

HOW TO BE A TOUGH-MINDED OPTIMIST

A Speech to the Million Dollar Round Table

By Dr. Alan Loy McGinnis

A few years ago I was stranded in the Salt Lake City airport. The weather was bad, all the planes were late, and it was a mess. When we finally boarded our plane at 10:30 that evening, it was packed and everybody was tired and irritable. That is, everybody except the well-fed salesman sitting next to me. He was cheerful and happy, teasing the two little kids across the aisle, spreading some good cheer.

“What do you sell?” I asked.

“Oil drilling tools.”

At that time, oil was about \$11 a barrel, so I said, “Oh, that must be a terrible business to be in these days.”

“No,” he replied. “It couldn’t be better. We just opened a new branch in Bakersfield and it’s doing great. This could turn out to be our best year.”

“But isn’t the oil business in a terrible recession?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said, “but we’ve decided not to participate.” He went on to explain their success. “The industry slump has worked to our advantage, because all our competitors are down-in-the-mouth and complaining that they have to cut prices and can’t make any money. That negative attitude rubs off on the customers. We, on the other hand, are not cutting our prices at all. I do think we’re giving the best service of anybody in the industry, we’re enthusiastic about our products and generally upbeat and optimistic. Customers like doing business with sales people who have that attitude.”

Then he smiled, and said, “If this recession will just continue for one more year, I think I can make enough money to retire.”

For a psychologist, there are some fascinating questions here: What goes into the formation of a winning attitude like that? And what is it that causes some people to be overwhelmed by their problems when other people are challenged by them?

In doing research on tough-minded optimists, I found that those who keep an upbeat attitude are not necessarily born with cheerful dispositions, nor have they led charmed lives. Far from it. Many grew up in very negative environments and most have suffered some crushing setback at one time or another. But along the way they have discovered techniques for defeating depression and pessimism and keeping their motivation high. I discovered that although they are very different in many ways, tough-minded optimists have a cluster of characteristics in common. By looking at these characteristics, we can gain some help in learning how to be tough-minded optimists:

1. Tough-Minded Optimists are Seldom Surprised By Trouble

There is a soft-headed kind of thinking that masquerades as optimism, but which is quite different from the tough-minded approach that brings success. I’m referring to the Pollyanna approach. When there’s a problem these people tell us to keep smiling, and if we’ll just be patient, everything will be all right. But I’ve noticed that things don’t turn out all right simply

because you keep smiling. To the contrary, if you ignore problems, they have a way of becoming bigger problems, and before you know it, you have a crisis on your hands. Many of us get exasperated with naively cheerful people. Channing Pollock tells about seeing the play Pollyanna: “After seeing two acts of that dreadful girl,” he writes, “I went out into the street looking for some beggar to assault.” And many of us feel that way when we’re around optimists who are unrealistic. They don’t ring quite true. Genuine optimists, on the other hand, are anything but Pollyannas. They are realists who are quite aware that we live in an imperfect world. Let me give you a quotation by a favorite therapist of mine, Virginia Satir. She once wrote:

Life is not the way it’s supposed to be.
It’s the way it is. The way you cope with it
is what makes the difference.

That is quite different from the phony pep talks you hear in some quarters. In speaking to corporate groups, I’m often on the same platform with the so-called motivational speakers who have been brought in to pump up the troops, and those people say some remarkable things. For instance they are very fond of quoting Napoleon Hill who wrote:

Whatever
The Mind of Man
Can Conceive and Believe
It Can Achieve

Now that has to be one of the most asinine things anyone ever put into print. Such overstatements give hope and faith a bad name. Like all heresies, it has enough truth to make it attractive, but we have people in the locked ward of our hospital who believe that, and it was their very grandiosity that got them into trouble. The fact of the matter is that merely believing ourselves omnipotent does not make us so. We all operate with certain limitations, and sometimes things happen to us quite beyond our control. When my patients say to me, “Dr. McGinnis, why is this happening to me? It isn’t fair!”, I don’t know what to say. In the first place, I don’t read anywhere that it’s promised that life will be fair. As Rabbi Kushner says, bad things have a way of happening to good people, and the sooner we are realistic about the existence of trouble and tragedy in our world, the better we’ll be at preventing some of it.

