking for something more permanent—you have to address the ultimate challenge for a marketer: closing the deal.

THE PRODUCTIVE FAMILY

Your next challenge is creating a productive family. This does not just happen; it has to be appreciated and planned. Families use their resources of money, time and skills to produce commodities. Families that do this efficiently will prosper and persist. This production benefits from specialization of labor based on comparative advantage. With only so much time in the day, no one is even remotely capable of doing everything. Jobs and responsibilities have to be allocated. Some important commodities are money intensive such as a meal at an expensive restaurant, while others are more dependent on time input such as an afternoon at the beach. One advantage that families have is the ability to produce shared commodities that benefit a number of people simultaneously. Marriage encourages critical investments that enhance a family's productive capacity.

GENERATING MONEY INPUTS

Since money is just one of the resources that are used to produce commodities, earning it should not be a goal in itself. Moreover, people should consider the net gain from employment rather than just the income earned. The net gain also takes into consideration the costs incurred in earning the income. If you have to accept a stressful and unpleasant job to earn a high income, it is probably time to consider how you can cut back on expenditures to permit you to consider lower paying—but more attractive—jobs. Education continues to be the key to finding jobs that have the potential for a substantial net gain.

THE ROLE OF CHILDREN

Probably the most important commodities produced in most families are children. There is no other reason for having children than the enjoyment that you expect from them. You will have them so long as the benefits exceed the costs. The investments that you make in your children are going to strongly influence the enjoyment that you receive from them. This investment will often require one parent to adjust a career to accommodate childcare. This adjustment does not have to be complete or lifelong.

AVOIDING BANKRUPTCY

You may not always conclude that your marriage is a success. With unilateral divorce, dissolving your marriage may become appealing at that time. All of the Traps can mislead you at that point. Due to a lack of experience, you may attribute too many benefits to being single again. Frustration with your marriage may encourage you to respond emotionally without an adequate consideration of the benefits and cost. Thinking primarily about your concerns may lead you to ignore those of others and yet their concerns—especially your children—may result in substantial costs for you later. Last, unilateral divorce may have encouraged you to limit your investment in your marriage and then when that relationship's quality suffered, it encouraged you to dissolve the marriage. If you made an even remotely good choice of a spouse, seldom is divorce going to dramatically improve your welfare.

MERGING FAMILIES

A remarriage is going to present even more challenges as you attempt to integrate two families. It is similar to two businesses merging. The presence of children from prior relationships as well as new children is one of the primary reasons that couples find adjusting to a subsequent marriage difficult. A remarriage is likely to be more successful if people critically evaluate the decisions associated with their first marriage, recognizing the areas in which they made poor choices.

CONCLUSION

So there you have it. There are significant benefits from approaching marriage as you would a new business. It is important to recognize that being pragmatic about your decisions is not a contradiction to your romantic goals of tender moments and great sex. You are more likely to have those experiences if you have made good decisions about your spouse and activities during marriage. These are probably the most important decisions that you make, so make them carefully.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

- It has become more difficult to make the best decisions about marriage.
- Help in making better decisions can come from viewing marriage from a business perspective.
- You can make better decisions by carefully weighing the benefits and costs of alternatives.
- A credible commitment is essential for marital success.
- While people marry because they are in love, they stay married because they feel better off in their marriage than in any other arrangement.