



## The Power of Optimism

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In the famous book by Dr. M. Scott Peck, called “The Road Less Traveled”, his very first sentence succinctly frames the challenge for all of us: “Life is difficult.”

Indeed it is. And when you and your team are experiencing significant organizational change, HOW we approach the challenges of work and daily life goes better when we understand the foundational power of “change from the inside out”. As we explored in the presentation, there is the One Change that Rules All Other Changes---the shift from Ego to the High Performance Self.

- Have you noticed that when you operate out of Ego and all of its limiting and negative thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, you greatly increase the probability that you can make your life and interpersonal relationships even MORE difficult?

One of the most important emotionally and socially intelligent competencies to engage challenging workplace change is **Optimism**. Like Empathy, it is one of those high-performing “keeper competencies” that effective people and leaders can develop that can help us handle the fact that “Life is difficult”.

But just what is Optimism, and how do I develop myself to be better at it? Let’s explore this more in-depth and give you some important distinctions and tools to develop your capacity for Optimism.

- Optimism is an inner emotional intelligence competency that blends a mental attitude, belief and expectation that “things will go right”, with a strong emotional component that embodies qualities of persistence, determination, and resiliency, particularly when you experience a setback or “failure”.
- Optimism also buffers you from inner states of apathy, hopelessness, and negativity that can often arise when dealing with challenging or difficult circumstances.
- Also, Optimism is one of the most powerful inner tools for self-motivation, and it propels you as a leader to “make it happen” despite the challenges you face.

Of course, Optimism’s converse inner state, Pessimism, is one of the most limiting and self-defeating of all the inner states, and often leaves us feeling we are a victim of circumstances and unable to make any “breakthroughs” happen.

## OPTIMISM IS CONTAGIOUS

- As a leader, expressing Optimism **outwardly** in our words, actions and body language is very important when we work with others. There is an important reason for this: our physiology is wired to help us be emotional and socially attuned to and connected with others (the so-called “neural Wi-Fi”).
- Outwardly expressing Optimism individually and in a team can be positively contagious when teams are facing challenges. Or if there is a very stressful event or period at work, a leader’s outward expression of Optimism can help the individuals and the team handle that challenge and maintain positive focus rather than moving into inner states and language that is negative, pessimistic or depressive.
- As leaders, we all have unfortunately witnessed how inner states like Pessimism can infect a team. All it can take is one pessimistic person to set off the “neural wi-fi” in the opposite direction from Optimism.
- While we would like all of our co-workers to be more self-aware, manage their inner states, and take responsibility “how they show up”, leaders often have to increase their social awareness and detect signs of negative states like Pessimism emerging in a group / team, and try to counter and interrupt it before this group emotional pattern grows into a more sustained negative “team mood” or worse, an on-going negative “team temperament” that can subsequently drain team morale and team productivity.

Unlike our IQ or intelligence quotient, the good news about Optimism (like many of the emotional and social intelligence competencies) is that it can be **learned**. Many research studies over the last three decades indicate that you can learn how to cultivate and skillfully use the powerful state of Optimism.

## OPTIMISM KEY: HOW YOU INTERPRET & EXPLAIN “LIFE” AND WORKPLACE CHALLENGES

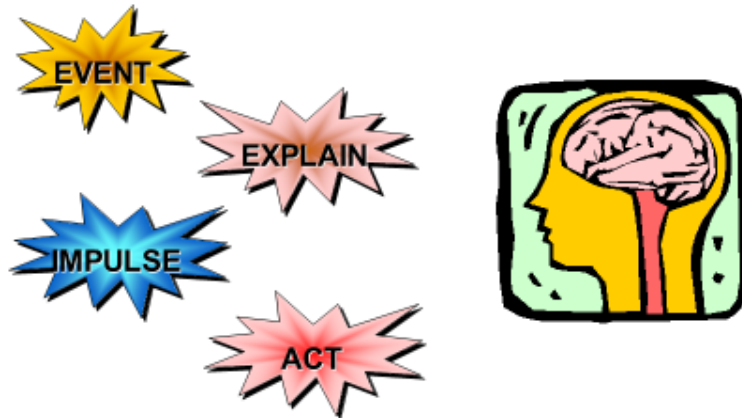
Here is one crucial key for generating Optimism in challenging circumstances. **It has everything to do with how we interpret and explain (in-the-moment) the life events that happen to us.** How do we interpret events and TALK to ourselves internally? What is our so-called “explanatory style” when something good or bad happens to us?

