

## Leaders MUST be Optimists

Attitude makes a difference. Truman said, “A pessimist is one who makes difficulties of his opportunities and an optimist is one who makes opportunities of his difficulties.”

True optimism is earned from a track record of overcoming obstacles. The more obstacles you have overcome, the more optimistic you are that you can do it again!

As Americans, we certainly have had our share of bad news in the last several months. Between the financial sector meltdown, the housing market collapse, the economic recession and a host of other issues foreign and domestic, there are a lot of reasons for people to see the “cup half empty” these days. It is only natural that the bad news causes a pessimistic outlook that permeates our work environments and can seep into our personal lives. The reality is that times are tough right now and we are all faced with uncertainty, irrationality, and a certain fear about the near-term future. This reality is changing the way people around us act and feel.

However, while it may all seem new to many, we have been here before. Consider this quote:

“Optimism is over. The layoffs, buyouts, and bankruptcies of the past year are starting to look like the good old days. Business sucks to such a degree that unbridled optimism—the kind of wild, harebrained zest to rule the world—is now just a sign that your medications aren’t working.”

You might be surprised to know that this comment was made in 2001 by an economist speaking with Fast Company magazine. Yet, this period of economic downturn was soon followed by a period of unprecedented economic growth. We tend to overestimate the impact of bad economic times and underestimate how long it will take us to bounce back.

This booklet is about focusing on how leaders can embrace optimism and contribute to the long-term strength of our growing global economy. Instead of being stuck in analysis paralysis, it is time to challenge everyone to invest their worry time in constructive actions--actions that can make a difference for you, your organization and those who work with you.

More than ever, we need to remember how important it is for leaders to be optimistic and to facilitate optimism in our organizations. We need to help others within our sphere of influence see (and believe in) solutions to the problems that confront us. The fact is, if we, as leaders, do not facilitate realistic optimism about the future, who will?

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, one of America's most admired Presidents, reminded Americans at a dark point during World War II with words that still ring true in these times, "The only thing to fear is fear itself." As leaders, one of our primary responsibilities is to keep hope alive. It is our job to appeal to the team's best hopes, not their worst fears, to their confidence, rather than their doubts. Remember, people crave a direction; give your team the positive direction that can help them make a difference.

Optimism is more than positive thinking. It is earned by the maturity and resolve that comes from a proven track record of overcoming obstacles over and over again. Research has shown that optimistic people are more willing than pessimists to face bad news. Optimists want to know about the problems they face, because they expect to be successful because they have been successful before. Optimists confront trouble head-on, while it is pessimists who bury their heads in the sand of denial. Far from being unrealistic, optimists are quick to give up on unworkable strategies and search for other alternatives because they have done it before.

Here are several key points and ideas that can help you lead optimistically:

**Watch your attitude.** Before you can lead others, the reality is that you have to take inventory of your own attitude. The way you think always shows up in your behavior, and the way you interact with others. You can't inspire others in these times of uncertainty unless you have a good handle on your own attitude. How do you react to bad news? Are you a "can do" leader or do you react negatively to problems? Do you badmouth an already bad situation? Do you vent your frustrations to people around you? You do not need to become a cheerleader. The point here is that what you say and how you react to tough situations has an effect on the way people feel and the way they view you as a leader.

**Trade victim thinking for constructive action.** Author Dennis Prager reminds us that victimhood tends to be appealing. It allows us to blame others rather than confront our lives and take responsibility for our actions. Victims also tend to get sympathy and enabling them to wallow in self-pity, delaying constructive action. Optimists, on the other hand, make the best of their options. Get everyone doing something to be part of the solution!

**Instead of worrying, looking for opportunities.** Albert Einstein had a way of making wisdom simple: "In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity." Inaction and powerlessness produce predictable results--nothing! Seek out the economic facts and trends that indicate both threats and opportunities for your organization. Minimize the threats and focus on the opportunities.

