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Business Behavior and Development Series

Optimism: Why It Matters So Much

Mike Nordbye is principal of Proven Strategies, a business and management development firm.

Recognizing that companies and situations are unique, Mike adapts the best management and leadership strategies to produce measurable results quickly for his clients. Being sensitive to individual situations, Mike skillfully adapts the philosophy and theory of validated growth strategies into practical, easy to implement solutions that have both immediate and sustainable positive impact on the bottom line. His goal always is to see ideas and systems translated into realities.

Mike holds a Ph.D. in Adult Learning Strategies, an MBA and a Masters Degree in Organizational Behavior and Development. For the past 15 years Mike has been working one-on-one and with groups to create meaningful results over a broad range of industries. Clients describe him as being direct with a sense of humor that provides for a light touch combined with an innate ability to inspire and create confidence.

“Success is measured by your ability to maintain enthusiasm between failures.”

— Sir Winston Churchill

Mahatma Gandhi, Norman Cousins, Helen Keller, Christopher Reeves and Thomas Edison are just a few names that come to mind in a discussion about optimism and success.

Mozart is another example of a genius who had exemplary self-confidence in the face of adversity. A psychological analysis of his correspondence shows that he carried optimism to an almost pathological extreme. Toward the end of his life, when he suffered the deaths of four children, serious illnesses and repeated professional and financial disasters, his optimism actually rose.

People who are considered successful in life measure high on assessments of optimistic attitudes. It would be easy to presume they are optimistic because they are successful, but there is enough research to show that the optimism comes first.

Traditional wisdom puts forth the idea that to be successful, you must have two things:

1. Talent or aptitude
2. Motivation

More recent research shows that a third element contributes strongly to success:

3. An optimistic attitude, particularly in the face of adversity.

High scores for optimism are predictive of excellence in everything from sports to health, elections and sales. When Metropolitan Life used an assessment of optimistic attitude to select and hire salespeople, they saved themselves millions of dollars in personnel selection. Those highest on the optimism scale outsold others in their first year by 27 percent.

At American Express Financial Advisors, a pilot test of optimism training increased sales enough after only three months to make it a standard part of training.

When Mark Biondi was in training for the Seoul Olympics in 1988, his coach would repeatedly tell him his times were slower than they actually were. Because Biondi scored high on tests for optimism, his coach knew that this discouraging news would only motivate him to swim faster. He ended up winning five gold medals in his last five events.

Optimists are more resistant to infectious illness and are better at fending off chronic diseases of middle age. In one study of 96 men who had their first heart attack in 1980, 15 of the 16 most pessimistic men died of a second heart attack within eight years, but only five of the 16 most optimistic men died.

Dr. Martin Seligman has shown that optimists not only do better educationally and in their careers, they also enjoy superior health and longevity. Data from cancer patients show a definite association between pessimism and mortality for those under 60.

Dr. Seligman, a researcher and psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, is author of *Learned Optimism*. He has spent a lifetime studying why some people are more resilient than others. He has developed an Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ), which measures optimism and pessimism. In one study of school children over several years, those scoring highest for pessimism were most likely later to suffer depression.

How a Dynamic Optimist is Better than a Passive One

Max More, Ph.D., has proposed an interesting concept about two distinct kinds of optimists: those who are “dynamic” and those who are “passive.” Dynamic optimists have an active, empowering attitude, which creates conditions for success by focusing and acting on possibilities and opportunities. Passive optimists simply tell themselves that all will

work out just fine. They expect other people and organizations will solve the problems.

On the surface, optimism may appear to be a simple case of “don’t worry, be happy.” However, an effective assessment of optimism/pessimism will show that there are degrees of optimism. Not all kinds will move us forward in life.

Most people say they are optimists in life. In fact, very few people actually admit to and espouse a pessimistic stance. More will say they are optimistic, but with a heavy dose of realism.

Dr. More proposes that effective optimism requires study, understanding and practice. A passive optimist, while more effective than a pessimist, sees no need to take action. They think positively but don’t know how to turn thoughts into actions. Those who are really dynamic in their optimism turn their thoughts into behaviors. They apply optimism in diverse ways to attain goals in career, finances, spirituality, health and leadership.

