Optimism Versus Pessimism

In the 1960s and 1970s, Martin Seligman wanted to find out whether or not optimism and pessimism are genetic traits. In his research,[1,2] Seligman found that people who had learned to be helpless viewed negative events as permanent rather than temporary. They held this view against evidence to the contrary. If they flunked a math test, they told themselves they had never been good at math and never would be. A single, negative experience became a general negative viewpoint that led to pervasive helplessness.

While the pessimist views failure as permanent, the optimist sees that good outcomes result from hard work, collaboration, and learning. Optimists realize that negative events are temporary, limited, and not unique to them. For example, optimists who have not been able to grow an organization are deeply disappointed, but they learn from mistakes so they can improve performance next year. They understand that past failure does not preclude future performance and that economic downturns happen to everyone. The good news is that just like pessimism is learned, so too is optimism. Thoughts are malleable, which means that hope can be taught.

Gratitude

Today, building a "personal brand" is touted as the basis for a successful life, which makes practicing gratitude challenging. In a culture of hope, gratitude is a by-product. By practicing gratitude, you can learn to be humble rather than prideful. You can avoid the arrogance that can be so damaging to team relationships as well as home life.

Recent research finds that practicing gratitude improves health, increases energy levels, encourages optimism and empathy, and strengthens the ability to respond to adversity. Hardship cannot be avoided, nor can it be controlled. Realizing this can help you avoid ingratitude and live a happier life.

To practice gratitude well, you must sympathize with the virtues and efforts of others and not just focus on yourself. In the process, you gain insights into the strength and values of others.

Hope Versus Despair

Virtue is a compass meant to help navigate turbulent times. The challenge of creating a virtue-based culture is in encouraging teammates to internalize virtue. When

this happens, coworkers develop an emotional connection with each other, which reduces antisocial behavior and selfishness. In her book, *High Performance Healthcare: Using the Power of Relationships to Achieve Quality, Efficiency, and Resilience,*[3] Gittell frames the concept of "relational coordination" and shows that when people leverage their personal relationships in service of working together better, outcomes for patients are enhanced. The same is true in creating an optimal air travel experience.

So often, what people are looking for is a culture that allows and encourages virtuous conduct, and this all starts with leadership. Teams mirror the conduct of their leaders. Virtue-based leaders provide a buffer against the toxic aspects of a culture. By relying on trusting and caring relationships, virtue-based leaders significantly improve engagement and teamwork. Put simply, people need to see their leaders practicing virtue in order for business practices to change.

You don't need to be a famous athlete, astronaut, or national leader like Nelson Mandela to make a difference. By emphasizing shared humanity and a desire to strive for virtue, you can motivate engagement and teamwork.

The virtues focus us on what we share in common, rather than what divides us. As Maya Angelou wrote, "I note the obvious differences between each sort and type, but we are more alike, my friends, than we are unalike."[4]

1. Seligman, Martin E. "Learned Helplessness," *Annual Review of Medicine*, vol. 23, February 1972, 407-412, https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev.me.23.020172.002203

2. Seligman, Martin E. P. "Building Resilience," *Harvard Business Review*, April 2011, https://hbr.org/2011/04/building-resilience

3. Gittell, J. (2009). High Performance Healthcare: Using the Power of Relationships to Achieve Quality, Efficiency, and Resilience. New York: McGraw Hill Education.

4. Angelou, Maya (1990). "Human family," *I Shall Not Be Moved*. New York: Random House.