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# Is Optimism Killing Your Business or Career?

We are currently living in interesting times...the global financial crisis continues to adversely impact overall spending and consumer sentiment—and this has hurt many businesses and families. It's no good hoping that circumstances will change—in order to survive and prosper we must dig deep and find creative ways to work smarter not harder.

**O**ptimism and a positive attitude are nice to have but they must be accompanied by purposeful and effective action. In order to take action that will produce the desired result(s), you really have to know exactly where you stand.

I was reminded of this brilliant principle recently when I spoke to one of my mentoring clients about a book I recommended to her—*Good to Great* by Jim Collins. In it Collins talks about this very interesting paradox that he calls 'The Stockdale Principle'. According to Collins, "you have to be realistic about your current situation and yet, stay optimistic about the future."

General Stockdale was the highest ranking American prisoner of war in Hanoi, Vietnam. Over the many years he was incarcerated, he began to notice an interesting phenomenon—optimism could in fact be a liability. His fellow prisoners (who were eternal optimists) constantly set themselves up for disappointment. They set huge milestones—"we will be rescued by Christmas"—but those milestones came and went year after year and with it... their will to live.

Similarly, the pessimists were quick to give up hope and they viewed each new day and circumstance as further evidence that they were doomed to die in that camp.

Conversely, the small handful of prisoners who looked at the painful day-to-day reality they were in and channelled their energies to

the right places, survived. This is not to say that this third group were closet pessimists but rather, they were in fact realists that maintained an unwavering faith in the end game, and a commitment to survive despite the brutal fact of their incarceration and torture over a period of years.

Here's how General Stockdale put it in his own words: "I never lost faith in the end of the story. I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade."

How many of us would look back on seven years of detention—with regular torture, dismal living conditions and an uncertain future—as an experience we would not trade? In fact, if we were honest with ourselves right now, how often do we choose to look at the challenges and adversity we have faced as evidence that we are somehow 'damaged' or a failure? And what would it mean to our compelling future if we were simply able to make this one small shift in our thinking and meaning right now?

When will you be ready to embrace the greatest obstacle or challenge in your life as the defining moment that shaped who you are today? Isn't today the very best time to let go of the excuses and reasons that no longer serve

you and have been holding you back?

Have you ever sat back and thought how this distinction between optimism versus reality could apply to your business/career or your life in general? Where in your life are you ignoring reality in favour of being optimistic and thus missing a crucial opportunity to take purposeful action?

Take for example my business mentoring client that I mentioned briefly above. She has an employee who doesn't take responsibility for her actions, doesn't pay attention to detail and is often defensive and reluctant to take direction and feedback. This employee is negatively impacting the entire work environment as everyone, including fellow team members and customers, are caught up in the drama of it all. My client doesn't want to face the truth and let the employee go. She is resisting doing what on some level she knows that she must in order to save her business. She hopes that it will somehow improve without any action on her part—she is now learning the very important distinction between reality and optimism. When she sees the difference for what it is, then and only then, will she become decisive and take action.

Things don't change—we change. We cannot reasonably expect to get a different result if we insist on ignoring reality and abdicating responsibility. Our survival and success, both in our personal and professional lives, are directly proportionate to our ability to face the facts head-on, make decisions and take purposeful action.

**"The pessimist complains  
about the wind;  
the optimist expects  
it to change;  
the realist adjusts  
the sails."**

*-William Arthur Ward*

Another area where it's easy in business to be blinded by optimism is in the financial arena. Do you have detailed financial reports, KPIs and forecasts in place to drive your decision-making or are you simply relying on your optimism and gut feel? The financials represent reality in a business. The numbers don't lie. They are one of the few objective indicators of how a business is performing and *why*. Regardless of any justifications you use as an owner, manager or investor to explain why the business is not performing—the poor economy, shortage of 'good' staff, competition online, skyrocketing rent—the numbers tell the truth and can lead you to the solution. Failure to face reality and take effective action (especially in these tough times) could lead to a cash crunch and the demise of your business/career.

Take a moment today to examine your relationship to optimism, pessimism and realism in all areas of your life. Success

belongs to those who operate from both sides of the Stockdale Paradox. The key is balance—knowing when to accept reality and take appropriate action and never losing faith in the end of the story. If you can walk this delicate line of balance and responsibility, you increase your odds of making good decisions and this will lead to your inevitable success and breakthrough results.

In life, we will all experience setbacks, disappointments, loss and challenges. What separates successful people from the rest is how you deal with those inevitable struggles. This is a very important distinction and it is what divides the winners from the losers. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which is something that you can never afford to lose sight of—with the discipline to confront the brutal facts and reality of your current situation, whatever that might be. **TB**



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Email: [info@thinkbigproperty.com.au](mailto:info@thinkbigproperty.com.au)