

# The Deliberate Optimist

Eileen M. Rogers and Daren Blonski

For leaders in today's turbulent business environment, creating an optimistic and compelling shared vision and motivating and energizing employees to pursue that vision is essential to success.

**T**o sustain a vision despite adversity, challenges, obstacles and delays, a leader must have a strong personal conviction in the importance of the mission; be determined to achieve the goal; maintain openness to alternative strategies; and press forward positively to make the vision a reality.

Where do leaders find the strength to maintain a positive outlook as they lead? Successful leaders have certain qualities and perspectives on life:

- They can see and behave beyond the current reality.
- They can make hard decisions with incomplete data, trusting their intuition.
- They integrate empathy and energy to align others to their pursuit.
- And perhaps most important, they view life's episodes with optimism and positivity.

## What Drives Optimism?

It is tempting to be negative in a time of change and uncertainty. Yet it is in moments created by turmoil that opportunities for optimistic leadership become most apparent. In the midst of chaos, crisis and ambiguity, leaders with the courage to see and guide others to envision a better future can transform paralyzing and negative mental and emotional climates, create belief and hope, and enable others to see and achieve success despite the current reality.

Being optimistic does not mean leaders ignore reality and underestimate risks — they see, recognize and evaluate danger — but their focus is on the opportunity. Danger is framed as an obstacle to be planned for and mitigated in the pursuit of the vision.

Consider Randy Pausch, a Carnegie Mellon professor of computer science who died in 2008. Instead of hiding his illness, he revealed his terminal cancer in a now famous lecture that became the title of a book about his life, *The Last Lecture*.

What could have been a dreary and morbid experience became a hopeful and humorous presentation. Finding positive meaning and purpose in his illness and mortality, Pausch chose to inspire others to pursue their childhood dreams. His mission was to encourage all, especially his children, to embrace life with an acceptance for what is, and strive for what could be, regardless of what happens. "We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we will play the hand," Pausch said.

## Mood Contagions

Optimism notwithstanding, emotional resiliency enables leaders to cope with setbacks and challenges. Research over the past decade has provided insights into the source and impact of optimism and positivity, the function of the human brain in creating a shared emotional climate and the role of emotional and social intelligence in leadership effectiveness.

In *Mirrors in the Brain: How Our Minds Share Actions, Emotions, and Experience*, researchers Giacomo Rizzolatti and Corrado Sinigaglia identified mirror neurons in the human brain that seek to match one's mood and behavior with that of others. As Daniel Goleman said in the *Harvard Business Review* article "Social Intelligence and the Biology of Leadership," "Mood contagion stems from neurobiology. Positive behaviors ... create a chemical connection between a leader's and his or her follower's brains. By managing those interconnections adroitly, leaders can deliver measurable business results." Essentially, the emotional atmosphere created

by optimistic leaders is contagious and improves productivity, business results and employee engagement.

In her book *The How of Happiness*, Sonja Lyubomirsky identifies three factors that influence a person's happiness level:

- **Genetics:** Individuals have a happiness set point that accounts for up to 50 percent of their inclination to be happy.
- **Circumstances:** Up to 10 percent of someone's happiness is dependent on age, gender and economic status, among other factors.
- **Voluntary activities:** Up to 40 percent of one's happiness is dependent on personal, mental, physical and emotional choice.

Voluntary activities that comprise 40 percent of our outlook are in our personal control. We can all improve our optimism and happiness, and the degree

to which we as leaders are able to be optimistic and happy has a significant impact on our ability to deliver on our promises.

In *Learned Optimism*, Martin Seligman profiles a habit of the mind that determines whether we have an optimistic or pessimistic outlook. Optimistic people regard good events as generating permanent good in their lives due to their own personal talent. Pessimists believe good events happen to them temporarily, confined to a specific instance, caused by chance, fate or circumstances outside their control. Seligman said we must create our own stories that follow the optimistic pattern, burning new neural pathways that significantly increase our optimistic outlook.

Cognitive scientists are also finding that our judgment faculty is different from our quantitative and intellectual processing capabilities. Our ability to make good decisions rests upon effectively processing our emo-

## The Redo Loop: How Leaders Make Good Decisions

Noel M. Tichy

Judgment is an essential element of leadership. Leaders of all levels are called upon to make judgment calls that impact their organization's customers, employees and stakeholders. The best leaders make a high percentage of good calls — whom to hire, what strategy to implement or how to handle a crisis situation. This doesn't mean a leader must make the right call on the first try, but great leaders learn from their poor judgment calls, correct them and don't repeat them.

The process of making an important judgment call is a dynamic one, guided by life experiences, personal values and others' actions. It is also one that can include mistakes along the way. A leader's success hinges on how well he or she manages the entire process, not just the single moment when a decision is made. It's not unlike a drama, with plotlines, characters and sometimes unforeseen twists and turns, as well as plenty of opportunities to recover. These recovery opportunities are called redo loops, and they signal an openness to learning and self-correction, which underscores the need to revise and revisit parts of the judgment-making process.

The process unfolds over three phases: preparation, making the call and execution.

**1. Preparation:** Good leaders pick up on signals in the environment from the beginning and are able to cut through complexity to get to the essence of an issue. They identify important stakeholders and engage and energize them. Good leaders set clear parameters, provide context for the issue at hand and establish a shared language between the parties involved. Ultimately, good leaders tap strong ideas from anywhere to formulate their calls. The redo loop in this phase comes when leaders discover they

can't mobilize and align the organization — probably because they have not framed the issue correctly.

