

Optimism and Pessimism

Before reading the article, consider the shapes below and, for you, which shape symbolises optimism, which denotes pessimism?

Write down some optimistic and pessimistic thoughts over the shapes



Irrespective of gender, sex, ethnicity etc. we have a bias towards optimism – it is self-evident why that might be? If we are optimistic it provides for a positive state of mind that helps us action our thoughts, plans and initiatives. We believe we can do it.

So why does pessimism exist? Perhaps it is a counterweight to over-optimism or unrealistic optimism

Optimism and pessimism cannot be defined by whether we see life as a bottle that is 'half full or half empty' - a better question to ask is what happened to the other half – did we drink the bottom half or the top half first? In other words, we cannot separate out optimism from pessimism...perhaps it becomes a problem if we are at the extremes...too optimistic or too pessimistic?

Let's look at this from a different perspective – an activity we do every day - how do we handle situations or problem solve. Pessimism is, in my view, wrongly associated with negativity, often seen in an all or nothing approach (usually nothing) based on feelings that

what I do makes no difference or fatalism ('there's no chance') – however if pessimism can be seen as the way of thinking that helps us to identify barriers and, when combined with optimism, can help us to navigate around the barriers or even do something different. When optimism and pessimism are seen as complimentary the value of both is enhanced : we get closer to seeing the whole picture and how to reach our objective: From the point of view of a team, then we might find that, typically, pessimism relates to question-asking and optimism to statements

b

We can build and expand

What we do can make a difference

We can improve our chances

How do we get around the barriers?
 Can we use our resources in a different way – do we need to access other resources?
 Have we sufficiently and rationally analysed the situation (if at all)?

What are the roadblocks?

Do we have sufficient resources?

Are we prepared?

The key importance of combining optimism and pessimism is that it provides a dialogue about what and how to do things (assuming that we know *why* we are doing it). It can lead to expanding the range of options open to us because as we engage with the problem we begin to understand it further and we start to examine different (re)solutions, we identify areas we need to develop in and, when needed, we seek help (without feeling inadequate).

If these are complimentary biases why do we talk about optimists and pessimists? What maybe happening is that our early experiences of success and failure and these experiences may condition the order with which we look at future scenarios- do you start optimistically or pessimistically? This may speak to you about whether you are an optimist or a pessimist...are you both?

Be realistic and energised.

© Harminder Singh