

# REDUCING WORKPLACE BIAS: THE OPTIMISM BIAS

## SHORT DESCRIPTION

### WHAT:

The Optimism bias is the tendency to have an overly rosy view of the world.

### PROBLEM:

While many people praise the value of “positivity” the real value is not being positive but being adaptive. There’s nothing wrong with being realistically optimistic but this can extend to simply not seeing the obstacles, rather than adapting to them.

### SOLUTION:

The lesson and meditation provide appropriate warnings and reminders to be realistic and instead encourage adaptation, which is enhanced through awareness.



While many biases are tendencies to err on the side of caution, the optimism bias strikes out in the other direction. In order to mitigate the negative effects of doubt, optimism seems a good alternative. It inspires confidence and a positive mindset that can be assets.

However, optimism can also betoken wishful thinking, and one needs to be careful not to cross the line from reality into fantasy. For some people this is an entrenched part of their thinking, for others a tendency, for others an occasional occurrence.

In general, cognitive biases tend to overvalue caution and the minimizing of risk. This is adaptive because as they say, “it’s better to be safe than sorry.” Or is it? It surely depends on the circumstances. Let’s rephrase that old maxim, which is a function of the brain whose prime activity is to look for threats, so they can be avoided or defeated.

“It’s better to be well prepared than sorry” allows for adaptation without a bias towards minimizing the potential and implicit negative outcomes. If you are focusing on just being ‘safe’ it might mitigate creativity and will certainly influence your perception.

As a counter to the “safe not sorry” conservative thinking, there are biases that strike out in the opposite direction. One of these is the Halo Effect the tendency to overgeneralize positive attributes in people who initially come across as very skilled in one way or another. Another counter to caution is the *optimism bias*.

# Reducing Workplace Bias: The Optimism Bias

## IN ORDER TO ENSURE THAT OPTIMISM IS WARRANTED AND NOT MISGUIDED HERE ARE SOME THINGS ONE CAN DO:

1.

Ask yourself what are the grounds for your optimism? Have there been external signs that inspired optimism? For example, if you're applying for a job, did the hiring manager call you up and compliment you on an outstanding resume? Or did she just email and say they had received your application?

2.

Are you someone who always imagines the best outcomes? If so, how do you respond when those outcomes don't materialize? Do you get disappointed and upset, or do you see it just as part of life and move on? This is important because your reaction to disappointment speaks to the question of whether your optimism is part of a cheerful but adaptive mindset or merely unrealistic wishful thinking.

3.

Always consider the downside as well as the upside. How will you react if you don't get that job? Facing the possibility is part of being adaptive. Talking of which...

4.

Being adaptive is better than being positive. We all suffer many setbacks in life and with the right mindset can learn most from these challenges. In fact, a life of total success would be very boring and very dangerous, because learning to adapt to setbacks and disappointments is a major life skill and without practice you can be completely thrown off course when they occur.

5.

Mindfulness exercises can help moderate emotional excess and create a balanced consciousness characterized by adaptation, rather than merely feeling "good".

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*If you pretend to be good, the world takes you very seriously. If you pretend to be bad, it doesn't. Such is the astounding stupidity of optimism.*

– Oscar Wilde

Perhaps it's not surprising that, in counter to the more common conservative, risk-averse biases, we should step out in the other direction to compensate for over compensation. Hence the rise of the positive psychology movement, heavily influenced by psychologist Marty Seligman whose work on learned helplessness showed the sometimes lethal downsides of being too cautious.

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The problem again is one of scaling emotions. In an attempt to counter unnecessary pessimism, the positive psychology movement encourages a positive mindset. The question is how positive is too positive? Imagining that everything is going to work out just fine all the time is not very adaptive, in the same way that worrying that everything will be a disaster is. Of course, it depends. If a literal or metaphorical tornado is heading your way, the mantra to 'just smile and be happy,' isn't very adaptive.

In an organization, there's a serious need to be prepared for any outcome. That doesn't mean leaders and executives should abandon optimism but for sure they shouldn't abandon preparedness and adaptation.