Let’s take a look at the inner process of our “explanatory style” graphically (see the model below), and explore what happens to us when we experience either a “good event” or a “bad event”.

- How do we explain it to ourselves? In other words, do we interpret the event more “optimistically”; or more do we explain it to ourselves more “pessimistically”?

As you will see below, an “event” happens, which we could generally describe as a “good event” or “bad event”. Immediately after the event happens, we interpret it, based on our internal style of explanation or “self talk”. Then, from that explanation, we generate the impulse to act, and then we act.

## Changing my “Explanatory Style”



Now in the life process, we experience all sorts of “good” and “bad” events. But what is not inevitable, what in fact varies dramatically from individual to individual, is the way each of **responds** to setbacks and failures when they strike; and more specifically---how we interpret and talk to ourselves about it BEFORE we respond. Remember, Thought + Emotion = Performance = Results.

- The same type of adverse event that causes Frank to collapse and withdraw into helplessness may be the exact impetus that motivates Anne to re-analyze the crisis, redouble her efforts and find an even better way next time. Such resilience and optimism in the face of defeat is one of the key ingredients for success in life, and work.

So how do we change our explanatory style? How we consciously train ourselves to be more optimistic?

### CHANGING OUR EXPLANATORY STYLE

As we learned in the self-awareness and self-management practices, using your awareness capacity to view how you might be internally explaining an event / situation to yourself can lead to more effective self-management of your inner states. So it is very possible to train your explanatory style to interpret events in more optimistic ways, and reduce and re-direct an explanatory style that may tend towards pessimism.

There are at least three dimensions you need to consider when you **train** your explanatory style, and learn how to interpret and respond to events with more optimism. These three dimensions are:

- **Permanence:** is this event or situation something that is temporary and specific, or something more permanent?
- **Pervasiveness:** is this event / situation an indicator that there are many other events, situations, and circumstances that have the same quality and features of this event or situation, and our interpretation / explanatory style can be extended to those events or situations---or not?
- **Personalization:** does this event / situation have external factors that are beyond my personal control or personal responsibility that are involved with its occurrence; or is it something that is more within my control and responsibility?

Let's look at the occurrence of what could be considered a "Bad Event" and contrast how the 'Pessimist' and the "Optimist" may explain the very same event with their inner "self talk".

Note that the Optimist sees a "bad event" usually as something temporary and specific that can be worked through and turned around.

### "BAD EVENT" - THE PESSIMIST EXPLANATION

- **Permanence:** "the cause of this bad event is permanent".
- **Pervasiveness:** "this one bad event is an indicator that many more such bad events that can occur, or will occur. This one failure could indicate there will be more failure in other areas."
- **Personalization:** "this one bad event is mainly my fault" (despite other contributing factors that I may or may not be aware of, or won't acknowledge as contributory causes of the bad event).

### "BAD EVENT" - THE OPTIMIST EXPLANATION

- **Permanence:** "the cause of this bad event is temporary and specific to this event or situation".
- **Pervasiveness:** "this bad event or failure is a specific bad event or failure. It is not indicative of any trend towards future bad events or failures in other areas".
- **Personalization:** "this bad event had contributing / external causes and factors that led to its occurrence. It wasn't just about me."

Conversely, when something positive happens, a "Good Event", the Pessimist and Optimist will also explain that differently. Note that the Optimist has confidence these good events will continue. They have hope (an inner state that is a first cousin to Optimism), and they are optimistic good things will continue because this state tends to foster higher self-regard, and self-confidence. The Pessimist self-talk concludes "I/we just got lucky, this time".

### "GOOD EVENT" - THE PESSIMIST

- **Permanence:** "this success is temporary, due to my great effort. It won't last."
- **Pervasiveness:** "this success is a one-time success in this area--it is not going to be wide-spread or continue."
- **Personalization:** "this success is mainly just luck, or the result of other good factors coming together. I may have had a part to play, but things just fell my way this time."

