TRACOM’s Behavioral EQ Model™ is based on the latest research in both brain function and performance. It focuses on the most important elements of Emotional Intelligence and those that can be successfully developed. The Model consists of four dimensions which house the fifteen various core competencies. The Behavioral EQ Explorations series takes a closer look each of these core competencies. This whitepaper focuses on Optimism.

Optimism

Optimism is a critical element of TRACOM’s Behavioral EQ Model, measuring the ability to maintain a positive perspective and stay persistent towards achieving goals, even in difficult circumstances. People who measure high in Optimism maintain a realistic sense of Optimism that is not blind to reality. They have an enthusiasm that is noticeable and spreads to others, and they can maintain their focus on achieving objectives.

“A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.”
—Winston S. Churchill
Maintaining a Sense of Optimism in the Face of Misfortune

There are so many forces in the working world that threaten to diminish employees’ optimism. However, we all know those individuals who, despite misfortunes at work, maintain a sense of ease and hopefulness about the future. This quality enhances their well-being and helps propel them forward through the difficulties. At TRACOM, we define optimism as the ability to maintain a positive perspective and stay persistent toward achieving goals, even in difficult circumstances. Those who are high in this quality believe the future will be good, but are not blind to reality. They exhibit enthusiasm that is palpable and spreads to others.

Research shows that a positive mood is so important because it actually changes the way our brain functions and processes information. While negative emotions narrow the mind and promote quick, sometimes hasty, responses, optimism broadens the mind. Optimism expands our problem-solving resources, cognitive flexibility, and creativity in challenging situations. So it's not surprising that optimism has been associated with a wide variety of positive outcomes at work. Research shows that optimists are more likely to be engaged at work, achieve higher performance, earn promotions, and bring in higher salaries.
Are We Natural Pessimists?

One human trait that impedes us from being optimistic is our negativity bias. Our brain is simply hard-wired to focus on negative information more than positive information. Neuroimaging studies show that our brain responds much more strongly and quickly to negative stimuli compared to positive or neutral stimuli. This negativity bias is even evident in our language. For example, of the 558 emotion words in the dictionary, 62% of them are negative and only 38% of them are positive. Of the most common emotion words that people use, 70% of them are negative.

This negativity bias has a primordial basis. As you can probably imagine, in prehistoric times, the environment was highly dangerous – threats of saber-toothed tiger attacks and natural disasters were constantly looming. To survive, people needed to pay attention to threats and avoid them. If a neighboring tribe was invading, our ancient ancestors experienced a surge of negative emotion that automatically prompted them to fight or flee. An area of the brain largely responsible for this negativity bias and fight or flight response is the amygdala, the alarm system of the brain. This tiny almond-shaped region in the central core of our brain expends two-thirds of its resources scanning for negative information and fires when we feel threatened, releasing adrenaline and other stress hormones into our system.

The negativity bias was adaptive in ancient times because it allowed people to evade physical threats. In modern times, we are not as concerned with physical threats. Threats are more psychological in nature – for example, threats to our sense of control and sense of self-esteem. However, this primitive amygdala response still has a strong influence over us today. For example, when your boss calls you into his office to discuss some figures on your report, you may immediately feel waves of anxiety and dread. This negativity bias drains us of energy and decreases our optimism.
Tips to Enhance Optimism

1. Challenge your self-talk

   Research shows that people speak to themselves constantly, using hundreds of words every minute. However, much of our internal dialogue is negative. In fact, researchers have identified common categories of automatic thought patterns that people have in response to stress. Here are just a few. You might relate to some of these more than others:

   1) **We catastrophize** — we imagine worst possible outcome and exaggerate likelihood that it will occur (“If I lose my job, I will die.”)

   2) **We assume** — We assume the worst without testing the evidence (“If I ask for a promotion, I won’t get it.”)

   3) **We internalize** — We assume responsibility for things that aren’t our fault (“My boss was short with me today, he must hate me.”)

   4) **We label ourselves** — We call ourselves terrible names (“I’m such an idiot,” or “I’m king of the losers.”)

   If we can step back, become aware of these thoughts, and correct them so they are more realistic, we can fundamentally change how we view ourselves and the world, and build our optimism.

2. Delay gratification

   A positive outlook is associated with high activity in the prefrontal cortex, which helps maintain activity in reward regions of the brain. You can strengthen your prefrontal cortex by delaying gratification, that is, by consciously forgoing an immediate reward for a more pleasurable future reward. For example, when you feel the urge to socialize with one of your coworkers or head to the break room, restrain yourself from doing so until you have finished a particular assignment.

3. Alter your motto in the face of negative emotions

   Dr. Barbara Fredrickson, a distinguished social psychologist who investigates positive emotions and human flourishing, says that the motto “be positive” backfires — when we try too hard to be positive, we can begin to feel that we are behaving insincerely and this creates a sense of internal resistance that is damaging to our health and relationships. Dr. Fredickson suggests that we instead adopt mottos such as “be open,” “be curious,” “be kind,” “be appreciative,” and “be real.” These mottos shift our thinking in a more gentle, but effective, way. And, she says that rather than resisting what we are feeling, we should acknowledge negative emotions when they arise. If we can achieve a state of mindful acceptance in the face of negative emotions, we can transform our internal experiences and generate a more positive brain state.
About TRACOM Group’s Behavioral EQ Model™:
TRACOM Group’s Behavioral EQ Model is the third generation of Emotional Intelligence, focusing on skills that are most related to performance and that can be practiced and developed. This model encompasses emotional intelligence (this refers to how well we perceive and understand our own emotions and the emotions of others) and behavioral intelligence (this refers to how well we manage personal behavior and relationships). Behavioral elements of our Behavioral EQ model are the most important because these skills are visible to others and most strongly predictive of job performance and career success.

Learn more about TRACOM’s Behavioral EQ Model and the other elements that comprise the model [here](#).

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References:


