

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Optimism in Leadership

Many people are embedded in their own particular world-views. They interpret the world in the light of their idiosyncratic beliefs, prejudices and experiences, and make the egocentric mistake of thinking that other sane people must see the world in essentially the same way they do. When leaders make this sort of mistake, they may become threatened by diversity of thinking, surround themselves with 'yes-men', and become closed to innovation. New leaders reject this kind of thinking as close-minded.

New leaders know that to a great extent, the world is what you make of it and that different people can and will interpret the same events in very different lights and still be 'right'. They know that people with a pessimistic bent will interpret events in a negative light, and that people with an optimistic bent will see the same events in a positive light. Knowing that they can choose how they will interpret events, they work to cultivate the better of the two options: optimism.

Whether someone is naturally optimistic or pessimistic has everything to do with their entrenched beliefs about the world. Optimists' belief structures lead them to focus their attention on positive possible interpretations of events, creatively finding ways to maximize the potential of what they have (rather than finding ways to morn what they lack). When handed lemons, optimists envision the positive possibility of making money selling lemonade while pessimists lament not having oranges. Not surprisingly, optimists tend to make more effective leaders than pessimists.

An optimistic interpretive style helps a leader in many subtle ways. First, optimism helps leaders to be more resilient in the face of stresses and downturns. Because they believe things will work out for the best, optimist leader make stronger commitments to work and the workplace than their pessimist colleagues. The strength of these commitments helps to sustain them through trying times. When negative events do occur optimists view them as transient rather than permanent events, and as challenges to be solved rather than as tragedies. Where their pessimist colleagues might overgeneralize a single negative event as foreshadowing a storm of similar negative events, optimists are generally better at containing the impact of any given negative event and not overreacting to it. They quarantine the stress and prevent it from spreading. Optimist leaders tend to strongly believe in their own capacity for self-control, personal effectiveness and creativity. They are more likely to 'think out of the box', to learn new difficult skill sets, and to take beneficial risks than their pessimistic colleagues because they 'know' with greater certainty that these investments and risks will likely result in positive outcomes. Other things being equal, an optimist will persevere more than a pessimist, or have fewer regrets about giving up on a failed project when it is time to do so, and thus will be more likely to succeed over the long haul than will a pessimist.

Quite apart from the personal and leadership benefits it provides, optimism also helps people to become more effective communicators. When they have a choice, people prefer to be lead by an optimist rather than a pessimist. A study of presidential election outcomes in the United States by psychologist Martin Seligman illustrates this point remarkably well. In every election between 1948 and 1984, (with one exception) the more visibly optimistic candidate won. Optimists communicate hope and a grounded sense of confidence; characteristics almost all people find attractive and motivating.

Effective new leaders continuously work on their ability to manage stress and adversity. By cultivating optimism, they learn to convert negative events into positive energy.

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