Sure, it is nice to be positive. It can minimize stress, at least initially, and it's better than being constantly pessimistic. The problem is that life can't be generalized. Each situation is different, requiring a complex level of understanding and adaptation.

An adaptive mindset is preferable to an optimism bias but for some of us, there's an attraction in always looking on the bright side of life. Then we can justify even in the worst outcomes with maxims like, "one door closes and another one opens," and "This seems like a disaster now but it will turn out to be our greatest blessing."



*There is an interesting scientific dispute about realism and optimism. Some find that very optimistic people have benign illusions about themselves. These people may think they have more control, or more skill, than they actually do. Others have found that optimistic people have a good handle on reality. The jury is still out.*

– Martin Seligman

The attraction of the optimism bias is that it seems to be an antidote to stress and worry. However, that involves very binary thinking. The antidote to any bias, positive or negative, is a mindset of adaptation; of facing the issues and effectively dealing with them, whatever they are.

An optimism bias, like other biases, can lead to a dangerous avoidance of big issues. Leaders and key decision makers need to exercise caution in their predictions, while at the same time having a degree of confidence in their views and forecasts. Just as with all cognitive biases, the impact of the optimism bias depends on the situation.

How much does it matter if you hire the wrong person as a junior executive?

How much does it matter if you completely overestimate the earnings of a potential merger acquisition?

The biases you favor are likely to be a product of experience and to some extent personality. One issue with all biases, including the Optimism bias, is that it doesn't become a defense mechanism designed to prevent you from dealing with your responsibilities to yourself and to others.

No worries, though, it will all work out in the end, right?

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## MEDITATION

Be careful that the optimism bias doesn't distort your thinking and your planning. You can just as easily sabotage yourself by being overly optimistic as you can being overly pessimistic. Both optimism and pessimism suggest underlying feelings. Optimism suggests confidence and pessimism suggests doubt. But that represents binary thinking. An adaptive journey requires some confidence and some doubt. They are not mutually exclusive.

Courage, resilience and hope aren't just the prerogative of an optimist.  
Courage, resilience and hope don't mean there's no doubt or apprehension.  
Courage, resilience and hope don't require a smile, or feelings of happiness.  
Courage, resilience and hope are about adaptive action.

The level of optimism you have should be based on an accurate appraisal of the situation and not be a default setting. If you pretend to be good, the world takes you very seriously. If you pretend to be bad, it doesn't. Such is the astounding stupidity of optimism.

An adaptive challenge is a complex journey that can't be easily generalized as one thing or another. The essence of adaptation is that you're not sure what circumstances you will face but that you do have a commitment to adapt as efficiently as possible. Optimism sounds good, but be careful it isn't a trap in which you get stuck.

Great leaders don't let the desire to feel good interrupt their focus.  
Great leaders don't let the desire to feel good disrupt your thinking.  
Great leaders don't let the desire to feel good interrupt your success.

The time to celebrate is when you have achieved your goal. Pride comes before a fall, and so does being too optimistic. Some very optimistic people have benign delusions about themselves.

Great leaders don't have benign delusions about anything. Courage, resilience and hope, don't require optimism. Courage, resilience and hope, don't need optimism.

Life is full of surprises. Be prepared rather than optimistic. Be adaptive rather than optimistic. Be adaptive rather than optimistic.

Never underestimate the task at hand. It is constantly changing. It changes because new events happen. It changes because your perception changes. You don't need to be anxious, you're just need to be well prepared. Being adaptive is being neither optimistic nor pessimistic. It involves being ready. Being adaptive is being neither optimistic nor pessimistic. It involves being focused. Being adaptive is being neither optimistic nor pessimistic. It involves being realistic.

Adaptation is the right mindset. Things constantly change and are often not what you had anticipated them to be. Adapt to the fact that you have to adapt. Adapt to the fact that you have to adapt. Life is full of surprises. Be prepared rather than optimistic.

Again, courage, resilience and hope are keys to adaptation but they don't need to ride on a wave of optimism. They will find their own way to the shore.