

Tough-Minded Optimism

By Henry S. Givray



In 1993 I came across a one-page, badly copied document titled “12 Traits of Tough-Minded Optimists.” It was from Alan Loy McGinnis’s *The Power of Optimism* published in 1990 (it is now out-of-print). Reading that one-page document had a real impact on me. It reinforced some of my own beliefs. As importantly, it gave me some insight regarding principles to be practiced and values to be lived. Below are those 12 traits with some of my own thoughts and interpretations. See how many resonate with you.

1. Tough-minded optimists are seldom surprised by trouble.

Tough-minded optimists recognize and embrace the notion that problems are part of life. However, they see themselves as able and willing to be problem solvers. They do this by developing and presenting ideas and options which help solve problems. And tough-minded optimists are resilient in pressing forward until they get to where they knew they would eventually get to – a better future state.

2. Look for partial solutions.

Waiting for 100 percent of the facts or the perfect solution before acting results in inaction, missed opportunities or even paralysis. Tough-minded optimists don’t wait until everything is perfectly in order or known before they take action. They know that *beginning is half the doing*. They aren’t crippled by a need for perfection. Instead they are willing to take small steps toward eventual success. Tough-minded optimists inherently understand that thoughtful action is far better than inaction or *analysis paralysis*, which solves nothing.

3. Believe they have control over their futures.

Optimistic thinking inherently boosts self-confidence and encourages determination. Optimistic people don’t let others’ opinions solely determine how they view the current or future state of affairs. They know they have a say in both the path and the destination.

4. Allow for regular renewal.

I interpret this as mental, social and physical renewal. Mental renewal is about continuous learning, self-reflection and personal growth. Social renewal is about making a special effort to get acquainted with new people as well as nurturing existing relationships. Physical renewal is of course about being and staying healthy by eating right and exercising.

5. Interrupt their negative trains of thought.

This simply means that as human beings we will at times have negative thoughts or self-doubt no matter how naturally optimistic or positive we may be. The key is to work at being self-aware while constantly monitoring our response to other people, circumstances, conditions on the ground, or new information. Negative thoughts often distort our understanding of problems or issues. Distortion impedes our ability to find solutions and plot action plans. Moreover, by blocking or shedding negative thoughts, prejudices, preconceptions and false judgments, we become more open to give trust and the benefit of doubt; this in turn builds trust with others.

6. Heighten their powers of appreciation.

This is about possessing and demonstrating a genuine and heartfelt “thank you” approach, both in words and in actions. Optimists tend to see the good in people, the positives in situations and the beauty around them. This in turn fosters trust and invites a positive response from others. This is especially helpful during difficult and trying times.

7. Use their imaginations to rehearse success.

By definition, pessimists view the world through a prism of danger, angst and failure. Tough-minded optimists picture a desired state of the future and are confident to go about and make it happen. They develop positive





“The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind.”

William James

images to minimize or replace the natural anxiety of uncertainty. But tough-minded optimists are also realistic in their visualizations. They are comfortably able to adjust downward, as needed, to make their “images” more achievable.

8. Are cheerful even when they can't be happy.

This is especially critical for anyone in a position of authority or responsibility who aspires to be an effective leader. In fact, during trying times a leader's optimism lifts spirits, gives hope and builds strength in others. Following this principle doesn't mean you should be artificial or adopt a *what-me-worry, head-in-the-sand* persona. It simply means that tough-minded optimists always have the “big picture” in mind. They recognize that their attitude can and will have a profound impact on the people around them, which can either enable or inhibit performance, results, and problem solving.

9. Believe they have an almost unlimited capacity for stretching.

Tough-minded optimists believe that they are on a perpetual journey of learning, growth and self-discovery – and they act accordingly. Their attitude is “my personal best is yet to come.” They are constantly pushing, stretching, reflecting, leveraging to grow, finding new ways to do things and developing themselves. This is not about Pollyanna positive thinking but more about recognizing that the mind, heart and soul offer limitless opportunities and potential.

10. Build lots of love into their lives.

Cynical or negative people knowingly or unknowingly isolate themselves and end up being alone much of the time. During times of great difficulty and challenge, personally or professionally, tough-minded optimists

recognize the power of love and friendship to heal, nurture and renew. McGinnis wrote “love nurtures optimism.” The reverse is true – hostility leads to cynicism and pessimism.

11. Like to swap good news.

How and what we talk about affects us mentally, emotionally and even physically. Sharing success stories generates excitement, builds confidence, spotlights desired outcomes, boosts morale, and helps others envision what is possible.

12. Accept what cannot be changed.

Even the biggest optimist has to know when to let go. Perseverance is powerful, but not accepting what cannot be changed can be costly as other opportunities drift away. Simply stated, tough-minded optimists ask “is there anything I can do to change the situation?” If the answer is “no,” they let it go and move on. •

Henry S. Givray is former Chairman, President & CEO of Smithbucklin Corporation, the world's largest association management and services company. He served as President & CEO from 2002 to 2015 and Chairman of the Board (non-executive) from 2016 to 2020. Henry is a dedicated, ongoing student of leadership, committed to speaking and writing as a way to teach and give back. His insights and ideas on leadership have been prominently featured in business books and national news media, and he has been invited to speak at numerous association conferences, corporate meetings, and educational forums. One of Henry's most enduring achievements has been his creation of comprehensive, high-impact leadership learning programs. The programming has evolved to include two offerings under the brand Leadership's Calling®. The Diverse Cohort Program is for CEOs and other C-suite executives, vice presidents, directors and managers at all levels, business owners, entrepreneurs, individual practitioners, and high-potentials from all types and sizes of organizations representing varied industries and professions. The second offering is an exclusive program for a CEO (or head of an organization) and members of his or her senior management team, participating together.