

FUTURETM
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Hopeful Leadership In Challenging Times



How can we thrive in turbulent and uncertain times - as individuals, as leaders, as organizations? This question remains hugely important as we move into the future. Maintaining a hopeful mindset — and cultivating hope in others — is a key leadership task in the face of turbulence and uncertainty. This guide explores the importance of hope and outlines specific strategies to cultivate and strengthen a hopeful mindset.

The Challenge - and the Hopeful Response

Unprecedented downturn. Challenging times. Uncertainty. Hardship. Layoffs. More layoffs. Deficits. Debt. Shrinking markets. Restructuring. Consolidation. Fewer resources.

This has become the loud background hum for our conversations- with others and in our own heads. Add to the economic woes the fears and concerns about the environment, and it is no wonder that many people are feeling stressed and even spiralling towards feelings of hopelessness.

As we contemplate the reality around us, we wonder: How can we avoid either paralyzing fear or panic driven thoughtless action that closes down future possibilities? Those who are tasked to lead face an extra challenge:

How do you lead in hard times when those around you are caught up in fear and hopelessness?

The seemingly paradoxical answer to the question of how to live and lead in stressful and uncertain times is to cultivate hope. It is only by building and tapping into hope that we can creatively engage the challenges of the present and open up the best possibilities for the future. This applies to us as individuals, as well as to organizations.

How can we resolve this paradox - that when hopelessness threatens we need to draw on hope? By practicing specific thinking strategies that cultivate a hopeful mindset, which generates hope. But let's first take a closer look at hope and why it matters.

Hope:

“an activating force that enables people, even when faced with the most overwhelming obstacles, to envision a promising future and to set and pursue goals.”

Bruce Winston

Hope is often dismissed as soft and fluffy, as an escape from reality and worth little from a business perspective. In fact, effective leaders know from their own experience that hope is vital for success.

In the words of Shane Lopez, one of the leading experts on hope and a senior Gallup scientist, hope "plays a central role in business as it drives persistence, motivation, goal setting, and innovation". Recent research on some of the factors that support high-performance work environments supports the notion that hope is a vital resource that leaders and organizations need to tap into for a competitive advantage.

Levels of hope in employees and leaders positively related to employee performance, job satisfaction, work happiness, and organizational commitment.

- Levels of hope in organizational leaders correlate with profitability of units, and with satisfaction and retention of employees.
- High hope employees exhibit more positive behaviors, including conscientiousness, helping attitudes, courteousness, avoiding the blame game, being energized even in the face of challenges.
- Hope also positively impacts academic and athletic performance, physical and mental health, survival and coping skills, and well-being.

In light of the positive effects of hope on hard business measures, Fred Luthans has proposed that hope (along with other factors such as optimism, resilience, self-efficacy) is a form of psychological capital. Psychological capital goes beyond intellectual or social capital. It taps into the positive psychological states of people as the real source of competitive advantage today.

It is no wonder, then, that hope is increasingly recognized as an integral part of authentic leadership. Leaders need to be able to connect with, nurture and enhance hope in their followers if they are to mobilize the collective will and resources to move things forward.

Knowing that hope matters still leaves unanswered the important HOW question. How can we cultivate hope in ourselves? How can we nurture and enhance hope in others? The answer lies in practicing specific "hope-inducing" thinking strategies - outlined below.

The Hopeful Mindset: Four Thinking Strategies that Cultivate Hope

“ ... hope forms when "goals thinking (I want to go from here to there) combines with pathways thinking (I know many ways to get from here to there), and agency thinking (I think I can get from here to there).”

Shane Lopez

Hope is both a feeling and a way of thinking. It is a positive emotional state that, like other positive emotions, broadens and builds our capacity to think creatively, supports well-being, and builds resilience for dealing with challenges.

But we cannot "will" ourselves to be in this emotional state simply by deciding that we want to be more hopeful. What we CAN do is to engage in hopeful thinking that will cultivate a hopeful mindset, that in turn leads to hope.

As leaders, we also need to model hopeful thinking and engage others in the process so as to build hope in them - giving us the collective motivation and energy to do what needs to be done. A hopeful mindset influences how a leader thinks and approaches challenges. This will directly shape the behaviors and actions chosen - hence affecting the results.

What does it mean to embrace a hopeful mindset, to engage in hopeful thinking? Here are four, interconnected, ways of thinking that are proven to build hope - hope that provides the energy and motivation for positive action.

