
C H A P T E R

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Trade Being Your Own Worst Enemy to Become Your Own Best Supporter

“Get busy living, or get busy dying!”

—Morgan Freeman as “Red” in *The Shawshank Redemption*

Every book has a beginning, so let’s start where every book ought to begin—what’s in it for you?

I’m assuming that you picked up this book because you want practical insights you can use right away to better your life on and off the job. You want to be affirmed for what you do well, and you want to be better for having invested the time in reading this book.

You also read self-help books to know that you’re not alone. You want to know that you’re not the only one who struggles with making life work, and you want a few new, tried-and-true insights that you can use to make your life’s journey just a little more satisfying and successful.

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“I prepare for the tough times by reading biographies. It reminds me that famous people never had it easy. Their lives are all stories of people who had to overcome obstacles over and over again. In his first court experience, the judge told Richard Nixon that he was the worst prepared lawyer he’d ever seen. George Patton was dyslexic and graduated last in his class at West Point. They persevered; I have to persevere!”

—Randy Voeltz

We’re facing some challenging circumstances, and people are looking for positive answers. Every age has its share of struggles, but when the tough times hit, they have a way of getting everyone’s attention.

Facing continued downsizing and more layoffs, a manager at one of my leadership training events added a sharper edge to an enduring cliché: “When they hired me, I *was* promised a rose garden. But they forgot to tell me that these rosebushes have some pretty nasty thorns. I hope you’re

going to provide some pruning shears to help me find a way out of this mess!” When you’re encountering difficult situations, you want answers. When life gives you a headache, you want something to take away the pain, and you want to avoid getting another one!

Although you’ll find plenty of useful answers and practical advice in this book, getting advice is probably not your primary problem. You’ve received more than your share of good advice from other authors, friends, teachers, and passing gurus. The challenge lies in *making* that good advice work for your life and your career. That’s why this book won’t coddle you; it’ll challenge you with some unsettling truth telling that’s designed to help you transform your attitudes, relationships, habits, and choices. Those changes will help you experience the optimism advantage. But for optimism to work, you have to do the work to think and act differently!

Truth #1: Life Is Difficult

The first truth in the great game of life is worth memorizing—life is difficult! So get over it. No sweet-talking politician, fairy godmother, or genie is coming to sprinkle stardust or grant three wishes. Embracing optimism is about embracing self-reliance, personal responsibility, and

the work of changing your thought patterns and your actions. It doesn't mean that you're denying reality; it's simply about positively coping with that reality to succeed in the face of life's challenges.

If you're lucky, you had parents, teachers, and bosses who cared enough to let you experience the natural consequences of your choices. They expected a lot from you. They also encouraged you, but they didn't give you grades you didn't deserve. They let you win and lose on your own. They made you cope with your own falls and failures and earn the rewards you received.

Protective cocoons may work for caterpillars, but they don't work for people. Shielding children from all of life's natural pains and setbacks doesn't allow them to gain the confidence that they need to cope with the even bigger challenges they will face later in life. In the great game of business, there is no eighth-place trophy for a salesperson who loses a critical account to a competitor. If the quality of your product or service is substandard, you don't get a passing grade. You lose the business.

So if you think optimism means adopting a Pollyanna mind-set where everything turns out right, then you've got the wrong idea. That's simply self-help hype! *True* optimists have earned their positive attitude from a proven track record of overcoming real obstacles. They did it the old-fashioned way; they earned confidence one obstacle, one challenge, and one victory at a time!

“What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared with what lies within us.”

—Oliver Wendell Holmes

If you are to become a true optimist, start by being a realist. Accept that life is difficult, and then get busy learning as much as you can about the challenges you face. Why? Because you've overcome problems in the past, you have every reason to believe that you've got what it takes to overcome whatever problems life deals you.

Life Is a Self-Help Project, but You're Not Working on It Alone

Developing maturity at any age is all about realizing that life is essentially a self-help project. Now, that's a good thing, because it's

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your life. How you define success, nurture your own education and career, respond to your problems, and make your choices allows you to shape your life the way you want it lived. That's both a life-affirming opportunity and a personal responsibility, but, as you realize, it also comes with your share of frustrating challenges. As an optimist, you'd want it no other way.

But optimists are not alone, and neither are you. Contacts in your local community, family, professional network, and fellow members of your faith community can help you make your way on life's journey. Although all of these people can support you, it's up to you to develop and tap those resources. Optimists don't merely settle for the relationships that find them. To claim your own optimism advantage, you need to realize who matters, who never did, who shouldn't anymore, who still does, and who you want to add to your team. The bottom line is simple: Seek out relationships that encourage and support the person you want to be.