**2. Making the call:** Good leaders will make clear yes-or-no calls and thoroughly explain them to all stakeholders. There is no waffling. There is a redo loop between the end of the preparation phase and the beginning of the call phase when leaders may get another chance to mobilize and align the organization if they have failed to do so.

**3. Execution:** Once the judgment call has been made, good leaders stay involved during the execution of the decision. They support others who are involved and set clear milestones along the way. During this phase, good leaders ask for continuous feedback, listen to it and make the necessary adjustments to help further the success of the judgment call. During this phase, the redo loop is ongoing as execution adjustments are made according to what is learned.

Leaders who demonstrate good judgment understand that judgment is a process, not an event. Leaders with character and courage are not afraid to pinpoint errors and repeat earlier phases to adjust for oversights, allowing for greatly improving odds of success. In the end, the true test of leadership is how well a leader adapts during the process, as well as his or her ability to own the judgment — good or bad — that determines an organization's success or failure. Leaders can make mistakes and still have a good judgment outcome by using the redo loops to continuously self-correct. **TM**

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tions, beliefs and intuition and combining this with knowledge and experience. Social scientists describe this ability as emotional and social intelligence. Current brain research indicates we are more likely to follow a leader who has demonstrated emotional intelligence than we are to align with someone who solely demonstrates a high IQ.

#### How to Improve Optimism

According to leadership expert Jim Kouzes, "The best leaders are the best learners." Leaders' ability to learn can define their chances of success. Like most leadership attributes and skills, the mental habit of optimism — a state characterized by a positive outlook and a general disposition to expect a good outcome — can be learned, but it may require 10,000 or more hours of practice, intense repetition and a moment-to-moment commitment to build a natural, habitual pattern of positive thought into unconscious competence.

Developing optimism requires a multilayered approach.

**Positive mental patterns:** In *Strengths-Based Leadership*, Barry Conchie and Tom Rath describe Wendy Kopp's positive approach. She saw educational inequality in the United States and decided a way to attract the best and the brightest to teach in disadvantaged areas was necessary. She believed a national teacher core, founded on the principles of the Peace Corps, would achieve this vision. When she was unable to find funding or support, she launched Teach for America, a nonprofit foundation. Using her own commitment, belief and influence to convince others that the vision was achievable, in one year she engaged 500 teachers, raised \$2.5 million and built the organization from the ground up.

**Optimistic interpretation:** Leaders must choose the focus of their interpretation and use a positive lens to look at the current reality.

- **Reframe adversity in the language of challenges and opportunities.**
- **Engage the core belief system by clarifying what you want and how badly you want it.** Is it worth the struggle, investment, risk and dedicated effort?
- **Elevate big-picture thinking.** Know with certainty that investments and risks will produce positive results.
- **Believe things will turn out for the best.** Ensure the self-talk pattern is positive.

**Effective stress management:** After completing the MHS Emotional Intelligence assessment, a Deloitte partner in Europe found his scores on stress management and impulse control were very low. He decided to take positive action to improve in this area, making deliberate choices to reduce and manage stress. The results were improved mood and emotions. Held back from his final solo flight while pursuing his pilot license as a hobby, suddenly the instructors told him to go ahead. After he successfully conducted the flight, he asked why he had been held back and was told that a few months ago he had seemed too anxious

and stressed, unsafe to fly solo, but the instructors had noted a significant change in recent weeks and now believed he could be successful. Needless to say, business results and teamwork improved as well.

- **Foster emotional resilience.** Engage in healthy practices, diet and exercise.
- **Quarantine adversity.** Contain the impact and see it as temporary, specific and external.
- **Control what is in your power.** Identify what can be changed and take action. Let go of those things outside your circle.
- **Engage others.** Social connection and intimacy are critical to manage a crisis effectively. Reach out for caring, support and wise counsel.

**Innovative problem solving:** During a past acquisition, Nick van Dam, currently chief learning officer of Deloitte, was informed that the parent company was going to merge functions, creating redundancies and potential layoffs. To maintain employee engagement, confidence and energy, he viewed the changing circumstance with an open mind, not judgment, modeling the way for the staff to remain positive and optimistic. Every Friday afternoon, he gathered the team and gave an honest update on what was happening, establishing an atmosphere of trustworthiness, reliability and credibility. His team continued to produce excellent work and during the merger earned a reputation as containing the best employees, and no one on his staff was laid off.

**Invest in positive energy, not negative output:** Ensure the workplace atmosphere is engaging and creative.

- **Stay curious.** Look for partial, incremental solutions, not perfection.
- **Use imagination to rehearse success** by visualizing positive outcomes and expressing these in stories that paint a picture of what the attainable future could be.
- **Embrace change and harvest the learning that comes from it.** See new and exciting possibilities and make positive progress visible.
- **Demonstrate positivity daily.** Find meaning in the effort and use words and actions to express belief in the vision and in people's ability to achieve extraordinary targets.

Perhaps at no time in recent history has there been a greater mandate for leaders to engage us in the struggle for a brighter future, energize our creativity, mobilize teams, focus on the positive, guide our purpose and ignite our best and most inspired accomplishments.

Some see a glass as half full, and some see it as half empty. Both are right. It comes down to how we build and share our optimism with others. **TM**

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