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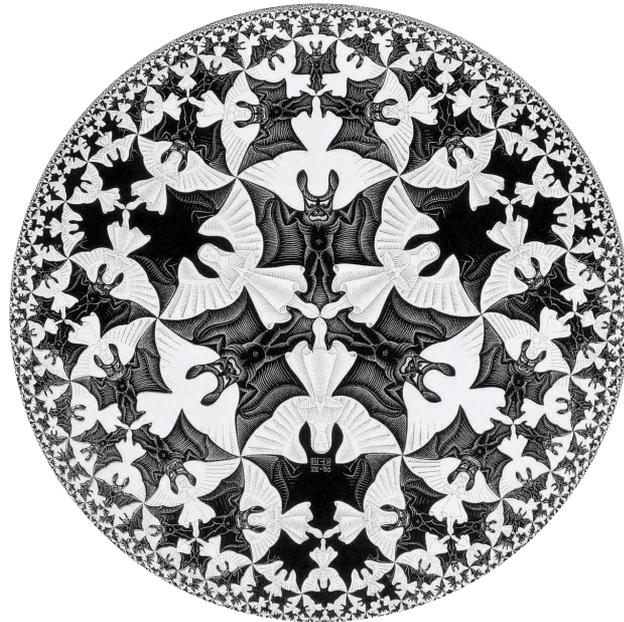
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The Optimism Illusion



BY GARY BURNISON

Which do you look for: what's right in what's wrong—or what's wrong in what's right?

Consider the M.C. Escher image (above). Even if the bats jump out at you, do your eyes keep searching for the gentler, happier images of the angel?

The vast majority of people (about 80% according to researcher and author of *The Optimism Bias*, Tali Sharot) gravitate toward the good outcome. They overestimate the likelihood of experiencing good events and underestimate the likelihood of experiencing bad ones.

Across all cultures, genders and ages, we are overwhelmingly optimistic. We acquire this “cognitive illusion” as part of our development to help us cope with (read: ignore) the ultimate outcome of being alive. We buy into the “happily ever after,” even in the face of such glaring statistics as the divorce rate (about 40-50 percent) or the likelihood of getting cancer (1 in 2 for men, and 1 in 3 for women). Even our memories are notoriously subjective—recalling our vacations as full of fun and relaxation, while ignoring the boring and mundane.

With optimism, we savor the anticipation of what we think is going to be great. That's why people prefer Friday, even though it's a workday, as they look forward to the weekend over Sunday because of the prospect of going back to work on Monday.

Optimists tend to be healthier (less stress and anxiety). And regardless of how things actually turn out, people with high expectations feel better in general.

When faced with failure, an optimist's brain goes into high gear to figure out why and what went wrong so they can learn for the future and have a better outcome next time. This is very much aligned with what Korn Ferry calls *learning agility*—the ability and desire to learn from the past and apply those lessons to new and first-time challenges and events. Importantly, learning agility is also the No. 1 predictor of future success.

Winston Churchill, who led Great Britain through one of its most dire periods in history, said “a pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.” To that I would add, a realist sees it all—the angels and the bats.

Like anything, too much of a good thing is still too much. Too much optimism is a danger. Optimism blindsides. You need pessimism—with all its doom and gloom—to warn you that objects really are closer than they appear.

For a leader it's all about creating a common purpose – transforming self-interest to shared interest. This establishes the left and right out-of-bounds lines and enables others to achieve more in pursuit of organizational purpose. However, a leader must also use pessimism not only to ensure the organization is grounded in today's reality, but also to anticipate events that could go wrong.

During a difficult time in Korn Ferry's history, I started a leadership meeting by showing a picture and asked people what they saw. Most people, with their optimism bias, focused on a girl holding a flower blooming in the spring. A smaller number said their focus was drawn to the dilapidated buildings in the background. Only 2 out of 17 said they focused on both. That's what I was driving at—while there are opportunities (the flowers), there are always risks to overcome and challenges to confront (the urban decay).

For leaders personally, it's all about self-awareness to reveal their own blind spots. Based on our research, nearly 80 percent of executives have at

least one blind spot—a trait or capability that they overestimate. This selective myopia can derail their career. Great leaders, however, are highly self-aware and hyper focused on exposing their own blind spots in order to more effectively lead others.

To lead a team, you need to tap into the optimism bias of your followers so that they believe the sky is the limit. Sometimes literally. In May 1961, in a speech before Congress, President John F. Kennedy gave the entire country a vision: “...I believe that this



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nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the Earth.”

Even here, though, Kennedy injected the reality of what it would take—a list of scientific developments that would make even the most optimistic NASA engineer doubtful: Advanced lunar space craft, alternate liquid and solid fuel boosters, engine development...

But optimistic vision combined with the right dose of pessimism was the $E=MC^2$ of reality. In July 1969, realism claimed victory. (As a young boy, I remember riding my bike and listening through the neighbors' screen doors to the clapping and cheers of “We did it!”)

Our optimism serves us well, changing our subjective reality as we work to make things better. But we can't be blinded by that bias. After all the world is not simple—cut and dry, one team wins and another one loses.

In the proper dosage, pessimism exposes what you need to pay attention to and worry about.

Reach for the stars, worry about the clouds, and keep your feet on the ground of reality. //