

Leaders with Optimism Get Positive Result: Industrial Perspective

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Abstract

In the dynamic business world of today, leaders face many challenges. Apart from the work skills they are also expected to have a persona that defines motivation, resilience and emotional stability which can inspire awe and respect in other employees of the organization. In such circumstances if the leader has attitudinal issues, he may not be able to do justice to the role. Everyone understands the importance of Optimism as an attitude that can help people attain success but, not enough is done to develop this attitude. Moreover organizations have no way to find whether their leaders have the required levels of optimism or their levels are plunging. A psychometric tool that can measure optimism should be made a necessity for all organizations not only at the hiring stage to find the right candidate but also at regular intervals for providing timely interventions through customized training to improve the ebbing optimism in their leaders.

Keywords: *Leaders; Optimism; Perspective*

Introduction

The definition of effective leadership includes inspiration, motivation, promotion of goodwill; effective communication and above all an emotional connect with other employees of the organization. As stated by Stogdill [1], a leader is expected to be able to read emotions of his peers and juniors, and the rest of the employees too, in order to be effective. Stogdill established a direct link between leaders' personality and employee's perception of the leader.

Same thoughts are echoed by Blanchard [2] in his theory about situational leadership. Leaders, as per him, are the ones to create vision of the organization and support its strategies. They are also the catalyst for development and factors for retaining the workforce for organizational development. Therefore, it becomes imperative to develop leaders to their full potential.

Leadership is looked upon as one of the most coveted role in any organization but it brings with it many encumbrances which make it one of the toughest jobs. Leader's role is full of challenges that keep him on the edge not only during the assigned work hours but also outside the workplace.

He is required to know technical skills, interpersonal skills and should be able to motivate the work force with effective communication. Every employee of the company looks upon him for solutions to their problems and for decision making. Employers hold him accountable for each thing and expect him to have the magic wand which should spell profitability in the organization.

In such a scenario only those who have the toughest resilience, motivation and self-efficacy are able to survive. It is extremely important for a person to be emotionally strong to sustain in leadership role. As per [3] emotional intelligence are becoming a significant and

inevitable factor in all walks of life especially effective leadership, along with its pre requisites like building teams, social skills, developing human potential and performance.

When people are hired or promoted for a leadership role, they are mainly judged for their years of experience. Somebody who has put in years at a senior position is considered fit for a leadership role. For a position in leadership the basic requirements are high qualification, technical skill, experience and past records of delivering successful transactions. They are seldom tested for their mental resilience, strength and relationship network. These are the things that are generally assigned to a position of leadership and mostly taken for granted in a person who is designated for the role. Although it is a known fact that a person lacking in mental strength and relationship will not be able to do justice to the role of a leader, not many organizations are making any efforts to test leaders on the people skills and his/her optimism quotient. Organizations either neglect the aspects, or they do not have the means to find out whether the one they are hiring is equipped with the level of optimism and emotional intelligence required for the job.

It is a proven fact that optimism is an attitude which acts as a propeller for attaining success. In his book [4] emphasizes on the power of optimism as an attitude. He says, optimistic and positive attitude can have transformational effects on one's life. More than the circumstances in your life, it is your attitude that decides whether you are going to be a successful individual or a complete failure. People who are blessed with the high levels of optimism are known to be more resilient and successful. They are more adaptable and have better people skills. Other than that, they are also the ones who perform better in adverse conditions and are able to goad themselves in the right directions. Needless to say, on the contrary, those who have low levels of optimism are less likely to find directions when the going gets tough. The good news is that optimism is an attitude that can be learnt and developed. But before we go on to train minds towards higher levels of learnt optimism the need is to know where one stands in terms of levels of optimism. Once it is known, the intervention can be provided in terms of customized training to improve the situation. In this context it would be relevant to quote [5] who created a tool called 'Optimism index to measure optimism. As per her, it is the desire of every person to live a happy and flourishing life. As per her the major factors that lead to a life of success and wellbeing revolve around the dynamism of emotions, engagement, relationships, meaningfulness and achievement. "OPTIMISM" is a catalyst by which these five factors get energized and propelled. She goes on to say that the importance of these is understood by everyone but to develop one needs a push.

It is seen that people in higher positions are more prone to stress and mental tensions. Dr Selye, the father of stress theory has very aptly defined stress. He opined, stress is a non-specific response of body as a result of demands made upon it [6].

