



Magazine Article / Managing Yourself

How Leaders Counter Pessimism in Trying Times

They model constructive behavior, reframe pressure, and highlight progress.

by Michelle Gielan

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Harriet Lee-Merrion

At a leadership session I led last year, an executive pulled me aside during a break.

“The strange thing is that the worst is behind us,” she said, “but you’d never know it from talking to the team.”

It had been a hard stretch: Layoffs the previous year. Two lost accounts. A reorg that left everyone doing more with less. The company had weathered all of it, and the numbers had finally steadied. But the team hadn't. People who once volunteered bold ideas had gone silent. Meetings felt flatter. Conversations drifted toward what might go wrong next.

"It's as if everyone is still bracing for impact," she told me.

As we talked, she realized that the problem was no longer operational. It was psychological. The noise from news stories and social media about the challenges facing their industry, company, and careers had become too loud to bear, and people were starting to believe that their efforts mattered less than they used to.

Many leaders are managing this kind of pessimism right now, and research explains why. In a study I ran with Arianna Huffington on how negative information affects the brain, we gave people three minutes of negative news in the morning, then measured their mood six to eight hours later at the end of an ordinary workday. Compared with the participants in the control group, who saw three minutes of neutral content, the people in the negative-news group were 27% more likely to describe their whole day as a bad one. Days upon days of such exposure—whether world news, industry warnings, or team and personal setbacks—can wear down well-being and performance until work starts to feel pointless. Against that backdrop, it is not surprising that employee engagement is at a 10-year low and that more than half of U.S. workers report burnout.

Feeling pessimistic, apathetic, or stressed out is not a character flaw. Our bodies are wired that way. The brain has a bias toward negativity, weighting threats far more heavily than reassurances, so a few alarming

inputs can color people's thoughts for hours. Feed that bias an always-on stream of problems mostly outside our control, and it hardens into something more corrosive. Martin Seligman, the founder of the field of positive psychology, called a version of this pattern learned helplessness: the mental state people enter when they conclude their actions can no longer change the outcome. I studied at the University of Pennsylvania with Seligman, and I often see the effects of *learned helplessness* in employees: Keep your head down, don't bother, nothing changes anyway.

That attitude is both personally and organizationally destructive. Having tested more than 25,000 professionals in *Fortune* 500 companies, hospitals, and school districts over the past decade, we have consistently found that pessimists are not only less engaged but also less successful. People who scored the highest in work optimism—strongly agreeing with statements about their workplace such as “I generally expect things to go my way,” “I feel optimistic about the future,” “I anticipate more good than bad,” and “I believe my behavior matters”—were, by contrast, three times more likely to be highly engaged, 40% more likely to be promoted within 12 months, and five times less likely to burn out. Other studies have found that people with a positive mindset are 31% more productive and that optimists outsell their pessimistic peers by 37%.

Here's the catch most leaders miss: You can't cure pessimism with a motivational speech or a good-vibes-only demeanor. Research shows that when people feel they must fake positivity, it leads to higher burnout. Instead, you need to build a culture of what I call *resilient optimism: the ability to see challenges clearly while believing that actions can still influence outcomes*.

By studying effective managers, I've found that you accomplish this through a set of simple behaviors: modeling optimism, reframing stress, and highlighting progress.

Model Constructive Behavior

Attitudes are contagious. Through the brain's mirroring systems, we automatically pick up and reproduce the emotional states of the people around us. Leaders, in particular, have the power to shift the mood of their teams, not by pretending everything is fine or manufacturing cheerfulness but through tone, body language, and small actions.

Even one specific expression of appreciation can move performance measurably. In a field experiment at UPenn, researchers had a manager thank one group of fundraisers for their work—a brief, genuine “We’re grateful for what you do”—but say nothing to a comparison group. Over the following week, the people who were thanked made about 50% more calls. What changed wasn’t their skill or their workload; it was that they felt valued. Small repeated signals from a leader helped the team spiral upward.



Harriet Lee-Merrion

When thinking about the types of behaviors you want to model, start with the signals people read most closely: what you pay attention to, what you prioritize, and how you restore energy.

Attention. Reassure your team that you are focused not just on threats but on purpose, agency, and positive signals. Flag a customer’s or client’s compliment, the hard work put in by a particular employee or team, or an optimistic industry report. Even something as simple as

saying “Thanks” or “Good catch” out loud or chuckling over a snafu in a meeting can lift people’s spirits.

Prioritization. A leader who treats everything as urgent overwhelms everyone. Instead, commit to a regular reset that your team can witness. Once a week, review your own calendar and commitments and ask three questions: What can I step out of? What can I hand off with guidance instead of doing myself? What am I doing out of habit or guilt rather than impact? This kind of maintenance keeps you—and the standard your team sees you set—in a productive mode that holds pessimism at bay.

Restoration. Optimism requires energy, so it’s important to show your team that you take the time to relax and refuel. You don’t need a week in Tuscany. Simply treat—and talk about—your weekends and even short breaks as critical. Anticipate those breaks, detach fully, and return to the office carrying and articulating one good feeling. When you model genuine recovery, you give the whole team permission to do the same.