The good news is that optimism can be learned and cultivated. Very few of us were lucky enough to have been raised with an attitude of optimism. Research shows that it is learned in childhood from maternal caretakers. Psychologists who teach the skills of optimism in their books are Seligman (*Learned Optimism*), Albert Ellis (*Rational Emotive Therapy*), David Burns (*Feeling Good*), and Aaron Beck.

Pessimists, passive optimists and dynamic optimists all selectively focus their attention. Studies show that pessimists are actually more realistic than optimists. Dynamic optimists interpret their experiences differently than other people. They also influence outcomes differently by translating effective thoughts into specific kinds of actions.

The differing ways in which optimists and pessimists focus their attention lead to noticing different things, experiencing different motivations, and taking different



actions. The pessimist focuses on problems, pains, and pitfalls. The passive optimist sees only what is encouraging and enjoyable, but blinds him or her to potential obstacles. This leads to missed opportunities or limited success. At its worst, it leads to failure, frustration and ill health.

Thus the dynamic optimist dwells on the constructive and enjoyable while de-emphasizing pain, difficulty and frustration. Such a person can look at a frustrating event, fully accept its reality, and then choose to interpret the event in a way that leads to action, growth and mastery. They recognize dangers but have a wider vision open to solutions, possibilities and assisting forces.

Optimists and Pessimists At Work

A successful company has a diverse set of personalities serving different roles. The optimists are good as researchers, developers and marketers. Their optimism helps them in their roles as visionaries. But if a company consisted of only optimists, it would be a disaster.

There is a place for pessimism, or at least for people who have an accurate knowledge of present realities. They must make sure grim reality holds the optimists in check. The treasurer, the CPA's, the financial administrators and safety engineers all need an accurate sense of how much the company can afford and of possible risks. Their role is to caution.

Hopefully such people, while serving an important role for the company, would not be high-octane pessimists whose attitude undermines their own achievement and health. They may be merely prudent and measured people who have nurtured their pessimistic side in the service of their careers. There is a time and a place for measured pessimism.

The case for pessimism rests on its heightened sense of reality. It endows us with accuracy, especially in certain lives or careers filled with unexpected disasters and safety

issues. By understanding the virtues of pessimism, along with its crippling consequences of depression and inertia, we can learn to resist its habitual pull. We can learn to choose optimism when we wish and also heed pessimism when it is warranted.

What to Do When You Hit that Wall...

Think about the times during the day at work that you are blocked and feel discouraged and as if you've run up against a brick wall. What do you do when you hit that wall?

The optimistic individual perseveres. In the face of routine setbacks he persists. He keeps on going, particularly at the crucial juncture when his competition is also hitting the wall and starting to wilt. Even in the face of major failure, the optimist persists.

Optimism helps at work and not just in competitive jobs. It can help every time your work gets very hard. It can make the difference between getting the job done well or poorly — or not at all. Even in non-competitive tasks, such as paper work or writing, an optimistic attitude can make the difference.

Procrastination is the result of not having optimism as a mindset to start and finish a task. Some people call putting off work just laziness. But at the root of the problem is the internal dialog that goes on in the mind of the person facing an unpleasant or routine, boring task. A pessimist thinks all sorts of negative thoughts when facing such tasks. The optimist thinks positive thoughts that actually encourage and energize.

Everyone has his own point of discouragement, his own wall. What you do when you hit this wall can mean the difference between helplessness, guilt, and a sense of failure, and success and feelings of accomplishment.

Failure often does not stem from laziness, or from lack of talent or lack of imagination. It's often simply ignorance of some very important



tools not commonly taught in schools or in training and development workshops.

The Basic Tools of Optimism Can Be Learned

If you are working with a manager, or an executive coach, you can use the opportunity to work on developing the skills of optimism.

Here are three important tools for learning to cultivate an optimistic attitude.

