

How to Be Productively Positive, Not Pollyanna



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“Being human means making space for the positive, the negative, and everything in between.” – Whitney Goodman

I’ve recently finished two books that inspired me to question my impulsive inclination to look for silver linings behind every cloud. Both books offer thought-provoking insights for leaders seeking to be appropriately positive without being Pollyanna.

In *Toxic Positivity*, psychotherapist Whitney Goodman defines “toxic positivity” as “...the advice we might technically want to integrate, but are incapable of synthesizing at the moment. Instead, it typically leaves us feeling silenced, judged, and misunderstood.” She contrasts toxic positivity with healthy and productive positivity, explaining that “Healthy positivity means making space for both reality and hope.”

Some, But Not All of This is For You

In *Happy People Are Annoying*, actor and comedian Josh Peck uses humor and storytelling skill to describe a childhood marked by professional success and palpable pain. Describing his journey to understand and cope with anger, anxiety, and substance abuse, Peck recounts the advice of a friend who told him that “If you take 5 percent away from this meeting then that’s great because the other 95 percent is for everyone else.” The 5% rule was a revelation for me. When I accept that there is likely to be something very meaningful and practical in the content, but it won’t be the entire session, article, or book, that knowledge motivates me to give my full attention to the speaker or writer. If I’m multitasking or distracted, I’m likely to miss the lesson or takeaway that will make any time spent on the activity worthwhile.

Noodling on the Negative is a Good Thing

A foundational concept in risk management is that pondering “what ifs” can, and should, make an organization more effective, efficient, and resilient. Whitney Goodman explains that: “The human brain’s main function is to look out for danger and keep us alive, not to make us happy. This is why constant positive thinking can actually be both toxic and dangerous. Without a little negativity, we’d all be really lost.”

Goodman’s book reminded me about the productive potential of negative sentiments, complaints, and old-fashioned venting. During [Risk Assessments](#), our team conducts one-to-one conversations focused on

understanding the risks nonprofits face. Yet during these confidential conversations, we sometimes hear things that sound and feel like personal beefs. We tell the clients who engage us that the interviews often serve a benefit beyond data gathering related to organizational risks: they provide team members with a chance to vent to a willing listener.

Goodman explains, “Hard feelings are normal, and we all have them. We know that we need those feelings and thoughts to live. If you didn’t have anxiety, you would probably be dead. If you didn’t experience sadness, you wouldn’t know what was important to you. If you didn’t complain, nothing would ever get fixed.”

In her HBR article “Real Leaders are Forged in Crisis,” Nancy Koehn writes that “Your job, as a leader today, is to provide both brutal honesty — a clear accounting of the challenges your locality, company, non-profit, or team faces — and credible hope that collectively you and your people have the resources needed to meet the threats you face each day: determination, solidarity, strength, shared purpose, humanity, kindness, and resilience.”

Koehn’s advice dovetails with a theme running through *Toxic Positivity*. According to Goodman, “Being genuine and authentic in moments of crisis or pain is important. It’s how we show up for each other and demonstrate that we’re listening and we get it.”

Goodman discredits what she calls the ‘simple formula’ found in positive thinking literature: “change your thoughts, change your life.” She explains that “This is so powerful because it taps into our biggest fear as humans: uncertainty. When we know, we feel safe, and safety is everything.” Fear of uncertainty—and the unrealistic quest to eliminate uncertainty—are often evident in conversations with nonprofit leaders hoping to evolve risk management practice. The NRMC team’s philosophy is that the most valuable benefit of risk management activity—conversations, workshops, and planning—is *increasing one’s understanding* of the risks to key objectives, not *eliminating* risk or uncertainty. Our team believes that a nonprofit that isn’t subject to risk is short-changing its mission by being too tentative.

Responding to Negativity in the Workplace

If you’re an incurable optimist or a pesky Pollyanna, I challenge you to consider Whitney Goodman’s tips for responding when team members share personal and work-related struggles:

- Show genuine interest in your employees’ lives by asking questions and demonstrating that you care about more than what they can do for you and your organization.
- Show empathy when people are struggling.
- Emphasize the importance of the work and its connection to the mission.
- Trust employees and colleagues and reciprocate with respect, gratitude, trust, and integrity.
- Be vulnerable by revealing your own challenges and doubts.
- Encourage your staff to ask you for help and call on your team when you need help.
- Recognize the differences between negativity and problem-solving; when a team member identifies a problem, gap, or challenge, it may be the first step to uncovering or discovering a solution.

It’s both possible and productive to be positive without dismissing difficult circumstances or downplaying the sadness or stress of others. Difficulty and learning go hand in hand. The challenges we manage through offer more meaningful learning opportunities than wins. Josh Peck reminds us that “The hard times are here to teach us, and the good times are to remind us what we’re fighting for.”

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She would love to hear ways you encourage your staff and colleagues to share both positive and negative concerns or chat with you about ways to ensure your responses aren’t creating toxic positivity at your nonprofit at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504.