Self-reliance doesn't require you to discount or dismiss the importance of others. It's simply about building healthy relationships that work for both parties. If you give value, you usually get value. Good relationships are like deposit systems in many ways; you tend to get back what you put in. Perhaps it doesn't always happen immediately, or in exactly the way you expected, but when you find a way to do your part to serve others, people have a tendency to serve you back. When you help a small, struggling customer when they are growing, they may just remember you when they're big and profitable. In short, take time to cultivate the right relationships, and you'll soon become more optimistic and accomplish more on and off the job.

Optimists Everywhere Claim Their Version of the American Dream

For people of every age and in every country, the optimistic belief that they can have a dream and make it happen has become a powerful source of hope and motivation. As the United States has become the influential nation that it is today, the importance of self-reliance in achieving personal dreams has been reinforced over and

over again. The history of our country is ripe with stories of individual Americans who took risks, overcame challenges, bounced back from setbacks, and earned their own version of the American Dream.

This in no way limits the dreams of other world citizens. After I mentioned the American Dream at a leadership presentation in Singapore, an apology seemed appropriate for what some might label a clear *diversity disaster!* But a manager from

“Children everywhere need the encouragement to dream big dreams. I’d like to think we could help them do just that. I love hearing the excitement in their voices when they realize they can do something new.”

—Tiger Woods

Hong Kong addressed my concern when he announced to all in attendance: “Please remember that the American Dream is not just your dream; it’s the world’s dream. The world looks to America and hopes that they, too, can have the freedoms and the opportunities you can easily take for granted. You have no need to apologize for referring to the American Dream. Please protect it for all of us.”

Throughout the world today, free, optimistic people everywhere share a version of that dream. Many do everything within their power to come to America to achieve it. Some wait years for a visa; others cross treacherous borders. In America, the gate swings in, because opportunities still remain. You certainly don’t meet a lot of people trying to get out!

Rest assured that no matter what the country, *hope* is a sweet-sounding word in any language. Even in the toughest economic times, some world citizens find ways to do quite well. Instead of watching the negative drone of bad news, people with an optimistic attitude and a compelling dream get busy taking advantage of available opportunities. Instead of worrying about the global economy, they get busy making an impact on their own personal economy one day at a time.

This book is full of hope, optimism, and suggestions on what you can do to live your dreams—dreams that don’t always involve big paychecks or newspaper headlines. Many millionaires who

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were B and C students were the ones who had the guts to start a small business, live in a nice little house, and save more than they spend. They live frugally and are very self-confident and self-sufficient.

Challenge yourself to become one of these dreamers. To deliver on that dream, you're going to have to get down to work! Success *does* come, but often, it doesn't come easy!

Choose Learned Optimism over Learned Helplessness

If this is getting a bit too optimistic for you to believe, then maybe you've already fallen victim to what has been called the depression of our age, *learned helplessness*. This depression comes from the belief that nothing you can do will better your situation. Modern-day living has a way of reinforcing how little you control and making it far too easy to become a victim.

Victims feel that they can't do anything to make a difference in what happens to them. Since they have no confidence in their own ability to cope with adversity and earn their own success, they avoid seemingly useless constructive actions, preferring instead to wait for fate to deal its hand. Both their headaches and their happiness come from what happens to them, instead of as a result of their own actions. Victims look for ways to blame those who contribute to their pain.

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing . . . to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances.”

—Viktor Frankl

Optimists are the opposite of victims. With positive attitudes built on a personal track record of overcoming adversity, they believe in their own ability to achieve their goals

and overcome whatever obstacles hinder them. When dealt a poor hand, they look for ways to play it well. They take pride in their achievements and look forward to life's challenges.

The choice is yours. You can trade your victim thinking and learned helplessness for the optimistic attitudes and actions that will help you develop your own resilience, persistence, resourcefulness,

and results. Every page you read and every step you take to alter your thinking will make you more optimistic.

The Study of Optimism and a New Emphasis on Positive Psychology

Some refer to him as the father of positive psychology, but whatever you call him, you can't talk about *learned optimism* without giving credit to the pioneer who provided the vision, the early research, and the road map on how to apply the truths discovered. Martin E. P. Seligman, PhD, is a psychologist, a University of Pennsylvania professor, the author of *Learned Optimism* and *Authentic Happiness*, and a past president of the American Psychological Association. His earlier works are well worth reading, and his insights will be evident throughout this book.

