



By: Carl Robinson, PhD
Carl Robinson, Ph.D., is a business psychologist and executive coach in Seattle who focuses on the development of high performance leaders. Dr. Robinson has over 20 years experience using research-based, proven-in-the-trenches, motivational and performance enhancement technologies to help individuals and organizations improve their effectiveness.

Presidential campaigns provide interesting insights into the human condition and about leadership. Regardless of your political persuasion, I believe that the results of the last election hinged mostly on Obama's attitude about the future. In the midst of so much fear about the financial crisis and other threats, Obama spoke calmly and forcefully about what "we can do." He, much like Ronald Reagan, appealed to the basic optimistic psychological underpinnings of our nation. Reagan's campaign theme was, "It's Morning in America." Obama's was, "Yes we can."

Obviously, no one would consciously elect a President or follow

Optimism

*Leaders **MUST** Have It and It Can Be Learned*

an executive who says, "We're not up to the task and I don't have faith that we can succeed." I believe that Americans, in particular, simply cannot accept being on the defensive for very long, e.g., we need to protect ourselves from the bad guys and that must be our primary focus. Two terms of any presidency is the maximum we can tolerate being that defensive because that stance is too pessimistic. Even though it's true that we have to protect ourselves from the bad guys, making that our primary focus is depressing and ultimately, debilitating. Pessimism is not the primary American mindset.

I find this optimistic characteristic of special interest because optimism also tends to be a characteristic of successful business leaders. Millions of business people start up and grow businesses – even during a major recession. Those risk-taking business people provide the real fuel for our enduring financial success as a nation.

After all, you have to be optimistic to start a business. You have to believe that you can succeed at the venture.

How big a role does optimism really play?

Martin Seligman, Ph.D., past president of the American Psychological Association and the author of the book, *Learned Optimism*, has spent most of his professional life investigating optimism. He cites some interesting research about optimism. One study he cited that caught my eye was conducted with MetLife, which found that "new salesmen who were by nature, *or training* (emphasis mine) optimists – and who were, in a sense, emotionally resilient – sold 37 percent more insurance in the first two years on the job than did pessimists. And, during the first year, pessimists quit at twice the rate of optimists." Sales people constantly deal with rejection (mini-defeats) and have to get up every day and do it again.

What does this mean for business leaders?

Senior executives, especially CEOs, are involved in an ongoing psychological dance with their fol-

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lowers/employees. No matter who the CEO is, employees *imagine* who he or she is. They project onto their boss their expectation of what a boss should act like and expect that he or she should behave in a way consistent with their belief or fantasy about leaders. One of the characteristics followers hope/ imagine about senior executive leaders is that he or she can successfully lead them through the ups and downs of business/life. They need to feel that their leader is optimistic about the future and believes they can achieve their goals.

The implication for executives is that you too need to inspire that sense of “we can do it” if you want to successfully lead over the long term. Threatening people with job loss, for example, is a short-term measure that keeps the mediocre from quitting but will drive top performers out of a company to greener, more inspiring pastures. Top employees, those that are not afraid, will, like other optimists, take the risk to leave for more inspiring opportunities.

As Seligman noted, some people

are born optimists while others are learned optimists. When coaching executives, we sometimes have to teach born optimists how to temper their optimism with pragmatism so as not to come across as Pollyannaish and thereby lose credibility. For everyone else, we help them learn to use techniques that born optimists unconsciously use. For example, optimists tend to respond to everyday defeats by saying to themselves, “I’ll do better next time,” whereas more pessimistic people will often beat themselves

up internally, saying something to the effect of “What a stupid thing to do.” The former acknowledges a poor business decision, but commits one to trying again, while the latter simply cuts one off at the knees. You can learn to reframe defeat from being an indictment about your abilities to a chance to learn from the mistake and to get back into the fight – subtle but powerful differences in attitude and perspective that anyone can learn. You too can learn optimism. &

