



Stress

# How to Stay Optimistic (When Everything Is Awful)

by Bill Taylor

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**These are trying times for optimists. Covid** deaths remain tragically high. Job growth remains stubbornly low. So many of our colleagues and kids are feeling stressed, exhausted, angry — “hitting the pandemic wall.” No wonder a recent front-page article in the *Wall Street Journal*, which has chronicled the Covid-driven struggles of companies and universities, highlighted a crisis at a different kind of organization — Optimist International, a 110-year-old club with chapters around the world. Membership is now at 60,000, down from a high of 190,000, although club leaders remain true to their guiding spirit. “When you hit rock

bottom, the only direction you can go is up,” said one chapter head, who declared she was “getting my optimistic groove back.”

It’s important for all of us to get our optimistic groove back. John Gardner, the fabled [scholar of leadership](#) whose insights have influenced generations of executives, argued that positive change rarely starts from blind faith or naïveté, but it also doesn’t start from despair or defeatism. “The first and last task of a leader is to keep hope alive,” [he wrote in 1968](#), another period of turmoil and struggle. “We need to believe in ourselves and our future but not to believe that life is easy.”

In other words, leaders help their colleagues be realists — and optimists. But whether you’re running a company or managing a team, how do you keep your colleagues upbeat [when the whole world is feeling down](#)? How do you keep hope alive when [things seem pretty hopeless](#)? Here are four pieces of advice, drawn from renowned thinkers on organizational life, innovation, even meditation, that I’m optimistic will help you shape a more positive future.

### **Insist on crisp execution, but make room for “organizational foolishness.”**

In times as demanding as these, it’s impossible to succeed without embracing the grind — the day-to-day struggle to meet the needs of anxious customers, collaborate with stressed-out colleagues, balance work and family.

But this organizational attention to detail can’t come at the expense of imagination and brainstorming — what celebrated Stanford Business School professor James G. March calls “organizational foolishness.” In his [seminal paper](#), “Footnotes to Organizational Change,” March describes how the best leaders balance “explicitly sensible processes of change,” such as careful planning and sound project management, with slack time, experiments, blue-sky thinking — “certain elements of foolishness” that

can be “difficult to justify” but are “important to the broader system” of innovation.

Achieving that balance has never been more important, not just for the healthy performance of the organization, but for the mental health of your colleagues. It’s hard for people to be positive if they don’t get a chance to play.

**Invite everyone to become a problem-solver, then give them room to fix things.**

More than a decade ago, Sara D. Sarasvathy published an influential [study](#) of how innovators and entrepreneurs actually get stuff done. The mythology, she argued, is that successful innovators predict a future others can’t see, develop a finely tuned plan to turn that future into reality, and attract the financial and human resources to back their efforts.

In reality, most change agents start with “who they are” (their “traits, tastes, and abilities”); use “what they know” (their “training, expertise, and experience”); and add “whom they know” (their “social and professional networks”). She calls this approach the “bird-in-the-hand principle.” Guided by this principle, she argues, starting a new venture or making things better “is no longer an incredibly risky act of heroism. It is something you can do within the constraints and possibilities of your normal life.”

By encouraging their colleagues to do, in the words of Theodore Roosevelt, “what you can, with what you’ve got, where you are,” leaders create a spirit of agency that leads to optimism.

**Don’t just champion new ideas; strengthen personal relationships.**

In times of unprecedented turmoil, there is an understandable temptation for leaders to bet the future on game-changing ideas: digital disruption, product reinvention, organizational transformation. All too often, though,

leaders who champion futuristic ideas overlook the human and emotional connections that keep colleagues upbeat today.

Sharon Salzberg, a central figure in the field of meditation, works with caregivers, educators, and social-change activists — well-meaning people with aspirations to make a big difference. She urges these leaders to tend first to their “[three feet of influence](#)” — the clients, patients, people and teams closest to them. “Few people are powerful enough, persuasive, persistent, and charismatic enough to change the world all at once,” she argues. “The world we can most try to affect is the one immediately around us.”

### **To counter so much bad news, share every piece of good news.**

Experts on human psychology don’t agree on very much, but nearly all agree that people respond more viscerally to bad news than good. To keep people optimistic, they advise, leaders should emphasize (even over-emphasize) hopeful stories and positive developments.

Research psychologist Robert F. Baumeister [estimates](#) that it “takes four good things to overcome one bad thing.” So pop a (virtual) cork whenever a team hits an important milestone. Hold a department-wide Zoom bash when you land a new client. Distribute a newsletter that highlights what’s going well, to help people compensate for what’s gone poorly. And treat yourself the same way: “Instead of obsessing about a snarky comment on social media, scroll down and reread four compliments,” Baumeister recommends.

These are challenging times to stay energized and upbeat. Hopefully, applying these four pieces of advice will make you and your colleagues more optimistic. If that’s not enough, you can always join [Optimist International](#). I hear the organization has open spots for new members.



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