THINK CONNECTIONS TO ENRICH THE PROCESS

Connect widely - with other people and with ideas - so that the input for each of the other aspects of hopeful thinking can be enriched. This involves tapping into and/or developing a network of people (internal and where appropriate - external) to provide input at each level. It involves being open to - and actively seeking out - new ideas and perspectives, in order to stimulate fresh thinking.

THINK GOALS THAT PULL TOWARDS THE FUTURE

Within the "enriched" context created by connecting to people and ideas, consider what goals are most relevant and meaningful. Set clear goals that both respect the current reality and focus on what's possible rather than the limitations being faced. The more clearly goals can be linked to what is valuable and meaningful, the greater their power to exert "motivational pull".

THINK MULTIPLE PATHWAYS TO ACCOMPLISH THE GOALS

Identify and generate multiple ways to approach the goals. When we see possible ways from here to there, our energy to move becomes engaged. Having multiple pathways also creates more capability to handle obstacles. Some of the traditional paths to achieving goals can be blocked during challenging times. This provides the opportunity for creative and innovative thinking - including thinking more broadly on what resources can be mobilized on the path towards the goals.

THINK RESOURCES THAT CAN BE MOBILIZED IN WORKING TOWARDS THE GOALS

Goals and pathways towards achieving the goals need to be structured keeping in mind the resources that are available - including financial, human, intellectual, technological. Creative resource thinking can make the difference in terms of shifting hopeful leadership into concrete success during challenging times. What capacities and capabilities can we leverage that we may not have thought of as relevant before in terms of achieving goals? In sum: A hopeful mindset is built through goals thinking, pathways thinking, and resource thinking. The power of each of these forms of thinking are "multiplied" when combined with "connections" thinking.

$$\text{HOPE} = (\text{Goals} + \text{Pathways} + \text{Resources}) \times \text{Connections}$$

From Concept to Action: Apply It

How can you put the concept of "hopeful thinking" to work in your situation? The first step is to commit to cultivating a mindset of hope. Then start by applying the thinking strategies to an area of challenge you are currently facing. Here is a template to guide your thinking process.

1. THINK CONNECTIONS TO GAIN INPUT AND ENRICH THE CONTEXT

- How can you step out of your current thinking and expand the context in which you approach your challenge, collecting new input to enrich the process?

- What connections can you make to gather new insight that is relevant to your challenge?

- What internal and external (where appropriate) networks can you access to expand your thinking and generate input into the various steps of the process?

- What new ideas and perspectives can you bring in to consider?

- What past experiences are relevant to this situation?

- Which of your existing goals still fit? What doesn't? What needs to and/or can be changed?

- What's a new and enticing goal that is relevant to the challenge and builds on the possibilities of your current reality? How much motivational pull does it have? What will be the benefits of achieving this goal?
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3. THINK BROADLY AND CREATIVELY ABOUT RESOURCES AND GOAL PATHWAYS

- Given the new or realigned goals, what resources come to mind that you have not thought of using before? How can you best launch the above resources in service of your goals?
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- What are possible routes in terms of moving toward the goal - possibly utilizing resources in a new or different way? (eg. organizing people in a different way for this project.... consolidating the content of this issue in a different way.....restructuring the plan....outsourcing some or all of the task)....
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- What are the implications of the various possible pathways and resources usage for other initiatives? What needs to be done to ensure alignment?

- What is the most applicable and viable path, given the resources you've chosen?

- What possibilities do you see for dealing with obstacles along the way?

4. THINK CONNECTIONS AGAIN TO MOBILIZE ENERGY

- What are you now ready to act on?

- What's the message - about possibilities, goals, pathways, resources - that you need to communicate to others?

- Who do you need to include in the communications - individuals? partners? teams? the organization?

- How can you communicate this message clearly and enthusiastically so that it helps enhance the hopefulness of others about the goals and the pathways?

- What have you learned from this intentional practice of "hopeful thinking" that you can apply elsewhere?

About the Authors

This article originally appeared in Leadership Exchanges, Issue #1, a newsletter co-authored by Melinda Sinclair and Karen McKnight. Melinda and Karen have independent coaching practices. They sometimes collaborate to think and learn about leadership, and this article is one of the outcomes of that process.

To contact Melinda:

(416) 932-8857

melindasinclair@rogers.com

www.melindasinclair.com

www.futuresmartleader.com

To contact Karen:

(416) 239-1101

karenmcknight@rogers.com

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