Is it possible to be too optimistic? Of course it is. We’ve all known people whose businesses failed or who lost everything because they had pie-in-the-sky dreams. I know a very successful real estate developer who is both a cheerful guy and also rather a crusty businessman. I once talked with him about the source of his high spirits and he said, “Well, I always try to do three things:

1. I try to find the good in a bad situation
2. I try to find ways to make bad situations better
3. I try to plan ahead in order to prevent as many bad situations as possible.”

His third technique may be more important than the others. The hard-headed optimist asks discriminating questions, such as: “What are the flaws in this deal? How could this be improved? Is there a way this can backfire? Where could we get cheated here?”

Asking such questions doesn't mean that you're becoming a cynic and expect everyone to be dishonest. It simply means that you're fully aware that things can go wrong and that there are people who are out to get your job, your money or your mate. Sinclair Lewis once received a letter from a very young and very pretty woman who wished to become his secretary. She said she could type, file and do anything else, and concluded "Mr. Lewis, when I say anything, I mean anything." He turned the letter over to his wife, Dorothy Thompson, to answer. She replied as follows: "Dear Madam: Mr. Lewis already has an excellent secretary who can type and file very well. I do everything else, and when I say everything, I mean everything."

That's not cynicism, it's enlightened self-interest. It's informed optimism that heads problems off at the pass before it gets too late.

2. Tough-Minded Optimists Like to Think of Themselves as Problem-Solvers.

If we could take one huge tranquilizer that would make us oblivious to any problems for life, few of us would sign up, because we know that trouble often brings out the best in us.

The management consultant Robert Updegraff once said:

You ought to be glad for the troubles on your job, because they provide about half your income. If it were not for the things that go wrong, the difficult people you have to deal with, and the problems of your working day, someone could be found to handle your job for half of what you are being paid. So start looking for more troubles. Learn to handle them cheerfully and with good judgment, as opportunities rather than irritations, and you will find yourself getting ahead at a surprising rate. For there are plenty of big jobs waiting for people who are not afraid of trouble.

The finest salesman I know is Mike Somdal, who, before he went on to bigger and better things, was my literary agent. In those early years I was an unknown and unpublished writer and when we made trips to New York to see publishers, we weren't always welcomed with open arms. One day Mike made what I thought was a superb proposal to an editor, but it was as if he'd served a slow, high lob, and the editor slammed it back with a vengeance.

Walking back to our hotel, I was discouraged and despondent, and felt like quitting. But not Mike. When we reached our room he began pacing the floor, rubbing his hands together, deep in thought. "This is when the selling gets fun," he said. "There's a way to go back and appeal to those people's needs, and when they do, they'll beg to buy from us. All we have to do is figure out the right approach!"

What I would have regarded as failure, Mike saw as merely the sort of setback one always encounters while solving a difficult problem, and his juices actually seemed to flow better when he was working on a problem like this that others would find hopeless. Eventually, this approach was successful, and he helped negotiate lucrative contracts with some of the very publishers who had turned us away.

Mike is a success at almost everything he attempts, and the main reason is this attitude toward trouble. He thinks of himself as a problem-solver, a trouble-shooter.

I should pause with a caveat and say that you can go too far with this, and begin to invite trouble, and that can cause disasters. I heard about a little 3-year old girl who was riding the freeway with her mother. The traffic was bad and she could barely peer over the dashboard.

After being very quiet for a while she said, “Where are all the bastards today?” Her mother replied, “Oh, I don’t know, I guess they’re only out when your father drives.” There is some truth in that isn’t there? If you expect the world to be peopled with idiots and jerks, they start popping up all over the place. So we can go too far in expecting trouble, but in general it’s good to think of yourself as a problem solver.

One of the best illustrations of the way some people are overwhelmed by their problems and others challenged by them is the different way two people will handle the tragedy of divorce. When Diane and I met, we were single, both with two children. My marriage had blown up very recently and I was scared to death of relationships. Diane, on the other hand, had been alone for three years, and had made a lot of progress. Her husband had left her when she was pregnant with Donna, and Scott was only one. She had no money and little preparation for the job market. When Donna was born, she was all alone and had to call the paramedics to get to the hospital. The fireman who rode in the ambulance with her felt so sorry for her that he and his wife brought flowers for her and the baby. At first the only job she could get was as a telephone operator, working split shifts. But all that had been three years before, and when I met her I was astounded at the progress she had made. By this time she had acquired a house and had a couple of college students boarding with her to help pay the mortgage. She’s worked her way up in an orthodontist’s office and was managing the office. And when we met she’d taken the day off to try out her new skis, and was a gorgeous, vibrant woman, and I had to fight off all kinds of men to get her to marry me.

