

Can simple positivity really boost health and productivity?

As a multinational employer, the question of whether your employees' glasses tend to be "half full or half empty" may not immediately seem relevant to managerial decision-making, employee retention, increased sales and the cost of your medical claims reduction.

'The positive or negative 'lens' that employees use to view a situation shapes their reality, their happiness and every other outcome'

Well, think again. It is! And, the evidence for this is strong. Optimism makes a real difference in these matters as well as in levels of productivity and disease generation, progression, and recovery.

Also, research has shown that positive employee behaviours and attitudes can influence business outcomes¹ as employee satisfaction, behaviour and turnover can help predict the following year's profitability. They also have a strong correlation with customer satisfaction.

Putting the positivity into optimism

So, what exactly is optimism? It's a state of mind, a belief that the outcome of an endeavour will be good. And this it seems, is vital. A workplace filled with employees that feel undervalued or helpless is a significant problem for an employer. In such an atmosphere, problems rather than solutions become the focus of attention and people

Here is some data to consider:



A happy and motivated workforce could potentially improve employee productivity by as much as **12%**²



Compared to pessimists, optimists have been shown to have a **55%** lower risk of death from all causes and a **23%** lower risk of heart-related death³



Disengaged employees have been shown to have **37%** higher absenteeism, **49%** more accidents and make **60%** more errors in the workplace⁴



Healthcare expenditure at companies where levels of pessimism are generally higher is nearly **50%** greater than at other organisations⁵



A stressful or pessimistic workplace can lead to an increase of almost **50%** in voluntary turnover

And yet, it seems that few organisations either know this or are seriously looking at their levels of optimism.

devolve responsibility for solving issues because they don't believe that they can deliver change. In such a state, employees are likely to get depressed, achieve less at work than their talents might warrant and reduce the vitality of their immune systems.

The positive or negative 'lens' that employees use to view a situation shapes their reality, their happiness and every other outcome. Before attempting to change that lens, employers need to identify optimism and pessimism as traits in the workforce.

The making of an optimist

As discussed above, optimists are defined as expecting the best possible result from any given situation. This is usually referred to as 'dispositional optimism'. It reflects a belief that future conditions will work out for the best.

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This doesn't mean that optimists do not face hardships. They do, but the difference is that when they do, hardships are seen as 'learning experiences' and even the most miserable day always holds the promise for them that 'tomorrow will probably be better'. In the workplace, optimists react to problems with confidence, believing negative events are temporary and manageable.

The perpetual pessimist

Pessimism is characterised by a negative mental disposition, where people tend to view problems as *internal, unchangeable, and pervasive*. Pessimists are defined as tending to believe that bad events will last a long time, undermine their actions and are their own fault. Negativity may appear to be a great defence mechanism: if you keep your expectations low enough, you won't be crushed when things don't work out. But recent

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research has revealed that the tendency to be a wet blanket in just about any given situation – a trait experts call 'dispositional pessimism' – doesn't merely ruin a good time, it's a bad strategy by just about every measure.

It is important to remember that while many things are beyond our control there are a number of areas we can control.

How to build optimism and increase workplace wellbeing

So now we've convinced you that this is important, what do you do about it? Well, the great news for employers is that optimism can be learned. Companies that develop optimistic work environments will probably experience far lower levels of work disruption due to absenteeism and presenteeism when compared to peer organisations in their industry.

Optimism benefits the individual and the business – it is a win/win scenario. In every workplace one of the biggest challenges is disrupting learned and engrained behaviours. Pessimistic attitudes are contagious in the workplace and some people will be less open to change than others. Simple strategies to break the negativity cycle include actions such as changing seating arrangements to prevent echo chambers of negative reinforcement and encouraging positive employees to socialise with those with a less optimistic attitude.

Companies can't afford to ignore the issue of workplace optimism and a simple first step is to be clear on why there is a need to shift the culture to be more optimistic. There is a need to awaken employees lulled to sleep by the monotonous rhythms of fire drills and lack of inspired opportunities. Employees may have turned off reasons to care. They are likely to be sceptical, apathetic. It is important to be prepared for this.

Health is a state of mind and body

There seems to be no doubt that what happens in the brain influences what happens in the body. A study found that optimists who maintained a positive attitude were significantly less likely than their pessimistic counterparts to succumb to cancer, heart disease, respiratory disease, stroke and infection.

So, what are the health benefits of a positive outlook?

- Living an average of 7.5 years longer
- A 55% lower risk of death from all causes
- A 23% lower risk of heart-related death
- A stronger immune response to a vaccine
- Greater resistance to developing a cold.

And the health impacts of a negative outlook?

- 70% more likely to die of a heart attack or stroke
- Six times more likely to have a stroke
- Over four times more likely to have another heart attack in the next 10 years
- Two and a half times more likely to develop heart disease.

Second, identify how to measure progress when moving to a culture of workplace optimism, which behavioural indicators to shift and target key business outcomes such as: a decrease in sick days, increased productivity and improved quality of work.

Four steps to learned optimism

The following strategies can be used by employees to increase optimism levels and improve resilience in the workplace. By sharing these tips with employees, you can help them to think and behave differently.



1

Reframe problems

Reappraisal is the way to stop setbacks from turning into prolonged problems. Increasing positive thinking doesn't happen on its own. Employees need to consciously deflect the negative and focus on doing positive things, whether that involves hobbies and exercise or simply interacting with others. As an employer, it is about encouragement and facilitation – allow people to share stories of their hobbies on employee intranets, investigate subsidised gym memberships or promote companywide participation in charity sporting events.



2

Recognise and replace negative self-talk

Positive self-talk in the workplace means identifying and replacing negative scripts such as “I can't...” or “That is never going to work” with phrases such as “I'll try...” or “Let's see how that will work out.” Just by encouraging employees to act more optimistically, they will become more engaged in both the process and outcome.



3

Set and pursue goals

The way to avoid being immobilised by pessimistic thinking is to act, even if we think it might be futile. Have your employees create and write down a step-by-step plan for accomplishing goals and then support them in taking the first step.



4

Be persistent

Optimists believe they will eventually succeed, so they keep plugging away at their goals. Management in an organisation can set positive expectations to fuel motivation and hard work, negative expectations have the exact opposite effect.

Finally, engage employee representatives and managers. To maximise the opportunities for success it is important to invite employees to actively become part of the process to deliver a solution. Simply by engaging employees and emphasising they can have a positive impact on the organisation can make a real difference to their attitude. Alexander Kjerfulf, an international author and speaker has highlighted why it is important that managers improve workplace relationships:

“Employees who have positive workplace relationships are happier at work... and we know that people who are happy at work are more productive, more creative and more successful overall.”

1. http://www.keepem.com/doc_files/clc_articl_on_productivity.pdf
2. <https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/research/centres/eri/bulletin/2009-10-3/ops/>
3. Archives of General Psychiatry, November 2004
4. <https://hbr.org/2015/12/proof-that-positive-work-cultures-are-more-productive>
5. <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/pdfs/87-111.pdf>

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