Reframe Your and Your Team’s Stress

Modeling an optimistic attitude sets the baseline. The next move involves helping your team members reinterpret the pressure they’re under.

Researchers Alia Crum, Peter Salovey, and Shawn Achor (who happens to be my husband) split UBS bank managers into two groups. They trained one to treat stress as a threat to reduce and the other to see stress as something that sharpens attention, fuels quick thinking, and drives growth. And they found an interesting divergence. Four months later, both groups were more stressed because of an industrywide crisis. But the group that had learned about the benefits of stress reported a 23% drop in stress-related symptoms such as headaches, backaches, and

fatigue and logged better performance with higher satisfaction and less burnout.

You can teach your team to reframe stress with two practices:

Signal check. Stress usually provides information—the mind is flagging something it values. So encourage your people to get curious instead of critical about this feeling and ask themselves, What is this stress protecting or revealing? What value of mine feels threatened? How can I respond in a way that honors it?

An executive I worked with used this tool to help a strong performer who became tense and short-tempered as deadlines closed in, snapping in meetings and redoing others' work. Instead of telling the team member to relax, the manager privately asked her the above questions. It turned out that she was afraid that one visible miss would undo years of hard work. That reframed the conversation from “You need to be nicer and manage your stress” to “You want to protect your reputation as a positive contributor”—and her grip loosened.

“Yes, and.” The principle comes from improv: Accept the reality in front of you (“yes”) and then build on it (“and”).

Resilient leaders don't sugarcoat or stall. They acknowledge challenges: “The launch has failed” or “We lost a major client.” But they refuse to let the negative be the end of the sentence: “...and here's how we gather feedback and relaunch smarter” or “...so starting this week we're prioritizing connection and communication.” This recognizes the difficulty while redirecting people to solve problems, which helps foster more-flexible thinking.

Create and Highlight the Positives

The brain is a pattern maker. In a noisy environment it strings negative dots into a discouraging story: Nothing I do matters. The most powerful thing a leader can do to counteract this tendency is to supply positive dots instead.

Charlene, an HR leader at a large tech company, discovered this during a brutal round of layoffs when her office became a drive-through for complaints. Then one afternoon she encountered the first flicker of lightness in weeks; she overheard two engineers high-fiving over a bug they'd finally cracked. After that, she leaned into soliciting positivity, stopping people in the hallway and saying, "Tell me something good that happened today." Soon people started to notice and remember their smallest wins to share. Her walks around the office became, in her words, "roving pep rallies," and the mood lifted. She wasn't ignoring the layoffs. She was curating the good that was already there but going unspoken.

In research Shawn and I did with *Training* magazine, we found that, on average, 31% of people at work are optimistic but don't express it. A leader who draws those closet optimists out changes the emotional climate.

Here's a three-day exercise that will help you and your team members to publicize and generate positive dots:

Day 1: Send praise. Tell an employee who is doing a great job what you noticed and why it mattered. Text or email the person directly, or tell one colleague about another's quiet win. "Did you catch how Mia stayed late to unblock the launch, even though it wasn't her project?" This positive gossip travels faster than formal praise and lands as sincere because people assume you've got nothing to gain by saying it.

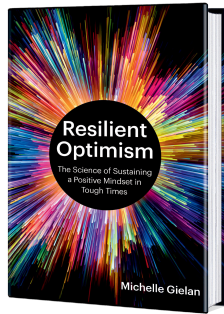
Day 2: Lighten a load. Ask one teammate what small thing would make the next step easier—a certain resource, a phone call, 10 extra minutes—and provide it. Friction removed is a dot created.

Day 3: Reach back out. Reconnect with a colleague you’ve lost touch with. No agenda—just a “You crossed my mind.” Getting together with someone when you need nothing is the opposite of the head-down, brace-for-impact posture hard times breed. Plus, the most powerful support is often just the reminder people need that someone hasn’t been forgotten.

Scaled up, this becomes culture. When Janet, an executive at the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society (now Blood Cancer United), saw burnout creeping through her team, she worked with me to launch a three-week optimism challenge—daily notes of appreciation, then gratitude, then small acts of kindness. By the end, her employees had generated more than 10,000 moments of connection and regained the sense that their actions still mattered.

The Leader’s Real Job

When a team, industry, or organization is struggling, pessimism can feel justified—and even useful as a protective shield against false hopes. But if that attitude festers, it will kill productivity and performance. None of this means papering over hard truths. Optimism won’t fix a broken strategy or an unsafe workplace. But it can change what people do with a difficult reality—whether they disengage and wait, or stay in problem-solving mode long enough to find the next move. That’s the leader’s job: to move people toward a still realistic but more positive mindset that prioritizes agency and action over analysis. If you model constructive behavior, help your team reframe stress, and create and highlight the positive dots of progress, optimism will build, person by person, day by day, until it becomes your team’s prevailing spirit.



This article is adapted from *Resilient Optimism: The Science of Sustaining a Positive Mindset in Tough Times* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2026), by Michelle Gielan.

[Buy it here](#)

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Michelle Gielan is a positive psychology researcher and the author of *Resilient Optimism* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2026). She has spent 15 years studying resilience and performance in leaders.