

Can pessimism be good for you?

By Pamela Enders

June can rip apart any document and find the flaw — the one thing that might undermine a transaction months in the making. She is also good at detecting the single false note in a high stakes conversation. Her success in spotting potential landmines in any kind of negotiation has made June a champion lawyer. Colleagues want her on their team and clients clamor for her time.

Some may refer to June's talent as prudence — a skill fundamental to the practice of law. After all, a good lawyer should be able to see the dangers and risks inherent in any transaction. The ability to anticipate problems and to protect clients is essential.

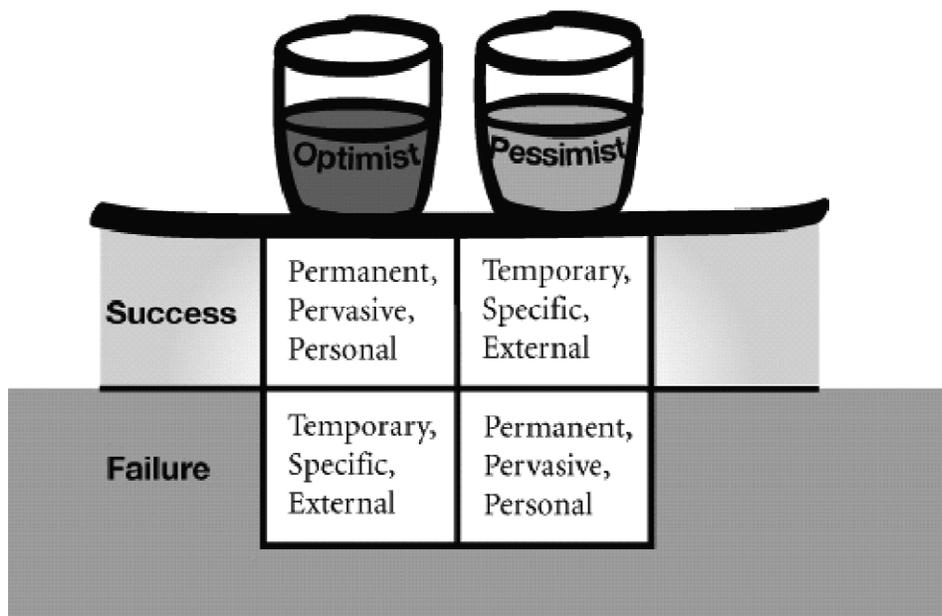
Maladaptive ... or adaptive?

Martin Seligman, Ph.D., psychologist and professor at the University of Pennsylvania, suggests that what some refer to as prudence can too easily move into pessimism. In the general population, pessimism is maladaptive — associated with increased depression, ill health, earlier deaths and underachievement. In a study looking at over 100 careers, lawyers scored the highest in pessimism. But the higher their pessimism, the higher their law school grades.

So, if pessimism is adaptive and helps one become a better lawyer, what's the problem?

Let's go back to June. Although she made partner in a short period of time, until the day she was voted in she didn't really believe it would happen. Even now as a full equity partner, she worries about her future at the firm.

Attributions



June's mantra "If something can go wrong, it will" affects her relationships with her secretary (June micro-manages to "make sure" her secretary gets everything right); her coworkers (it's not easy to just sit back and relax with June); and her family (her focus on what might go wrong on vacations, for example, diminishes the joy of planning excursions).

Interpreting life

According to Seligman, pessimism refers to an explanatory style: We need to explain why things happen so we create stories to help us make sense of the world. These stories do not necessarily reflect objective reality; rather they are a personal interpretation of an event. Seligman argues there are three central

dimensions which we use to interpret events in our lives:

1. Permanence (always versus not always);
2. Pervasiveness (everything versus not everything); and
3. Personalization (internal versus external).

Seligman says pessimists attribute the causes of negative events to stable and global factors. ("It's going to last forever and it's going to undermine everything").

"The pessimist views bad events as pervasive, permanent and uncontrollable, while the optimist sees them as local, temporary and changeable."

These differences can account for the higher levels of depression in the profession of law compared to other professions.

Pervasive: A particular problem

It is the pervasive dimension that is the biggest problem for lawyers — generalizing pessimism beyond the law, allowing it to leak into professional and personal relationships. This is what was happening with June.

The dénouement for June was when, in the same week, she overheard her children referring to her as “gloom and doom mom” and her secretary finally confronted her about her micromanaging. June also became aware of her chronic low energy level and her general lack of pleasure in her life.

June was asked to keep track of her thoughts periodically throughout the day over a period of a few weeks. She quickly saw how her pessimistic thinking was affecting almost everything in her life. She also saw that in some respects, this was adaptive and contributed to her being a successful lawyer.

The goal was to sequester and limit June’s pessimistic explanatory style to certain aspects of her work life. We created a chart plotting out where it was appropriate for her to engage in pessimistic thinking and where it was damaging. She was able to enlist the support of her children and secretary in alerting her when they detected excessive negative thinking. This immediate feedback helped June to shift her approach.

Toward behavioral change

The process in changing any behavior is:

1. Recognition — seeing that a particular behavior or approach is unconstructive;
2. Reorientation — changing direction by modifying perspective and behavior;
3. Repetition — engaging in the new, more constructive behavior repeatedly;
4. Reconstruction — integrating the new behavior and perspective in your life. ©



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