Well, all that was 20 years ago, and the story has a happy ending. Soon after we married, I was able to adopt Scott and Donna. They’re 22 and 24 now, out of college, doing great. A few years ago, Diane and two friends started an interior design firm, which now has twenty employees and grossed over two million dollars last year. I am so proud of her. These have been the best 20 years of my life, and I owe nearly all of it to a remarkable woman who never allows herself to be overwhelmed by trouble, who always believes that the best is yet to be.

3. Tough-Minded Optimists Are Cheerful Even When They Can’t Be Happy.

By the way, I’m not under the illusion that I’m telling you anything all that new. You wouldn’t be at this meeting if you didn’t already practice many of the principles we’re discussing. But I don’t apologize for repeating them, because, as Samuel Johnson use to say, “What we need is not so much to be taught new truths as to be reminded of those old truths we already know.”

When I was in graduate school, learning to be a therapist, we were trained to get our patients to talk about their troubles. “Just pour it all out,” we urged. If they cried during the hour, then it was a good session.

But the longer I’ve worked with people, the more I’ve come to believe that there’s value in a certain amount of denial. Let’s say you have the flu or a bad cold. Usually the more you talk about how sick you feel the sicker you get. The other side of the coin is that when you’re discouraged and depressed, you can change your mood by acting cheerful. The behavior changes the mood.

Some days I get up sluggish and unenthusiastic about going to work. But I do a few calisthenics and that gets my blood circulating and I feel a little better. Studies show, by the way, that whether we’re optimists or pessimists is determined a great deal by diet and exercise, but my doctor says I’m not exactly the ideal person to lecture groups about that. He thinks he’s

something of a wit. Some time ago, I wasn't feeling so good so I went to my doctor, and he said, "Well, McGinnis, I'm not sure what's wrong with you, but I think we can rule out one thing and that's anorexia." I told him I wished he's stop trying to be a wit and stick to doctoring.

Anyhow, after doing a few calisthenics, I do what I call "spiritual calisthenics." This may sound a little crazy, but I repeat aloud several verses of the Psalms that I've committed to memory, and I do so in a cheerful, enthusiastic voice. Even when I'm not feeling very cheerful and enthusiastic. For instance, I look out the bedroom window and repeat the verse from the Psalms. "This is the day which the Lord has made. I will rejoice and be glad in it." It may be raining, and I may be dreading the pile of work on my desk, but when I do that it's amazing how much more optimistic I begin to feel.

What I'm saying is that we need not be at the mercy of our moods nearly so much as some psychologists have been telling us. I borrowed this idea about cheerfulness vs. happiness from Beverly Sills. When she had born a child who was deaf and would never hear her sing, and then two years later had a son who turned out to be autistic, some reporter asked her if she was happy. She said, "Happy? No, I'm cheerful. There's a difference. Cheerful people have cares, but they've learned how to manage them."

I've said that one of the ways to be cheerful is to act cheerful. Another is to monitor carefully the ideas you put into words. In their best selling book, In Search of Excellence, Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr. reported a few years ago on the characteristics of the best corporations in America. One of their discoveries about the high-morale companies was that "good news swapping" was common. The leaders of these companies took time to stop by people's offices and relate an anecdote or give a statistic about the business that was encouraging.

At business meetings it is very easy to become problem oriented, so that the only reason you call a meeting is to discuss problems. But one of the most important reasons for business teams to get together is to fuel one another's enthusiasm, to swap good news, to talk about your successes. I have done some work for large corporations to try to help their low-producing managers and salespersons. As I've sat listening to these people talk, it is striking how bleak and pessimistic their conversation is. You might say, "Of course they're talking negatively; they're in trouble in their company." But I suspect that it may have worked the other way; that their production is in trouble because of their negative ways of talking. At some point it became habitual to comment on bad circumstances, the bad feelings, the bad business. Or maybe they simply picked up the habit from other workers. But before they had realized it, they had become very negative, dour people, and of course their work suffers.

4. Tough-Minded Optimists Are Often Content With Partial Solutions

As we examine this cluster of characteristics, a pattern begins to emerge: these optimists are always people of action. They can't stand to be idle, and they hate to quit. Whereas the pessimists are standing around, wringing their hands, saying "What a mess we're in, ain't it awful?" – paralyzed by their pessimism – the optimists say "I don't know how we're going to lick this thing, but here's one thing we can do about it today."