AS one goes higher on the corporate ladder his stress levels increase parallel to his responsibilities. If this goes unchecked the person suffers greater risks of falling prey to diseases, mental and physical and also is not in control of the work pressures that are always staring him on the face. The present study is an effort to draw people's attention towards the dire need of a devise which can check people's optimism levels at all times and provide timely interventions.

Review of Literature

Peter F Drucker created a very distinct difference between management and leadership. As per him, 'Management' is about doing things right and 'Leadership' is about doing the right things [7]. An organization completely depends and trusts its leader. Leadership has the power to influence people to achieve their goals along with organizational goals. They help people innovate and achieve their best. Leaders also create vision and inspire people to dream. Only those leaders are effective who have the passion, values and foresight. Also leader needs to be proactive and has the ability to connect emotionally with people. He achieves all of this with a demeanor that's humble and full of humility. Just the name 'Leader' is not enough to instill confidence in people. Leader has to make a constant effort to justify his role by staying ahead and giving people the confidence that he has things in control. In other words he should have an emotional appeal through which he sustains his position.

Leadership and stress

With such preconditions and expectations it is natural for leaders to succumb to the demands of work and pressures which results in stress.

There is a direct adverse link between stress and effective leadership. A leader has to keep up with work overload, ever changing technology, travel, long working hours, continuous meetings and the perennial pressure to increase profitability of the organization.

Amidst many studies on work related stresses Oakland and Ostell discussed many stresses which leaders are prone to. Of those, the main stresses are performance anxiety, goal setting, planning, coordinating, decision making, work place politics etc [8].

Kornhauser also talked about the significance of sound mental health and stressed upon a realistic, positive belief that one has in his purposeful activities. Those with good mental health will attach more meaningfulness in their job and have a kind of inner security and peace which will help them to perform better in their role as a leader [9].

Leadership and communication

To achieve, what is expected of him, a leader has to continually upgrade his skills. Communication is one of the most effective skills in leadership. Mosley, Pierti and Megginson described leadership as the ability to influence others through the process of communication towards attainment of their goals [10].

Communication is considered as the most important tool to change attitudes and behaviours. Shannon [11] and Mc Gregor [12] also stated that communication is a mean for organizations and leaders to exercise their power and establish natural understanding.

Many modern researchers have established many different communication processes which benefit leadership. Howell reiterated the above mentioned point by saying that direct leadership is an interaction process through which an individual influences the behavior of others to achieve some specific goals (Howell, 2011).

Thus it is of utmost importance that a leader is able to communicate and influence people.

Leadership and motivation

Communication is also linked with the ability to motivate. It would be impossible to influence without communication. But only those who are self-motivated will have the ability to motivate and communicate. The theory of self efficacy is relevant in this context. Bandura's remark would be worth mentioning; he felt that human agency exercises its personal influence through, self-regulation, endowments and a belief system. Researchers have established a correlation between perceptions and performance in work settings. People with high efficacy will be more committed and motivated and persons with low efficacy will find less meaningfulness in their jobs.

Bandura also found self-efficacy to be a person's belief in his own capability to perform a particular task. It is clear that a person who has belief in himself will be able to have belief in others [13].

Chau, in his study of personality factors, self-efficacy and locus of control on organizational effectiveness, reiterated this point that People's perception of their psychological and emotional state have direct connect with their self efficacy. He further went on to say that a leader has a very strong impact on his followers (Chau, 2008).

Leader's optimism

A person's optimism level decides how an individual will deal in different situations. Everyone goes through the stressful situations but not everyone goes through the mental stress. The defining factor can be the level of optimism. Those who are blessed with positive frame

of mind have better sustainability on the face of crisis. Those with higher optimism are less likely to suffer with physical health problems too. Those with higher optimism can also motivate and help others. Martin Seligman, the father of positive psychology, opines that optimism is akin to higher sense of confidence and personal ability. People with higher optimism believe that negative events are temporary and limited in scope and therefore manageable. Seligman also brought out the fact that optimism is a learnable skill and can be developed. One can metamorphose to a higher level of optimism from a lower level (Seligman, 1991). Lazarus and Opton talked about coping which is an adaptive response to deal with threatening situations which is another way to deal with learned helplessness (Opton, 1966).

