

## **Glass Half Full?\*\*\***

Jean M. Holcomb\*\*\*

*What can library staff do to help their libraries and themselves survive and even thrive in these difficult times? As a starting point, listen to the stories you tell yourself to explain your current reality. Do you see your glass half full or half empty? Your preferred frame of reference brings consequences with it.*

¶1 Law librarians in all types of work settings face enormous challenges as their parent institutions address the current economic downturn. As cost curtailment strategies mandate cuts in financial support, library staff find themselves trimming all aspects of the library's budget. Reductions in staffing levels, closed branches, vacant positions left unfilled, and management's expectations for continued high levels of service contribute to a stress-filled workplace climate.

¶2 What can library staff do to help their libraries and themselves survive and even thrive in these difficult times?

¶3 As a starting point, listen to the stories you tell yourself to explain your current reality. Do you see your glass half full or half empty? Your preferred frame of reference brings consequences with it. When confronted with difficult times, optimists and pessimists respond in opposite ways.<sup>1</sup>

¶4 Pessimists tend to think that bad events will drag on for a long time. They believe that bad events will undermine everything they attempt. Pessimists view bad events as their own fault. They "give up more easily and get depressed more often."<sup>2</sup>

¶5 Optimists, on the other hand, when confronted with the same tough situation, think about misfortune differently. Optimists believe that bad events are a temporary set-back, that the causes are confined to this one event, and that it's not their fault. Because optimists view difficulties as the consequence of circumstances, bad luck, or the actions of other people, they remain unfazed by defeat. When faced with a difficult situation, optimists don't give up. Rather than seeing a bad event as

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\* *Editor's Note:* "Managing by the Book" is a regular feature of *Law Library Journal*. In each article, author Jean Holcomb highlights a book outside the field of librarianship that has a message about management topics that will resonate with law librarians.

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1. See MARTIN E.P. SELIGMAN, *LEARNED OPTIMISM: HOW TO CHANGE YOUR MIND AND YOUR LIFE* 4–5 (1st Vintage ed., 2006).

2. *Id.* at 5.

a consequence of their own missteps, optimists view bad events as a challenge to be mastered.<sup>3</sup>

¶6 While seeing the glass half full in hard times may at first glance appear to be an optical illusion, the skill of viewing your world through an optimist's lens holds promise. Clinical research suggests that optimists outperform pessimists. Optimists enjoy better health, "age well . . . freer . . . from the usual physical ills of middle age. . . [and] may even live longer."<sup>4</sup>

¶7 Given the benefits that flow from an optimistic view point, is it any wonder that media attention has focused in these hard times on stories about optimism? Stories extolling the benefits of having an optimistic perspective have appeared in the political arena, in current events, in management literature, and in articles targeted at librarians. For example, soon after the inauguration of Barack Obama, questions were raised about the new President's optimism.<sup>5</sup> Depending on your political bent, his first 100 days played out against a backdrop of too much optimism or not enough. Commencement speakers exhorted new graduates to view their future in terms of the opportunities presented by living in challenging times.<sup>6</sup> Articles in publications devoted to management and leadership topics focused on the responsibility of leaders to inspire and present a positive view of the future.<sup>7</sup> *Library Journal* highlighted reasons for optimism and encouraged M.L.S. students preparing to enter the job market to think of issues as opportunities.<sup>8</sup>

¶8 With the evidence in mind of the benefits to be gained from seeing the world through the eyes of an optimist, what approaches can be taken to develop and strengthen an optimistic perspective?

¶9 Becoming an optimist means more than just putting on a smile, channeling your inner Pollyanna, and hoping for the best. Your pessimism/optimism meter is not irrevocably set at birth.<sup>9</sup> Martin E. P. Seligman, a founder of the field of positive psychology, identifies techniques for learning new cognitive skills that will help undo lifelong pessimistic habits and open the door to looking at setbacks in a new optimistic light.<sup>10</sup>

¶10 In *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*,<sup>11</sup> Seligman describes how research into depression led to breakthroughs in psychological thinking about both pessimism and optimism. His experiments demonstrate that our thoughts are more than reactions to a situation—they dictate what we will do

3. *Id.* at 4–5.

4. *Id.* at 5.

5. Warren Bennis, *Obama Optimism: Leaders Are Purveyors of Hope*, LEADERSHIP EXCELLENCE, Mar. 2009, at 3.

6. Frank Bruni, *The World Is Your Oyster! The Sky's the Limit! These Are the Worst of Times But You Can Make Them the Best of Times. Then Again . . .*, N. Y. TIMES, May 31, 2009, at 1 (Week in Review).