Henry Ford once declared that any task, no matter how large, is manageable if you break it down into small enough pieces, and most optimists think like Henry Ford: they bracket their work into manageable segments. Being people of action, they look for partial solutions when

complete ones do not present themselves. The result is that at least they improve things, and many times a series of partial solutions will lead to a complete one.

What we're talking about here is learning to be flexible, always on the outlook for alternative solutions. I heard recently about a florist who was pretty nimble. A customer had ordered a spray of flowers for a friend who was opening a new store. But somehow they had got the order garbled and a funeral wreath arrived, which said "Rest in Peace." The man was irate and said, "How could you make such a terrible mistake?" The florist told him he'd immediately make up another arrangement and send it over. "But look at it this way," he said. "Somewhere in this city a man is being buried in a casket under a spray of flowers which says, "Good luck in your new location."

In May of 1940, the lights seemed to be going out all over Europe. Great Britain was on the verge of collapse to Hitler's assaults. Stalin had signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler, the U.S. was still a year and a half away from entering the war, and most military experts predicted that England, which was poorly prepared and poorly armed, would topple within weeks. But the experts made those predictions without taking the measure of a 65 year-old politician, who, after an erratic and frustrating career filled with failures, had finally been handed the post of prime minister. His name was Winston Churchill. Churchill was no Pollyanna. To the contrary, he was something of a curmudgeon. He didn't smile much – he was too battle-scarred, he's seen too many reverses in his life to put on a false front or to talk in rosy terms about the future. When he accepted his post on May 13, 1940, he addressed the House of Commons with anything but a phony pep talk:

I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat. We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind.

Notice how realistically he paints the problem. In fact, part of his gift was this ability to vividly depict the gravity of the situation and to show the enormity of evil. Yet if you look closely at his speeches during those critical months in late 1940 and early 1941, there is always an upward turn, and they are shot through with hope:

Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, "This was their finest hour,"

Looking back on England's heroic defiance of Hitler, most historians would agree that is was indeed her finest hour. But that heroism could have lain dormant had it not been for a tough-minded optimist who combined realism with hope, who believed that the best was yet to be.

5. Tough-Minded Optimists Find The Good In Bad Situations

Remember the real estate developer I quoted a few minutes ago? Remember that he said, among other things, that he always tried to find the good in a bad situation? That's our last characteristic, and it's an ability worth cultivating.

In December, 1914, the great Edison laboratories in West Orange, N.J. were almost entirely destroyed by fire. In one night Thomas Edison lost two million dollars' worth of equipment, and the record of much of his life's work went up in flames.

Edison's son Charles ran frantically about trying to find his father. Finally he came upon him, standing near the fire, his face ruddy in the glow, his white hair blowing in the wind. "My heart ached for him," Charles Edison said. "He was no longer young, and everything was being destroyed. He spotted me and said, 'Where's your mother? Find her. Bring her here. She'll never see anything like this again as long as she lives.'"

The next morning, walking about the charred embers of so many of his hopes and dreams, the 67 year-old Edison said, "There is great value in disaster. All our mistakes are burned up. Thank God we can start anew."

That summarizes very well what I've been trying to say this morning: that no situation is entirely good or bad, and that we have somewhere in the back of our minds a selective apparatus that determines where we focus our attention.

When I began working on a book on optimism, some of my intellectual friends looked down their noses and said, "How can you make a case for optimism when the world is going to hell? The economy's a mess, there's global warming, there's the drug problem, crime and terrorism are out of control, things are getting worse instead of better."

I don't pretend to know whether the world is getting better or worse at the moment. Everything has cycles, and five hundred years from now historians will be able to make that judgment. But I'm not sure that has much bearing on whether, for our personal philosophies, we choose pessimism or optimism, cynicism or hope. To tell you the truth, I'm getting tired of self-styled intellectuals who tell us that the only smart position is to become a cynic. It doesn't take any intelligence to give up! What takes intelligence and creativity is to decide to improve things, even if they're only partial solutions. And it doesn't take any courage to be a cynic. I'll tell you who the courageous people are: they're the ones who are seldom surprised by trouble, who think of themselves as problem solvers, who are cheerful even when they can't be happy, who find the good in bad situations. The courageous people are the ones who dare to believe that the best is yet to be.