The Case for Leadership Optimism

2017

HEALTHCARE
EXPERIENCE
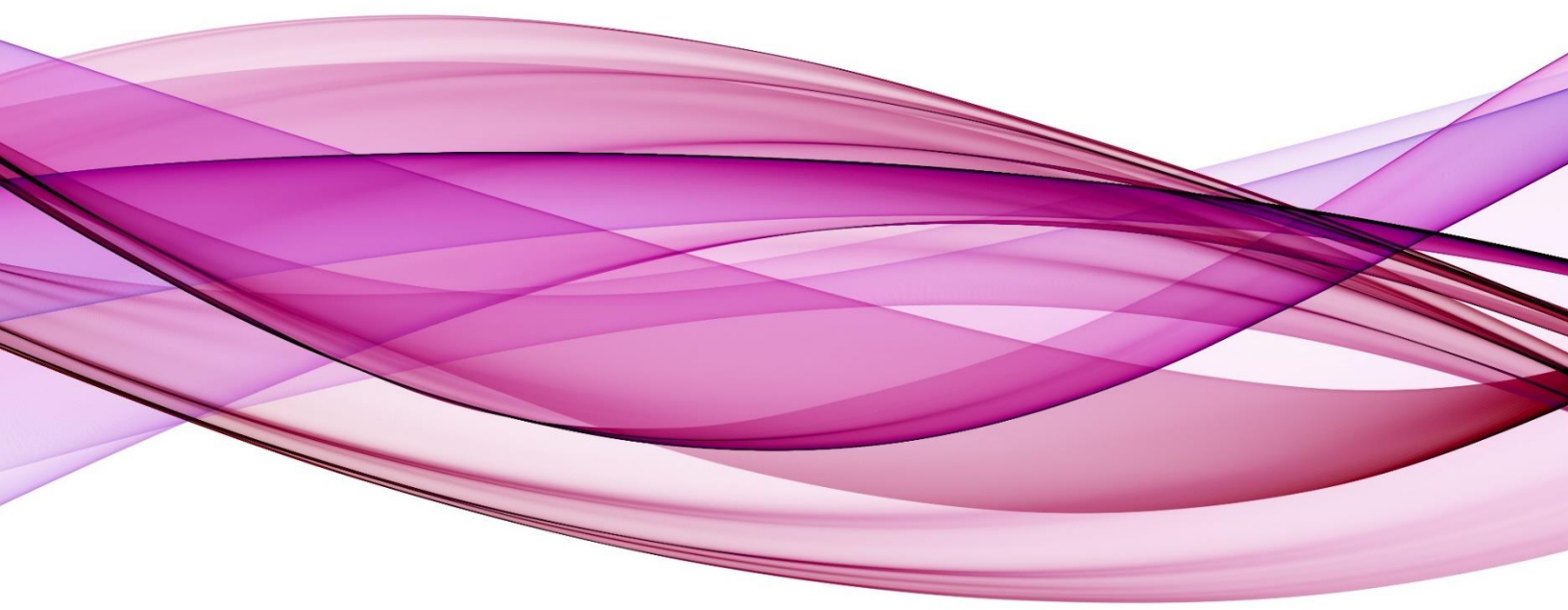FOUNDATION

Unleash the power of the positive. Negativity from leadership zaps the team's energy. Confront problems, not people! You ARE the example.

Introduction

Every healthcare leader will freely admit that running a world-class, safe organization is no easy task. Working toward a vision and creating a better way forward for you and your team is challenging at best, especially since you are guaranteed to face adversity, trials, and negativity along the way. As Dr. An Wang states, "progress is not a straight line"[1]. However, in the face of all the known challenges, your attitude can be the differentiator in creating that better path. Your mindset can empower you to make all the difference in the culture and achievements of your organization.

Throughout history, we see that visionaries, believers, and optimists are those who create meaningful and rewarding changes regardless of the obstacles, the nature of the endeavor, or the field of interest. Wherever they go, these are the people who contribute to making the world a better place. Conversely, nay-sayers, pessimists, and cynics often spend their energy "churning"; as a result, they are unable to make effective change.