1. Become aware of your awareness: look at how you selectively focus on events.
 2. Examine your internal dialogue then change what you tell yourself.
 3. Do something pleasurable to distract yourself from bad events.
1. **Notice what you focus on when a bad event happens to you.** Are you seeing only one side of the situation? Are there opportunities that you can narrow in on, rather than mistakes? Would an extreme optimist look at this situation and see different things? How else could you view this? Are you looking at this as permanent or temporary? Are you looking at this as global or specific to this one event only? Do you assign blame personally or to some external person or thing?
 2. **Talk to yourself with kindness.** If something goes wrong, pessimists tend to have hopeless thoughts. They tell themselves, "I'll never get it right," or, "There I go again, I always screw up." Even worse, they label themselves with a global declaration of negativity: "I'm a stupid fool." The goal here is for the person to speak to themselves with kindness and compassion as they would a friend. The person might say something like this: "Ouch! That didn't go very well today, but I can learn from this. Some

of what I did can be corrected. I can do better tomorrow." To counteract the negative labeling, the person can reframe his or her self-talk by saying something like, "I know I feel like a stupid fool, but I'm not. I'm a lot better than I was when I first started this job. I'm learning quite quickly and I'm not going to get everything perfect all of the time."

3. **Distract yourself with pleasurable activities.** The other technique for overcoming pessimism is distraction from negative thinking. It's important to not to ruminate about bad events that happen to you, at least not immediately. Studies show that if you think about problems in a negative frame of mind, you actually come up with fewer solutions. By boosting mood and self-esteem and by participating in activities that are pleasurable, you can break the pessimistic cycle and free yourself to think more creatively. So, if your boss gives you a less than favorable performance review, it is important not to ruminate and obsess about it. Distraction with pleasant activities will free your mind to think more optimistically later on.

How Do You Rate Yourself on Your Explanatory Style?

Explanatory style is the way that you explain events to yourself — both good and bad. You explain to yourself that what has happened is either permanent or temporary, pervasive and global, or specific (limited to just this one event), or personal (you're responsible) or external (somebody else gets the credit or blame.) This is a measure of your optimistic or pessimistic attitude.

When something good happens to me, I tell myself that:

- A.
 1. This kind of thing always happens.



2. These things happen sometimes.
3. This never happens.

B.

1. This event happened because of something I've done.
2. This happened because of me but I was lucky: in the right place at the right time.
3. This is really due to someone or something else.

C.

1. This is a great example of the way things always go for me.
2. This event is great, but it's just limited to this one specific situation.
3. This event is a quirk, it'll never happen again.

When something bad happens to me, I tell myself that:

A.

1. Wow, how unusual! This never happens.
2. This may just be a quirk; this normally doesn't happen.
3. Here we go again. This is typical of what always happens.

B.

1. It's not me — it's them.
2. Maybe I could have done better, but so should they.
3. I should have done better — it's my fault.

C.

1. Well, this is only limited to this one situation.
2. This is too bad, and it could easily happen again.
3. This is awful. It will ruin everything.

Circle 1,2, or 3 and add up your score. The lower your score (close to 6), the more optimistic you are. The higher your score (close to 18), the more pessimistic you are. If you scored in the mid-range, you may be optimistic, but passively so. In order to achieve more, be more successful, maintain good health and possible longevity, you may want to work on how you can raise your score and develop a more dynamic optimistic attitude.

	Pessimism	Optimism
Good Events	Time: Temporary Scope: Specific Source: External	Time: Permanent Scope: Pervasive Source: Internal
Bad Events	Time: Permanent Scope: Pervasive Source: Internal	Time: Temporary Scope: Specific Source: External

Optimism Quotes:

“A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.” — Sir Winston Churchill

“For myself I am an optimist – It does not seem to be much use being anything else.” — Anonymous

“Don't ever become a pessimist; a pessimist is correct oftener than an optimist, but an optimist has more fun – and neither can stop the march of events.” — Robert A. Heinlein



Resources for Optimism

Mercer, M., Ph.D. & Troiani, M., Ph.D. (1998). *Spontaneous Optimism*. Castlegate Publishing Inc.

More, M., Ph.D. Dynamic Optimism: www.awarenessmag.com/so_dynam.htm.

Optimism/Pessimism Inventory: www.psychtests.com/optim_frm.html.

Perry, J. M. (1996). *The Road to Optimism*. JM Perry Corp.

Seligman, M. E.P., Ph.D. (1998). *Learned Optimism*. New York: Simon & Schuster Inc.

Teaching Optimism: www.eqtoday.com/jpcoptimism.html.

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