Learned optimism

As stated earlier optimism can be developed if one is suffering from lower optimism. The theory is closely associated with Seligman theory of learned helplessness. Learned helplessness means inability to fight a negative situation because of some past experiences which tell you that you are not in control of a given situation.

On the contrary learned optimism means being conscious of the situation and giving it a positive perspective. To cultivate this perspective, interventions can be provided through mediation, training and counseling. Dr. Padmakali Banerjee, developed 'Optimism Attitude Model' as a tool to develop higher levels of optimism. OAM - Optimism Attitude Model is a scientific intervention for training one's mind to achieve optimum level of cognitive functioning, performance and the ability to handle stressful and uncertain environment with enhanced resilience. Using this five step model the individual is able to self-manage, monitor and acquire a positive attitude and mindset leading to improved self-worth and efficacy. Source: www.optimism-index.com.

Research methodology

Objective of the research is to create a certain consciousness towards need for screening and measuring of leaders' optimism levels to hire the right candidate for leadership positions and also to maintain a consistent record of their optimism so that timely intervention can be used to improve the levels of optimism.

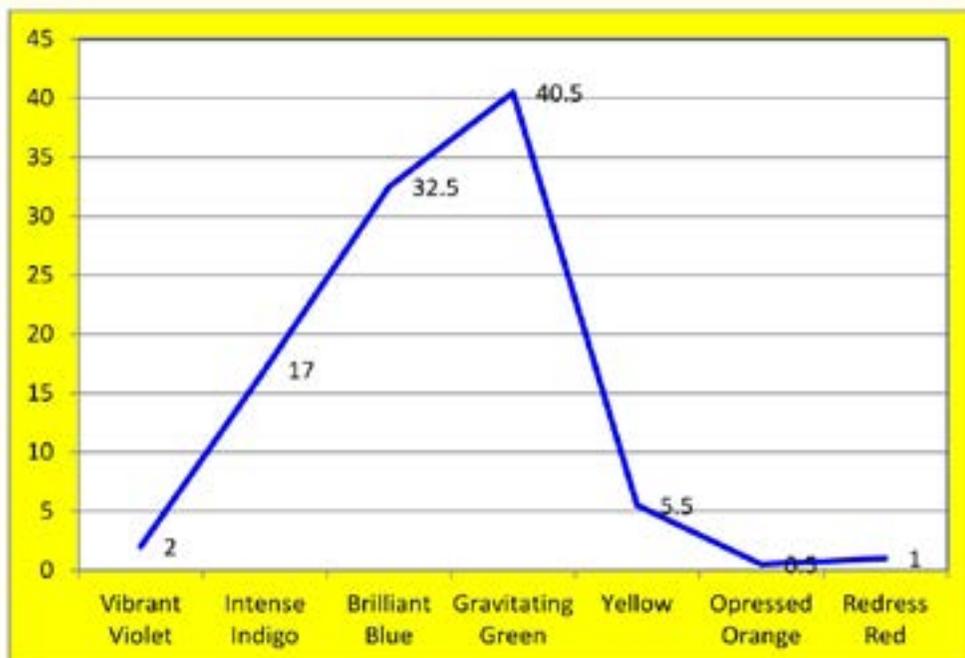
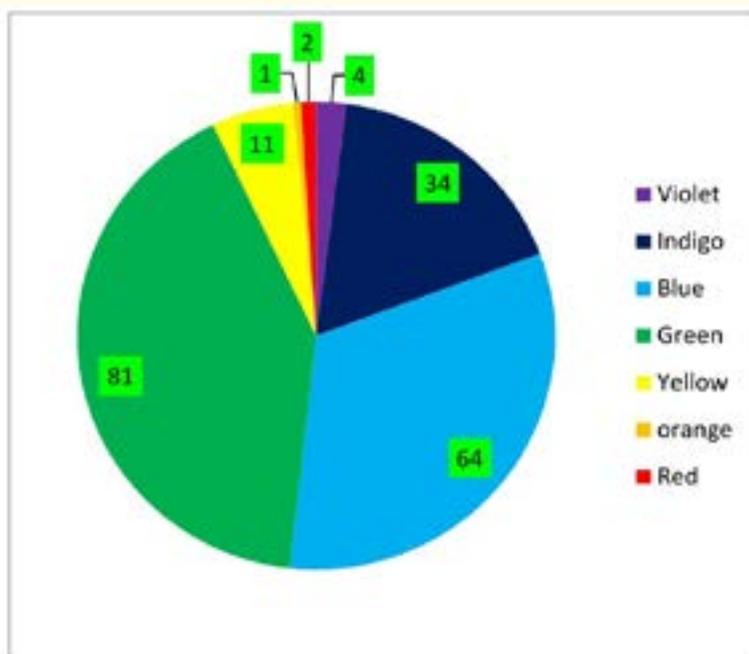
Optimism index is a psychometric test, available online and as a pen and paper test. It measures people's optimism on five elements namely Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationship network, Meaningfulness and Achievement. The sum total of these is Optimism which is the driving force to achieve success and wellbeing in one's life. The tool can be the right machination for the organization to see if their employees', especially their leaders, are at the optimum level of optimism and can be trusted for the success, sustainability and profitability of the organization.