**Watch out for hypocrisy.** Good leaders do not contradict themselves (i.e. say one thing and do another). Poor leaders claim to be open minded, but then quickly and negatively judge others. They say they are team players, but then gossip about colleagues behind their backs. They say they are results oriented, but then quibble over office politics. This kind of hypocrisy breeds pessimism. Be aware of your actions and be careful to ensure your behavior follows your beliefs. After all, the word integrity comes from integrating your actions and your beliefs. When you think like a leader, you will naturally act like a leader. This breeds optimism in both the way you see yourself and the way others view you.

**Focus on relationships.** Good relationships and work friendships are a great source of optimism any time. People cannot endure difficult times alone. Do not confuse transacting with people for connecting through good conversations. They are not the same thing. Don't be so busy that you rarely talk with your peers and teammates. Conversation is the greatest way for people to connect and "think together." Stop what you are doing when someone walks into your office. Stay interested in people around you. Ask a peer you don't know to lunch. Listen more carefully to others around you. Confront and heal personality clashes that you have with people in the workplace. Help two peers who don't get along to work together better. Connecting with others is a big part of optimism.

**Be a "Good Finder."** Don't dwell on the problems. Anyone can list 10 things that are wrong with an organization or a current project. Challenge yourself and others around you to find 10 positive things. All good organizations have both. As a leader, your job is to find the good things and ensure that others are putting problems into perspective. Give compliments, catch people doing things right and give people around you recognition for doing things well. This kind of "good finding" creates resonance and breeds optimism in the workplace.

**Stay passionate.** Most of us are so busy that we rarely have time to think. We rush in and out of meetings, we make hurried decisions, we speak fast to get our points made before being interrupted, and we hustle from one activity to the next. This kind of relentless pace breeds burnout and pessimism. It is hard to stay passionate when we don't take time for ourselves. Passion is not something external or out of your control. Passion is within you, and has a lot to do with the way you treat yourself. Take time to read good books. Feed your mind with positive thoughts and healthy "mental food." Take time to exercise and invest in your health. Balance your personal time with your work. Investing in yourself will help you stay passionate and maintain an optimistic outlook on your work, your life and others.

**Accelerate innovation.** Challenge team members to invest time in accelerating progress in developing your next wave of innovation. Tough times can be a time to reinvent a business. When the economy turns, your organization will be ready to lead the way. Not only will such a strategy produce sustained results, but also you will help rally the morale of others by helping them stay focused on making a difference.

**Get people focused on learning strategic skills.** Alvin Toffler reminds us all, "The illiterate of the future are not those who cannot read or write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn." With all the educational options available, keep your people investing 5% of their time in remaining a recyclable asset. Do not just do what you have always done; encourage people to learn the skills that will allow them to invent the future. Let people know that investing in lifelong learning is their best insurance policy. Good, skilled leaders and workers will always be the first to be hired and the last fired.

The economy, the stock market, business world and world events are all going to stay messy for a while. The interim is a great opportunity for leaders. The best leaders know that no amount of worrying or negativity is going to help. Inspiring others toward a common goal is what counts. Now is the time to challenge people to invest in constructive actions. This is what leadership is all about.

About WrightOne Consulting:

At WrightOne Consulting, our mission is to help organizations select the right people, manage their workforce and develop strong leaders. We have the experience and expertise to help your company develop a fully engaged team.

We identify, develop, and implement solutions that enable our clients to:

- \*Select and hire people who can make a real contribution
- \*Objectively evaluate employee's strengths and assets
- \*Measure and enhance employee engagement
- \*Assess and develop a prosperous corporate culture
- \*Develop strategies to minimize turnover
- \*Build effective succession management systems
- \*Enhance effectiveness through performance coaching

We focus on five key areas for leading people in organizations:

- ~ Assessment Testing for pre-employment and professional development.
- ~ 360° Development Surveys (Center for Creative Leadership Certified)
- ~ Organizational Surveys: Employee Engagement, Strategy Alignment & Motivational Climate
- ~ Career Developmental & Personal Effectiveness Coaching
- ~ Training Programs for Interpersonal Skill Development, Supervisory Training and New Managers

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Organizational Strategy Alignment  
Organizational Motivational Climate

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