Before Seligman became president of the American Psychological Association in 1997, an analysis of negative versus positive topics in psychology journals from 1967 to 1997 found 41,416 references on anxiety, 54,040 on depression, 1,710 on happiness, and 415 on joy. It was time to balance the books by studying and learning more from the resilient souls who seem to cope with stress—and effectively and consistently handle the demands placed on them both on and off the job.

When he became APA president, Seligman challenged psychologists to increase their study of positive psychology. Historically, psychologists had learned a lot about mental illness and how people break down in the face of life's challenges. But why do some in

“Psychology has, since World War II, focused on the question of how can we cure mental illness? It's done very well. There are by my count at least 14 mental illnesses which we can now treat or relieve, either with psychotherapy or with drugs. But that's half the battle. We've ignored the other side, which is to ask: How can we take what we are strongest at and build them up in such a way that they become great buffers against our troubles?”

—Martin E. P. Seligman

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the same situations remain resilient, resourceful, and optimistic? Seligman wanted researchers to find out.

So *can* you change your attitude and your actions to become more optimistic? You bet you can! Researchers have shown that you can significantly alter the way you think and act and become more like the optimist you want to be.

At one of my presentations on the optimism advantage, a woman approached me after the program and confessed, “I wish I had your attitude.” My reply was immediate: “Take it. Your taking my attitude certainly won’t stop me from keeping mine!”

Star in Your Own Positive Soap Opera

Unfortunately, claiming your own optimistic advantage takes more than the mere decision to do so. It requires a long history of changing how you think and act. This isn’t a movie that’s all wrapped up in a fancy bow in two hours. This is a soap opera, and you’re the only star who counts. Your challenge as you read this book and apply the insights learned is to make your life’s soap opera as positive as possible. As already discussed, you’ll want to fill your cast with

“Make a point that you will not sign up, line up, or whine up about the recession. Instead, stand up and fight for your dreams and goals, and never, ever give up on you and the incredible possibilities that are within you!”

—Willie Jolley

people who will encourage and support you, and steer clear of those who belittle and doubt you.

Like any soap opera, there’ll be challenges, setbacks, victories, defeats, laughter, tears, joy, grief, record profits, and sizable losses. Your job is to keep making progress in claim-

ing the life you want to live, one day at a time, one choice at a time. This book will help you write your positive script and find your supportive cast of characters.

Why is this book a must-read at this point in your life? Some clichés are so wise that they’re worth repeating: “Today is the first day of the rest of your life!” Life is way too precious to waste boring yourself

in an existence that isn't satisfying, and there's no time like the present to take responsibility for changing your situation. Waiting won't make it any easier, and it won't make success any more likely.

Stop being your own worst enemy and start becoming your own best advocate. Take the time to learn how to trade your negative thoughts and unproductive worries for the positive attitudes and constructive actions that will help you produce winning results.

Truth #2: Control What You Can, and Accept and Use What You Can't

Cultivating optimistic attitudes and actions is this book's focus, but one of its guiding truths comes from what has been affectionately called the Serenity Prayer, a simple but powerful statement that was written by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Taken aback by the impact of his words, he confessed in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*: "The embarrassment, particularly, was occasioned by the incessant correspondence about a prayer I had composed years before, which the old Federal Council of Churches had used and which later was printed on small cards to give to soldiers. Subsequently Alcoholics Anonymous adopted it as its official prayer. The prayer reads: 'God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.'"

The Serenity Prayer has been shortened, memorized, and repeated privately and publicly—because it captures important truths that *work*. Treasured statements like these that stand the test of time deliver wisdom with a simplicity that makes every word count. Whether you believe in God or not, this book will help you appreciate the value and depth of this statement and the sentiments it promotes.

As an optimist in training, you must learn how to accept and maximize your reaction to the both the blessings and the adversity that come your way and take responsibility for managing your own motivation, attitudes, and actions in a way that makes a difference in the quality of your life.

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Optimism Is Important on and off the Job

Optimism can have a profound impact on both your personal life and your professional life. Graduating with a doctorate in clinical psychology prepares men and women to provide therapy, but it seldom teaches therapists to appreciate the importance of one's work life to one's mental health. Therapists are ready to deal with abusive parents and struggling marriages, but what about bosses and dysfunctional teams who can drive someone crazy? Both worlds are important to you and to this book because optimism can make a difference to you in both situations.