In the world of healthcare, those who display positivity find innovative ways to create the best experience and safest care for patients and their loved ones. Martin Seligman, renowned author and psychologist, states, "The very good news is there is [*sic*] quite a number of internal circumstances ... under your voluntary control. If you decide to change them (and be warned that none of these changes come without real effort), your level of happiness is likely to increase lastingly".[2] And so, even if being an optimist is not your natural state, you can learn to adapt your outlook, and that will not only change your own life for the better but will make you a much stronger leader.

A Well-Documented Connection

In present day healthcare, words and phrases such as Burnout, Suffering, Disengagement, and Stress have become a part of our daily vernacular. For the right reasons, we are engaging in a national dialogue about challenges facing the healthcare workforce. Leaner staffing models, heavier volumes, and more complex patient acuities are taking a toll on retention and morale. Several studies have examined the prevalence and impact of disengagement:

- A 2013 Career Builder Survey found that 60 percent of healthcare employees identified themselves as "burnt out". Twenty-one percent reported feeling burnt out always or often.[3]
- When teams are disengaged, Healthcare Acquired Conditions can be 13 percent higher and patient safety decreases by 15 percent. Healthcare workers report they provide top-quality service only 23 percent of the time when disengaged.[4]
- Gallup has demonstrated that negativity impacts morale, performance, and productivity of teams and costs the economy $250 to $300 billion per year.[5]

Assess Your Own Engagement

As a personal reflection, think about <u>the past six months</u>. Rate on a scale of 1-4 (4- Highest; 1-Lowest):

1.	Your personal level of Engagement	1	2	3	4
2.	The Engagement of your team and those you work with	1	2	3	4
3.	The Engagement of your Senior Leaders	1	2	3	4

What gaps exist? How can we close those gaps? What if positivity is an antidote to many of our ailments?

Changing our Paradigm

At the Healthcare Experience Foundation, we believe reducing burnout and disengagement is a low bar to set. We have found success in creating environments of engagement, joy, and positivity that in turn yield cultures of excellence. This does not mean organizations do not experience challenges, set-backs, and devastation. These attributes do, however, set a standard for growth and achievement that stretches us to have greater expectations for what is possible and deserved by our workforce in service to our patients.

Research supports the connection between a positive attitude and individual and organizational success:

- Daniel Goleman, psychologist, researcher, and author of *Emotional Intelligence*, has found that positive teams perform at higher levels than negative ones. Additionally, emotional contagion (demonstrating positive or negative emotions) will have a corresponding impact on others.[6]
- A higher degree of energizing people in your workplace correlates with higher work performance; people want to be around those energized people. As these people attract others, these others are more likely to engage in organizational projects and offer their energy and information. However, leaders who de-energize others will find that people will not follow; they will not be eager to help or work under disempowering circumstances.[7]
- The Broaden and Build theory of positive emotions has demonstrated that unique thoughts, activities, and relationships build enduring personal resources such as resilience, social support, and skills, resulting in enhanced health and fulfillment. This upward spiral then serves as a feedback loop to produce more positive emotions which feed the continuation of the cycle.[8, 9] Additional research has shown that positive emotions can also counteract negative spirals of emotion.[6,10]
- In the *Upward Spiral*, Alex Korb, PhD, shares the neuroscience behind our thoughts and behaviors. His work demonstrates that gratitude can serve as powerful remedy to negativity and depression.[10] Gratitude can improve physical health, boost healthy brain chemicals, aid sleep, build better social support, and decrease symptoms of depression.[9,10]
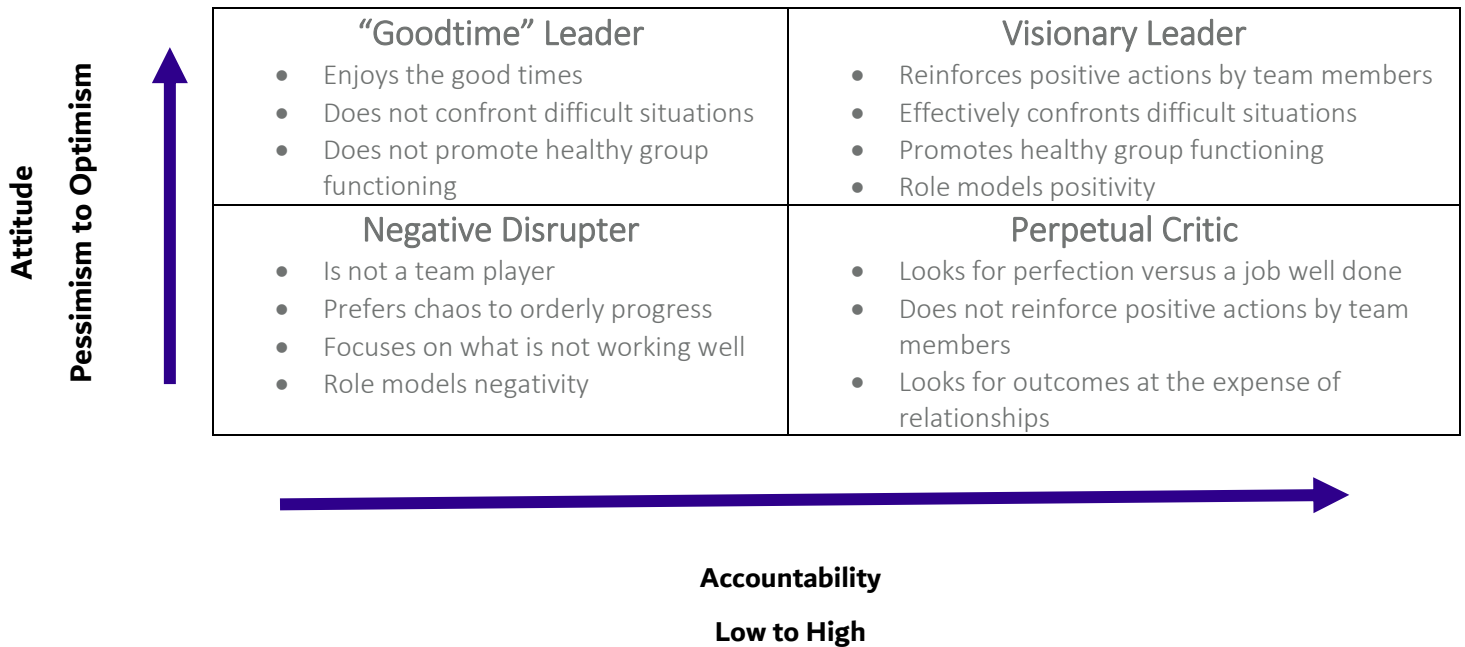
Your Chance

Visionary leaders work every day to instill confidence, be positive, and build and have faith in their teams. *Optimism in your organization starts with you*. And, that optimism cannot be built upon simply "leaving your personal life at the door" when you arrive at work; in fact, who you are personally makes authentic optimism possible. True positivity comes from a knowledge of yourself, a disciplined approach to self-reflection and growth, and a consistent practice of building personal resources. If you do not have this genuine source of optimism, you cannot cultivate or share it.