7. Eileen M. Rogers, *Optimism or Positivity: It's the Leader's Edge in Tough Times*, LEADERSHIP EXCELLENCE, May 2009, at 19.

8. Michael Casey & Michael Stephens, *Reasons for Optimism*, LIB. J., May 15, 2009, at 20.

9. See SELIGMAN, *supra* note 1, at 16.

10. See Claudia Wallis et al., *The New Science of Happiness*, TIME, Jan. 17, 2005, at A2.

11. SELIGMAN, *supra* note 1.

in response and what will happen next.<sup>12</sup> He explains how clinical studies show that individuals can choose the way they think. Employing self-direction, individuals can be trained to change the destructive, pessimistic stories they use to describe the setbacks of life by using “non-negative thinking.”<sup>13</sup>

¶11 Seligman’s theory of self-direction rests on two concepts. He describes the first concept as learned helplessness.<sup>14</sup> By his definition, learned helplessness is the giving-up reaction. Learned helplessness is using wording like: “it’s too hard,” “there’s no money,” or “I can’t make a difference” when you talk to yourself about a challenge. It’s the quitting response that flows from the pessimist’s belief that whatever you do won’t matter, that you’re powerless to impact the outcome favorably.

¶12 To prevent learned helplessness, the individual must come to realize that responding actively rather than passively to challenges does make a difference. The author explains this second key element of self-direction as explanatory style.<sup>15</sup> Your explanatory style is the manner in which you describe to yourself the causation of the events that happen to you. Resilience in the face of defeat flows from what Seligman calls “immunization”<sup>16</sup>—learning to frame your internal dialogue, the voice in your head, in an active “can do” style. The can-do voice tells you that you can find a solution, that others will join your effort, or that money’s not the only answer to the problem.

¶13 For Seligman, explanatory style consists of three dimensions: “permanence, pervasiveness, and personalization.”<sup>17</sup> People who resist learned helplessness believe that the causes of bad events are temporary while the causes of good events are permanent. Pessimists hold the opposite view of the causes of good and bad events. Those who believe that good events have permanent causes try even harder after they succeed rather than thinking that success was an accident. When optimists experience failure, they bounce back and move on. Pessimists don’t have the elasticity optimism provides and may never rebound from a major disappointment. “The permanence dimension determines how long a person gives up for.”<sup>18</sup>

¶14 *Learned Optimism* presents the notion of pervasiveness as being either specific or universal. This dimension explains the extent of the area of life affected by helplessness.<sup>19</sup> Those who make specific explanations for failure experience helplessness only in the affected area. Universal explanations of failure bleed over into other aspects of the pessimist’s life with paralyzing effect.

¶15 To Seligman, our choices of how we explain setbacks as either temporary and specific or permanent and universal provide direct ties to our ability to experience hope. The skill to see temporary and specific causes for misfortune links

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12. *See id.* at 7.

13. *Id.* at 15.

14. *Id.*

15. *Id.*

16. *Id.* at 28.

17. *Id.* at 44.

18. *Id.* at 47.

19. *See id.*

directly to the capacity for hope.<sup>20</sup> Viewing misfortune in terms of permanent and universal explanations, on the other hand, leads to despair.

¶16 While permanence and pervasiveness control what you do, personalization controls how you feel about yourself. When bad things happen, pessimists tend to internalize, blaming themselves and experiencing low self-esteem. Optimists externalize, blaming circumstances or others for the problem.<sup>21</sup> Optimists, because they believe they cause good things to happen, generally like themselves better than those who think good things happen as the result of someone else's actions.

¶17 Before offering details about how to begin to inoculate yourself against learned helplessness responses, Seligman provides readers with a multi-phased self-diagnostic test to evaluate placement on a scale from very optimistic to very pessimistic. The test also appears on his authentic happiness web site.<sup>22</sup> Why is it important to understand your optimist/pessimist explanatory-style ranking? An optimistic explanatory style runs the risk of ignoring potential consequences when making decisions about courses of action. A pessimist explanatory style also brings with it the possibility of serious side effects.<sup>23</sup>

¶18 The author's research leads him to believe that those with pessimistic explanatory styles run the risk of experiencing depression. They may not achieve at a level their innate talent would predict. Their general health and immune function might suffer. And ultimately, their chances for a happy and fulfilling life may not be realized.<sup>24</sup>

¶19 To change your explanatory style from pessimism to learned optimism, Seligman outlines a series of five cognitive therapy tactics.<sup>25</sup> First "you learn to recognize the automatic thoughts" that flow through your mind when you feel the lowest.<sup>26</sup> These phrases reoccur in challenging situations with a regularity that makes them almost unnoticeable. Phrases like "I can never remember how to . . .," "this is just too hard for me," or "my numbers never balance out" illustrate types of automatic negative thoughts.