### "GOOD EVENT" - THE OPTIMIST

- **Permanence:** "the cause of this success has some permanence to it, due to my ability / our ability."
- **Pervasiveness:** "this good event (or one success) indicates the possibility of more success. It is indicative of future good events and successes."
- **Personalization:** "this good event / success was the result of my (our) effort. I / we made it happen".

As you can see, what makes the critical difference is how people interpret and explain to themselves their successes and failures. Optimists tend to see failure as due to something that can be changed, inspiring them to succeed the next time around, whereas Pessimists take the blame for their failure, ascribing it to some lasting characteristic they are helpless to change. Or attribute it to circumstances that are fixed, permanent, pervasive---and hard to change.

Optimists, on the other hand, maintain a more balanced overall perspective in the midst of crises, which they are able to see as contained and limited events. Rather than thinking in “always” and “never’s,” the Optimist thinks in “sometimes” and “lately’s,” knowing that trouble will surely pass. Even though he may feel temporarily “stuck” in one area of life, the Optimist is able to continue marching stalwartly on in the others.

- Note too that Optimistic types don’t hammer themselves internally when a bad event befalls them, but instead **seek explanations outside themselves**. All of this adds up to having more of a sense of control over future events, that despite a setback, Optimists trust they can, and will indeed, influence a better outcome next time.
- Life may be indeed be “difficult”, but the competency of Optimism helps you stay consciously positive, resilient, and solution-oriented that you will find a way through events and circumstances, and not slip back into the inner zones of the Pessimist and the Martyr.

## FLEXIBLE OPTIMISM

Of course, there are situations and circumstances that are favorable to use Optimism, and times when it may not be the best interpretation of the reality of a situation. Optimism needs to be used flexibly. There are times when it’s best to exercise more caution. The fundamental guideline for not deploying Optimism is to ask what the cost of failure is in a given situation. The following are general examples of when you want to use Optimism:

- you are in an achievement situation (launching and sustaining an important project, getting a promotion, servicing patients in an exceptional way, writing a difficult report)
- you are concerned about managing how you will feel (keeping up your morale, fighting moodiness or depression)
- you want to lead and inspire others; and more

And do not use Optimism in certain circumstances like:

- your goal is to plan for a risky and uncertain future
- your goal is to counsel others whose future is dim
- you want to be sympathetic and empathetic to the troubles of others
- the objective “reality” of the situation or circumstances suggests a more cautious or balanced approach until you can make the circumstances more favorable to a successful outcome

## OPTIMISM AND YOUR HEALTH

Finally, as a leader in healthcare, your mission is all about bringing health to others, including yourself. In this “whole person” / “whole leader” development process, it is important to highlight that the powerful inner state of Optimism has been shown to be highly protective of your health and well-being. Several studies in recent years have shown that:

- Optimism is associated with improved cardiovascular health and Pessimism with increased cardiovascular risk
- Optimism and positive mood is associated with greater protection from colds and flus due to increased immune strength from these positive mental / emotional states
- Optimistic people may have lower risk for developing cancer
- Optimistic people are more resilient and cope better with repeated stress in high demand work environments versus pessimists who often feel “helpless” and exhibit higher levels of “stress hormones” like cortisol that drives higher levels of physical inflammation that has been directly implicated with increased risks factors for heart disease and cancer
- Healthy optimistic people who have good psychological well-being are at less risk for **death from all causes.**

And it should not be surprising that optimistic people have been shown to be more motivated to take action to achieve better levels of fitness, particularly through **exercise**. If our human health is an asset to treasure and grow, then exercise is one of the most scientifically validated pathways to build the asset that is our health. You just have to Do It.

As healthcare leaders, your mission of bringing health to others starts with bringing health to yourself and your closest relationships, your family.

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

*What are some strategies you can use to increase how Optimism is used in your clinical team?*

*How can you help them understand it and coach them to develop more competency in this master skill for emotional and social intelligence, which also helps manage stress, deal with change, and achieve optimal health?*

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### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR THE EMOTIONAL & SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE

- Ellis, Albert. *A Guide to Rational Living*. New York, Wilshire, 1975
- Seligman, Martin. *Learned Optimism*. New York: Random House, 1990, 1998, 2006
- Seligman, Martin. *Flourish*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011.
- Stein, Steven and Howard Book. *The EQ Edge: Emotional Intelligence and Your Success*. Ontario: Jossey Bass, 2011.