

MANAGING PESSIMISM - AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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“The optimist thinks that this is the best of all possible worlds; the pessimist knows it.”

~ Julius Robert Oppenheimer

Pessimistic employees are people who nurture a consistently negative attitude in the workplace. It is thought that the negativity that pessimists portray is often the result of a loss of trust, confidence or control. According to “Career Builders” a pessimistic attitude is one of the top problems in the workplace. It is contagious and can wear at productivity, lead to a lack of motivation, poor client relationships, poor work ethic and be a distraction in getting the job done. On the other hand the optimistic employees are people who are more likely to have focus in the workplace, better communication skills, and are more motivated to get the work done in an efficient and timely manner. Or so we thought.

Conventional wisdom says that if we think positive we will be able to achieve our goal, if we just envision ourselves getting the job, or making the sale. While these strategies sound compelling, it turns out that at times they may backfire. According to Julie Norem author of *The Positive Power of Negative Thinking*. Despite their pessimism, “some people do well because of their pessimism.... negative thinking transformed anxiety into action. By thinking of the worst-case scenario pessimists motivate themselves to prepare more and try harder.”

It is often said that optimists see the glass half full and that pessimists see the glass half empty. While we have always promoted that being optimistic is the way we all should be, there is some value to the pessimistic point of view and that is optimists might overlook some potentially important or damaging obstacles in any given situation. We should not consider pessimism as only destructive. Pessimism can also provide an alternative perspective, a counter view or the flip side of a situation which can be an important element when brainstorming to solve a problem or difficult issue. Many pessimists are more successful when the focus is on the reasons that we are likely to fail. Negative input from a co-worker can actually incite a discussion which can turn into a dynamic session that generates many ideas, opinions and solutions. Where it becomes a problem is if the pessimist continually is a naysayer and not interested in finding a solution to the project or task at hand.

In the book *Managing Workplace Negativity*, Author Gary Topshik states that “knowing what people are negative about is the first step in solving the problem.” So how can leaders, who research has shown are mostly optimists, benefit from the perspectives of pessimists? First leaders must have the desire to actively look for the value in the alternative perspective. Of course, as always, active listening and paraphrasing is key. When the negatives are being pointed out by the pessimist we can ask questions like “How can this information be useful?” “Does their position/opinion make sense?” “Am I clearly understanding their position?” Once you have a clear understanding then it is important to express your understanding so that the pessimist feels heard and understood. (An important human factor is that we all need to be heard and understood!) This does not mean that you have to completely agree with their opinion, just acknowledge that you understand it. Don't take their challenges or criticism about a situation personally. It is not about you.

Ultimately, both the optimist and pessimist styles can be destructive in their extremes. Pessimism can become fatalist and optimism can become toxic. However, in more moderate ranges that include the benefits of both optimistic and pessimistic approaches; the importance of striking a balance between the optimist's blue sky view of the world and the pessimists' challenging and critical view is integral to effective problem solving, a positive workplace environment and employee motivation.

As always, there is value in all perspectives when it comes to problem solving. The balance of seeing the possibilities AND the obstacles is essential to better decisions and strategies. Appreciate others' point of view even when they may appear to be obstructionist and negative in their comments. They may save you from being too enthusiastic and unrealistic in your estimates and directions!

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