

Relentless optimism: the one question that always makes work better

According to psychologist Paul Ekman there are just five 'basic emotions' universally recognised and experienced by humans: joy, sadness, fear, disgust, and anger.

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Shockingly, only one of these is positive. So as leaders, how can we hope to ingrain positive emotions at the centre of everything we do at our organisations? My general ethos for solving business challenges is equal parts humility and optimism. That means never approaching a brief or a problem assuming we automatically know the answer. When we leave ourselves open to possibilities and keep asking 'Could it be better?', we might get to a place that's surprisingly wonderful.

'Yes, and...'

In response to any idea, I typically say, "I'm not in a mood to say 'no'." That's not to say there's no such thing as a bad idea (because despite that cliché, honestly, there really are some bad ideas). But to borrow from the language of improv, 'yes, and...' is a powerful principle to live and work by. Even a bad idea can be shaped with a bit of compassion and creative thinking, into a good one.

To foster a culture of optimism, leaders should create a safe space for people to be their authentic selves and voice their own points of view, whilst giving them everything they need to succeed. This ranges from

encouraging healthy and respectful debate, to all employees being clear on the company's values and mission.

Set the vision

In any business, it helps to have a visual symbol that expresses the values and mission of the organisation. At Turner Duckworth, ours is the red and white checkered rocket from *The Adventures of Tintin: Destination Moon*. The lore of the story goes back to our founders' vision for the company, and it lives on to this day. The rocket is on our website, in all of our studios, and success is celebrated at our annual award ceremonies with highly coveted rocket trophies. In difficult times, it's helpful to have something physical to remind ourselves that we can keep trying.

Oftentimes, it pays to stay curious about ideas that seem unachievable. I'm reminded of the former Coca-Cola design director, Moira Cullen, whose relentless optimism also translated into a physical object. For several years, she would place a prototype of an aluminium bottle symbolising her vision for design at Coca-Cola on the table at every meeting. That tangible embodiment of a hope and dream became a strategic north star for the design and marketing team. Being relentlessly curious and optimistic about what "better" could look like for Coca-Cola manifested, in time, to a reality and the now iconic bottle that became synonymous with Coca-Cola's era as a design leader and cultural icon.

Leading by example

When you boil it down, working to an ethos of relentless optimism – always asking how, or if, something could be better – is straightforward. It means never giving up, and always striving for what you think is the right and best thing for your employees and your clients.

But relentless optimism is very different to toxic positivity. When things get tough, you can't just tell a sad person to be happy or a stressed person not to worry. Instead, we have to lead through our actions, modelling relentless optimism in a way that is also totally authentic and respectful of others. Picture this scenario: you're at a team meeting where someone is airing a grievance about their frustration on a project. It's important to validate that person's feelings. Acknowledge what they say, then ask if they want you to help them find a solution or if they need support to deal with and move through the negative emotion that has come up.

In terms of coaching and mentorship, there is always time to take a beat and listen to people. Hear them out when they're down or burnt out, or when they've received negative feedback from a client. Sometimes things aren't rosy, and leaders need to acknowledge when that is the case. Transparency builds trust and shows that you're attuned to the realities your team faces.

Once a problem has been flagged, what matters is how we deal with it. Encouraging the team to pick ourselves up by asking, 'how can we make the best of this situation?' is our start point. Then, we can move forward with the most integrity possible and in a way that's genuinely optimistic.

Then, there might be occasions where even the most relentless optimism can't break a stalemate. It doesn't happen often, but when it does, it's important to know that it's ok to part ways with a client or partner if something isn't working. When a project is terminally frustrating and clearly breaking your team - be that because the client is overly cautious, say, or the brief is constantly changing - it's far better to cut ties than slog on and make everyone miserable. If that customer doesn't want what you're selling, there's nothing you can do about it - but you can conclude a relationship knowing everyone tried their best up until the very last moment.

Visibly positive

Optimism is obviously an abstract and intangible thing, but I've seen time and again that it shows in the final deliverable. For me, the best work that anyone can do is that in which the care and love for the process is apparent in the outcome.

Ultimately, relentless optimism facilitates the result that every company strives for - a culture and output that makes you, your team, and clients smile - while always aiming for even better.

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