

How to Adopt an Optimistic Risk Frame



By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: General

Several years ago, I experienced the phenomenon of a waning friendship whose decline I struggled to fully understand. I was perplexed that my friend's texts and invites caused dread instead of delight. Racking my rational brain led to endless questions but no clear answers.

Recently I stumbled into sense-making about this relationship while listening to *How I Built This*, the NPR program hosted by Guy Raz. The guests on the episode, Life is Good® founders Burt and John Jacobs, spoke about their mission to "spread the power of optimism," and the company's "superpowers"—values built around an optimistic frame. If you've ever worn or gifted a Life is Good® tee shirt or ball cap, you know that the company's optimism-infused casual wear features fun graphics and expressions such as "Here Comes the Sun," "Let it out, let it in," "I'm not old, I'm classic," and more recently: "Quarantini: Life is Good®" and "Life is (Still) Good."

During the interview, the Jacobs brothers used a term that was unfamiliar to me: *rational optimism*. After arriving back home, I looked it up. The expression means: "taking a realistic assessment of the present moment. . . maintaining the belief that you can put one foot in front of the other, take action, and overcome a challenge or reach a goal." Intrigued by the definition, I continued researching to learn more!

In his blog post "Facing Reality: Are You a Rational Optimist or an Unrealistic Pessimist," Jim Clemmer recounts a conversation with a friend named Phil. In response to Jim's question, "How's it going?" Phil responded: "Oh, you know; same crap, different day." My daughter tells me that I'm an incurable, irrational, and infuriating optimist. I fully expect that my next "ah-ha" moment about the risk discipline will be a breakthrough, and the most interesting consulting engagement I'll ever take on is around the corner.

Frame Change

Risk professionals are perceived as the purveyors of doom and gloom. We peddle the scary 'what ifs' of organizational life and the threat of mission extinction to inspire action to protect precious people and assets. Often, we use pessimism as a tool to uncover risks and threats. Our go-to questions to spark risk conversations are the ever-upbeat: "What keeps you up at night?" and "What could go wrong?"

But just as excessive pessimism has been linked to chronic depression, anxiety, and a slurry of other health concerns, pessimism can dampen and diminish the confidence and enthusiasm needed to boldly go where your

mission must. If you're worried that your risk program might be bogged down in what could go wrong, read on to learn how to infuse rational optimism into your risk practices.

What if you were to *dispense* with those stress-inducing questions and start an entirely new practice that brings positivity—dare I say optimism—into the room? Here's one approach to doing just that. The next time you have an opportunity to talk about risk with a team, try starting with these questions:

1. What is the development, new program, or 'big idea' you're MOST excited about this year?
2. How will that work? How might that turn out even better than your wildest dreams? What can we do now to create a runway for a smooth takeoff and big success?
3. There's so much positivity expected; what are some of the things that COULD happen, even though you don't honestly expect them? Are we ready for those rare possibilities as well?
4. What were some of the biggest "ah-ha" moments from the work we did last year? How can we leverage those learnings this year?
5. What's a big risk we should be taking to advance our mission but won't? Why not?! What could we do to make that 'wish' a reality this year?
6. What's something you used to worry about here but no longer do. Why?

Friendship Footnote

My final serendipitous stop on my journey to understand a failed friendship was deep in the pages of *The Business of Friendship* by Shasta Nelson. In this fascinating book, Nelson explains her time-tested friendship formula: Friendship = Positivity + Consistency + Vulnerability. She writes that "Everything we name and want in our relationships falls under these three categories, are descriptions of or preferences of ways we do these three actions, or are produced by these three nonnegotiables."

Initially, I was smugly self-satisfied to see 'positivity' listed first in the friendship equation. But that doesn't mean that optimists are off the hook when it comes to failed relationships. Friendships happen and continue when *both parties* practice *all three* things. True friends lead with positivity, not self-righteous optimism. To be a friend—or friendly risk champion—requires that we reinforce and uplift the good, be a consistent and reliable source of support, and dare to reveal the vulnerability that exists under the self-preserving pessimistic or optimistic mask we wear.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is the incurably optimistic Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your thoughts on optimism's role in risk management at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504.

Rational (and Irrational) Optimism Resources:

- PODCAST: [How I Built Resilience: Bert and John Jacobs of Life is Good](#)
- [The Business of Friendship](#), by Shasta Nelson
- ["Facing Reality: Are You a Rational Optimist or an Unrealistic Pessimist?"](#)
- ["Rational Optimism Illuminates the Evolution of Everything"](#)
- ["Are You an Irrational Optimist?"](#)

If you're interested in exploring the connection between pessimism, optimism, and mental health, we encourage you to examine the following resources:

- [The Optimist vs. The Pessimist](#), by Allan Schwartz, LCSW, Ph.D., for MentalHelp.net
- [Pessimism](#), Psychology Today
- [Optimism and Its Impact on Mental and Physical Well-Being](#)