The tool, optimism index, was used on 200 leaders working in the chosen sectors of Aviation, Automotive, Apparel and Construction. The leaders were asked to tick on the option they felt closest to. They were expected to choose from options like: Strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree. The test comprises of 60 questions with each parameter comprising of 10 or more questions. The scores are summed up to acquire a global score based on colors of VIBGYOR; highest being the violet and lowest the red. They are Vibrant Violet, Intense Indigo, Brilliant Blue, Gravitating Green, Yellow, Oppressed Orange and Redress Red. Combination of different elements is also calculated to classify individuals in different categories to find out where they stand in terms of expertise. The classifications are Leader, synergist, Analyst, Expert, Motivator etc.

The analysis of the 200 leaders showed that an alarming number of leaders were falling at the threshold level of optimism which is Gravitating Green, to which 81 people belonged. There were only four people who belonged to the highest category of Violet. Eleven people belonged to Yellow, which is below threshold level and three of them belonged to Orange and Red which are dangerously low levels of optimism.

What was more appalling was the fact that everything was calm and quiet at the surface and there were absolutely no tell tale signs to predict that these people are suffering from low self-esteem and low levels of confidence. The test brought out the fact that although these leaders were performing their duties at their work places, their mental wellbeing was slowly evading them.

The graphs below are the graphical version of results as shown in the test. Optimism Index test brought out following categories of people indicated by their respective colors, Vibrant Violet being the highest and Redress Red the lowest in optimism levels.



Result shows low optimism

After the test, it was very clear that majority of leaders were suffering from low self-esteem and low optimism levels. Those who are not in control of their own situation can't be expected to motivate others. Organizations like Aviation with zero error requirements may be in a grave risk where one needs to remain alert at all times. Also, it is seen that organizations where leaders are suffering with low optimism have history of more conflicts and disputes which leaders may find difficult to resolve in view of their own plunging confidence.

Recommendations and Suggestion

After the above analysis following suggestions can be put forward

1. Organizations should be more astute during the hiring of people at leadership position
2. Organizations should use a screening test before hiring their leaders
3. A time to time measuring of optimism is needed to see any change in people's attitude
4. Organizations need to invest more in their leaders in terms of training and development
5. Stress management should be given a good measure of attention
6. Leader development programmes should be regularly held
7. In case it is found that optimism levels are critically low, interventions should be provided
8. A customized training is needed rather than blanket training for all.
9. Personal counseling sessions should be provided at micro level
10. All round effort should be offered to enhance optimism as an attitude

Conclusion

Organizations are required to pay more attention to the mental health of their leaders for their success. Only those leaders who are equipped with right attitude are able to sustain their positions. Stresses are the silent killers which slowly and surely destroy a person's confidence levels and strike the ability to communicate and motivate. Attitude is not visible on a person unless an effort is made to measure it. Psychometric Screening tools have been widely successful in understanding a person's attitude and measuring the levels of optimism. The need is for organizations to follow the system of screening their leaders not only at the time of hiring them but also make it a regular process to learn any changes in attitude during the course of work. This will ensure a consistent level of optimism and self-efficacy amongst the senior professional and leaders who are entrusted with the utmost responsibilities by their organizations.

It has been seen that people with high levels of optimism are more accountable and are better team persons. They prefer to find a solution rather than whining and complaining and blaming the system for all wrongs. Learned optimism can work wonders on those who are suffering from low levels of optimism. The interventions provided can help people overcome their fears and stress levels. Thus, the beginning of a sustainability and profitability of organizations starts with screening of levels of optimism.

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