¶20 Once an awareness of automatic negative thoughts develops, the next step involves learning "to dispute the automatic thoughts by marshalling contrary evidence."<sup>27</sup> Make an effort to think of times when the negative thought wasn't an accurate description of a response to a challenge. This activity paves the way for the third step, in which you provide a different explanation for the negative event, an activity called reattribution. The fourth step in the process calls for you to "learn how to distract yourself from depressing thoughts."<sup>28</sup> Seligman advises that dwelling on negative thoughts won't help. He suggests that to do your best you must understand that you can control both what you think and when you think. Finally,

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20. *Id.* at 48.

21. *See id.* at 49–50.

22. Authentic Happiness, <http://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu> (last visited July 16, 2009).

23. *Id.* at 53.

24. *Id.*

25. *Id.* at 89–90.

26. *Id.* at 89.

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.*

the author's research shows that you can "learn to recognize and question depression-sowing assumptions" about yourself.<sup>29</sup> By following these steps, the learned-optimism approach holds out the promise that you ultimately can build more positive operating premises.

¶21 Seligman does recognize that a role exists for pessimists in the corporate world. In a chapter devoted to success at work, he notes that modern organizations do need to acknowledge the value of the pessimistic voice. He sees pessimists as those best able to present an accurate picture of the current situation.<sup>30</sup> They play an important role by advocating caution.<sup>31</sup>

¶22 Finally, with the techniques for challenging pessimistic explanatory styles at hand, you possess the power to choose the appropriate times to question negative responses without becoming a slave to these methods. With what the author calls flexible optimism, you control how you respond to adversity and possess a wider range of options calibrating the balance between pessimism and optimism to suit the particular challenge.<sup>32</sup>

¶23 A law library manager's challenge will be to balance and reconcile the different points of view presented by pessimists and optimists within the work unit in a variety of situations. To address current economic challenges, a manager first must focus on what is working well. This focus on the positive unleashes energy that can transform challenges. To leverage what's working into solutions for existing problems, a manager should be able to tap into the strengths of those they work with to identify resources. The manager who articulates a compelling vision provides needed guidance. A manager who displays the attitude that the focus for the future needs to rest on the "what is" rather than the "what isn't" of a situation frees the work group addressing the challenge to explore a variety of options for action.<sup>33</sup>

¶24 Managers who monitor their own emotional climate and that of their workplace will be in a position to intervene if symptoms of depression appear. Chronic fatigue, cynicism, withdrawal, self-criticism, and a sense of being besieged act as warning signs. Address work habit and productivity concerns immediately. As a manager, look for opportunities to praise work efforts. Frame the praise in personal terms, praise often, and avoid hyperbole, and platitudes. Set clear boundaries for projects and work goals. Ask for help in project design. Discuss rewards in advance. Build shared effort into performance measures. Continue to provide challenges and opportunities for personal growth. Convey a clear sense of where employees' jobs fit into the library's goals. Model appropriate behaviors. Take time away from your desk for lunch. Schedule vacations.

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29. *Id.* at 90.

30. *Id.* at 112.

31. For a defense of the pessimistic viewpoint, see generally JULIE K. NOREM, *THE POSITIVE POWER OF NEGATIVE THINKING* (2002).

32. See SELIGMAN, *supra* note 1, at 291–92.

33. Nancy Ring et al., *Appreciative Leadership: Widen Your Lens to See Resources*, *LEADERSHIP EXCELLENCE*, Mar. 2009, at 4.

¶25 Clean up your library's meeting culture to ensure that meetings meet their stated objectives. Prepare and distribute agendas in advance. Be clear about purpose and goals. Monitor the clock. Track assignments. Communicate results.

¶26 Work smart by avoiding the trap of working longer hours in an effort to meet increased service demands.<sup>34</sup> Remember that time is a finite resource, but energy is not. Do an energy audit to identify the rhythm of your energy peaks and valleys. Plan your daily schedule accordingly.

¶27 Pay attention to physical as well as mental well being. For the individual, remember to eat well. Find time for physical activity. Nurture social and professional relationships. Maintain control of your work/life balance. Exercise your curiosity.

¶28 Positive mental patterns serve both leaders and followers well in difficult times. Remember to reframe adversity in the language of challenge and opportunity. Monitor your self-talk for positive statements. Look for a glass half full. Give a try to strategies that strengthen personal resilience and decision making, and give polish to a lens that will reflect a happier and more productive life.

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34. Tony Schwartz, *Manage Your Energy, Not Your Time*, HARV. BUS. REV., Oct. 2007, at 63, 63.