The good news is that negativity or pessimism lies within your control; it is malleable and not permanent. You can change it, and it benefits you and your team to do so. Here are ten tips to help you make the transformation from negative to positive (or pessimistic to optimistic):

10 Tips for Building Personal Positivity

1. **Begin or end the day with gratitude**. Consciously name (and write them down if you like) three things for which you are grateful. This practice teaches you to look for the good in your life and surroundings.
2. **Practice some form of mindfulness**. Whether your preference is walking meditation, seated prayer, a focus on breathing, or conscious reminders to stay in the moment, mindfulness prevents worry and fear from overtaking your mental and emotional processes and allows you to think beyond a rote loop of automatic thoughts.
3. **Develop a new skill**. Learning something new, whether tennis or how to use a new computer program, requires focus and attention. Confidence developed in the learning contributes to positivity.
4. **Take responsibility for your behavior and don't dwell on your mistakes**. A realistic mental reckoning allows you to change your behavior for the future without sending you into a downward spiral. This practice represents a healthy and mature approach to failing.
5. **Spend time with positive people**. What your mother told you is true: the people around us influence our behavior. And our behavior influences our thoughts and feelings. Positive people generate positive actions which tend to build that loop of positivity.
6. **Give back**. Whether you give back to your employees or your community, find a way to do something outside the scope of your job that allows you to give to others. Studies show the physical act of giving produces more feelings of positivity than simply writing a check.
7. **Read inspirational material**. Whether a quick quote or an entire essay, reading positive information reinforces our belief that optimism works.
8. **When you find yourself thinking negatively, use the STOP approach**. Mentally saying "STOP!" interrupts the thought and allows you to literally change your mind.
9. **Establish and work toward goals**. While we each support organizational goals, having personal goals also allows you to feel a sense of progress and monitor your accomplishments.
10. **Compliment others**. In much the same way as recognizing what you are grateful for, complimenting others genuinely brings a smile to their faces, which in turn results in your own smile. Smiles beget smiles.

A Frame of Reference: Optimism and Accountability as a Leader

"Goodtime" Leader	Visionary Leader
• Enjoys the good times • Does not confront difficult situations • Does not promote healthy group functioning	• Reinforces positive actions by team members • Effectively confronts difficult situations • Promotes healthy group functioning • Role models positivity
Negative Disrupter	**Perpetual Critic**
• Is not a team player • Prefers chaos to orderly progress • Focuses on what is not working well • Role models negativity	• Looks for perfection versus a job well done • Does not reinforce positive actions by team members • Looks for outcomes at the expense of relationships

Attitude
Pessimism to Optimism

Accountability
Low to High

What You Can Do as a Leader

Make a choice. You are the only person who can control your attitude. Act and think yourself into becoming the positive leader you want to be.

Know you are always on stage. As a leader, your presence is always felt. Others are constantly watching your actions and listening to your words. Never let your hair down but do be genuine.

Make complaining and criticizing non-negotiable. If you are complaining, you are not solving or leading. Positive leaders identify problems and look to solve them for everyone's benefit.

Motivate toward where you are going. Regardless of the current state or circumstances, lead your team forward to a greater ambition, an optimistic future.

Lead with compassion instead of fear. Compassion and teamwork unite; fear destroys and divides. Encourage kindness. You cannot establish an environment of trust, cooperation, or innovation with a culture of fear and anxiety.

Be accountable without being disparaging. Positive leaders chase excellence. They believe in a better path forward and take steps to create it. Optimistic leaders demand high expectations, but they build people up instead of tearing them down.

Encourage versus discourage. Optimistic leaders also frame communication positively. They are not insincere when challenges arise, yet they make people around them feel encouraged and confident. They welcome new ideas, spread positive stories, and are genuine when they speak. Leaders who display confidence and empowerment are more likely to have high performing teams.[11]

Build meaningful relationships. The most successful leaders connect with those they serve. They put the effort in to truly get to know employees, colleagues, and patients; they are visible and approachable. These leaders create a sense of safety so that anyone can bring a problem or concern forward because they trust their leader's intent.

Build team gratitude. Leaders who practice gratitude are role models for teams who practice gratitude. When teams hear these leaders consciously call out actions and people for whom they are grateful, members learn the importance of recognizing gratitude in daily work.