“Perpetual optimism is a force multiplier.”

—Colin Powell

A leader without influence and an ability to drive strategic change really isn't a leader. A professional who can't trans-

late her gifts and skills into results that serve won't last in this competitive global economy. To be effective in either role requires you to have the right skills, the right attitudes, and the right motivation. And while advancing in your career and making a difference for those you serve is important, there is more to life than work. Few people would want on their tombstone: “I finished everything on my to-do-list!” Life is about cultivating good relationships, being a good parent or partner, making a difference to your community—and, most important, enjoying the journey.

Everyone complains about the difficulty of finding the right work-life balance. Maintaining such a stable balance will always require a healthy tension that appreciates the importance of both areas of your life. Honor the importance of achievement and business results, and honor the importance of lasting and satisfying relationships with those you love. This book is committed to helping you do both.

Faith and Faith Communities Can Impact Your Optimism

The month before making a presentation to an executive forum at a major national newspaper, *One Minute Manager* author Ken Blanchard had presented to the same group. Executives were still talking about one of his comments.

“Ken’s program was exceptional,” the meeting planner confessed. “But it was his response to a question that had people talking. During the Q&A, one of the executives asked, ‘You spend your life motivating audiences. How do you motivate yourself?’”

“I’m so glad you asked,” Ken replied with a smile. “Every morning I rise early for time to study the Word of God and for prayer. I know faith is important to many. For me, faith centers and motivates me in a way that nothing else can.”

That simple, authentic disclosure about how faith affected Blanchard’s life and attitude surprised and challenged many of the executives present. It gave them permission to discuss more openly the role spiritual faith played in their own lives.

Although not a primary focus of this book, research and surveys have found that religious faith has consistently been a reliable source of hope and optimism for many people. For centuries, believers have written and witnessed to its impact in their lives. To leave out references to the difference faith and faith communities can have on your attitudes and actions would not do justice to the breadth of insights available to you. Explore this area of life for yourself, and never discount its importance to many very optimistic believers.

“In our study, we looked at 11 major religions in America and how hopeful and optimistic the adherents were. We looked at the level of optimism in stories the children were told, as well as in the liturgy and sermons. We found strict Calvinists, Roman Catholics and Orthodox Jews were the most hopeful and optimistic, while Unitarians and Reformed Jews tended to be more pessimistic. The fundamentalist religions simply seem to offer more hope for a brighter future than do the more liberal, humanistic ones.”

—Martin E. P. Seligman

Don’t Just Read This Book—Devour It

Remember: The books you buy and put on the shelf won’t affect your thinking or your life. This book is full of proven strategies that work,

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“All truly wise thoughts have been thought already thousands of times; but to make them truly ours, we must think them over again honestly, until they take root in our personal experience.”

—Goethe

but strategies don't work unless you use them. Start by promising to devour this book. Write in the margins. Test and use the strategies that make sense to you, consistently, over time—until they become habits.

Don't just read this book once; that is a lesson my grand-

mother imparted to me when I was very young. With sparkling eyes and an inquisitive mind, she nurtured her children's offspring with stories and quotes that left a lasting legacy. She often gave us her version of a Swedish massage, and while working my back, she would share quotes and Scripture from memory. I once asked her, “How do you remember so many quotes?”

Grandma Vera said something I've treasured since: “If you read something often enough, no one can take it away from you.”

How many great books have you underlined and treasured but never read again? If you were to bet on this book or on years of negative thinking habits, which would you bet on? The good money in Vegas is on your past habits. The only way you change that is to diligently nurture and review content that will provide you the ammunition and encouragement for the changes you want to make.

Don't just read this book; reread the chapters that speak to what you need to change. Summarize what you've learned for your friends and family. Share your favorite short quotes and key statements on your social networking websites. By doing so, you can become a force for positive change for all your friends. When you risk being contagious for what's working for you, you'll soon find you're practicing and remembering what you're sharing!

One final note: I promise not to bore you with lengthy references or scientific jargon. I'll even add some timely humor, relevant stories you can relate to, and inspiring quotes to keep you turning the pages.

I've written this book to provide you with examples and tools you can use now to make a difference in your attitude and your life. It's self-help-lite, and it's word-reduced to make it a quick and worthwhile read. With that in mind, let's get on to the next chapter.

"The future belongs to those who show up for it."

—Mark Steyn

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