

# THE OPTIMISTIC LEADER

MANY SUCCESSFUL CEOS EQUATE OPTIMISM WITH  
GOOD LEADERSHIP. SO CAN YOU LEARN TO SEE  
THE GLASS AS HALF FULL?

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In 2013 General Motors Holden broke the news that there was no long-term future for its Australian manufacturing facility and operations. Over the next four years a workforce of close to 4,000 employees would shrink to less than 1,000. And, for Jaydeep Solanki, that was just part of the story. As Head of Global Purchasing and Supply Chain, he also had strong relationships with more than 80 companies that depended on Holden for their own survival. Yet he remained optimistic. “I believe that, irrespective of the challenge you’re facing, an optimistic outlook can make the situation workable for the leader,” he says. “I also believe this attitude will be reflected in the team.”

In this case, Solanki’s optimism centred on his commitment to finding alternative ways for his employees and suppliers to earn a living.

“For a while I became less focused on growing sales and profits and more focused on helping our team to transition into a life outside of the automotive industry,” he says. “Our employees picked up on that and, in the final year of operation, we had the best-performing employee base in the General Motors plants worldwide.”

Victor Perton, founder of The Australian Leadership Project, recently released a book called *The Case for Optimism: The Optimists’ Voices*. It features over 200 quotes, including one from Dominic Barton, McKinsey’s London-based Global CEO, who describes optimism as being “at the very core of leadership”. Many other notable leaders have expressed similar views, and there’s also evidence that optimism has a positive impact on everything from the health of your heart to your coping strategies.

## LEARNED OPTIMISM

But what if you’re a natural pessimist? Can optimism be learned? “I believe that, in most cases, the answer is yes,” Perton says. “One of the most powerful things you can do is focus on gratitude by getting into the habit of acknowledging the good things in your life, feeling grateful and thanking the people who contribute to them. Using optimistic language is also important, particularly now the language used in politics, business and the media has become excessively pessimistic.”

Perton quotes Harvard cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker’s argument that, because the news is about what happens rather than what doesn’t happen, it features sudden and upsetting events like fires, rampage shootings and shark attacks. A country that’s not at war, or a city that hasn’t been attacked by terrorists, is never going to make the headlines.

“This is why I advise CEOs to save the news till later in the day,” Perton says. “Of course you need to stay in touch with what’s going on but you don’t need to hear 15 minute updates on everything that’s bad in the world. If you want to start out feeling optimistic you need to immerse yourself in optimistic literature, not relentless doom and gloom.”

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HELEN MACDONALD, FOUNDER,  
THE LEADERSHIP MINDSET INSTITUTE

## MORE THAN THINKING HAPPY THOUGHTS

Some people confuse optimism with delusion. “Optimism has a built-in action imperative, so it’s not about sitting around visualising success and waiting for it to happen,” says Helen Macdonald, founder of The Leadership Mindset Institute. “And it isn’t the blind belief that everything will be fine if you continue travelling in the same direction. Optimistic leaders are focused on the best possible outcome, but they’re also grounded in reality. They acknowledge that things don’t always go well and, when things go wrong, they ask three questions. How can we make sure we don’t do that again? What can we learn from the experience? And how can we do better next time?”

Pessimism can also be misjudged. “It’s not productive to look for nothing but the worst possible outcomes but there’s also such a thing as healthy pessimism,” Macdonald continues. “It’s true that there’s a fine line between optimism and delusion and that’s why you need enough healthy pessimism to check for possible downsides, look for holes in the arguments and assess the risks. Considering the worst case scenario is not pessimism, it’s good business planning.”

## A UNIVERSAL POSITIVE

As General Motors’ Director of Asia Pacific Vehicle Program Purchasing Management, Solanki now leads teams in Australia, South Korea, Thailand and India. He believes that, while most people will respond positively to an optimistic leader, different teams require different approaches.

“We’re an American company but the style of leadership required to motivate people in America may not necessarily motivate some of the people I work with in Asia,” he says. “One of the most important rules when you’re working with multiple cultures is to adapt your leadership style to respect each one.”

Throughout periods of growth, downsizing and working in different geographical locations, Solanki’s optimism has remained a constant.

“It’s been very helpful to me over the years,” he says. “Whatever the challenge, optimism will always help you to find the next door you need to open.” ■