Encourage empathy and kindness

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Build gratitude

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Encourage teams to build positive relationships
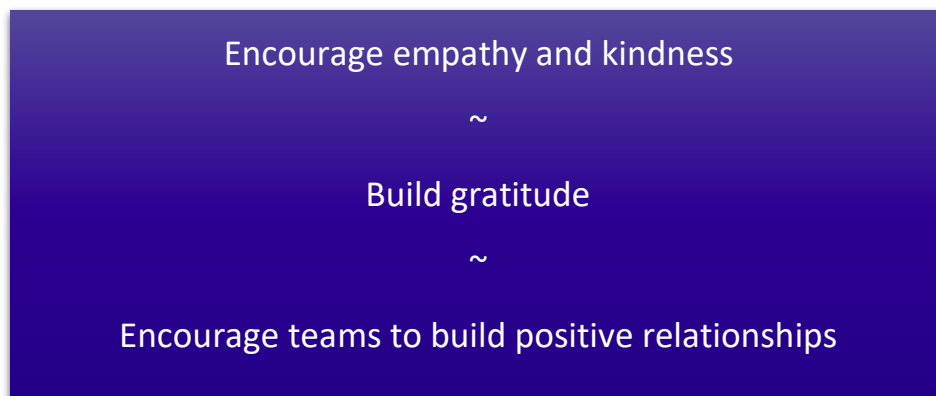
A Case in Point- UNC Healthcare

In September 2017, Paige Roberts, a nurse leader with UNC Healthcare, shared her journey to create positive cultures in care environments.[12] Her conviction to focus constructively has been built over time by studying the psychology of positivity and resilience. As Paige described, negativity can stick like Velcro and destroy a team and positivity can fall off like Teflon in a climate where negativity is too pervasive to overcome. Her solution was to create a strategic and operational daily advantage for herself and her teams. Her studies of neuroscience demonstrated that a long-term commitment to these positive endeavors could minimize the impact of negativity, build a more resilient team, and enhance patient care. She focused on six priorities:

1. **Three Good Things**[2] - For two weeks, her team wrote down "good things" that happened during each shift and shared 3 of those good things with the oncoming shift to start things out on a positive note. As the practice sustained itself and the list of "gratitudes" grew, Three Good Things was extended to other teams and departments. She even noticed over time that on bad days, her team listed many more "good things" than they did on good days.

2. **Social Connections** - Paige views each interpersonal encounter as an opportunity to create high quality connections. Her team introduced "getting to know you" cards for team members and "getting to know you" boards in patient rooms to engage both staff and patients in enhancing social connections. She sought out opportunities for the team to interact socially outside of work and participate in volunteer activities in the community.

3. **Practicing Gratitude** - She established a "heart healer" reward and recognition program for staff to express peer gratitude and provided note cards for staff to write gratitude letters to each other.

4. **Meditation**- She engaged the Chaplain's services to teach meditation techniques at staff meetings.

5. **Signature Strengths** - She conducted this exercise with her department's management team to discover the character strengths of each team member.

6. **Random Acts of Kindness** - Paige made a two-month commitment in which her team was encouraged to engage in random acts of kindness with each other, patients, and teams. They found the acts were contagious and continued this practice for years.

The results were profound. Her department saw improvements in

- Patient Safety Survey Results
- Quality Outcomes
- Press Ganey Patient Experience Survey Results
- Employee Opinion Survey

> "Resilience is our ability to bounce back and persevere in the face of stress and adversity. As healthcare workers, we not only face stressors such as staffing challenges and the pressure to improve outcomes, we are surrounded by illness and the vulnerability of others.
>
> If we don't have the capacity to overcome the challenges around us, it becomes increasingly difficult to be fully present for our patients, who are themselves experiencing some of their biggest challenges and adversities. As healthcare leaders, promoting positivity to enhance the resilience of our teams is an important priority to ensure both the wellbeing of our staff and the provision of excellent, compassionate care."
>
> __Paige Roberts, MBA, BSN, RN, PCCN
> Nurse Manager, UNC Healthcare

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About the Healthcare Experience Foundation

Mission:

Transforming the healthcare experience

Vision:

Shaping cultures through innovation so every person can receive and deliver the best healthcare

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