

Optimists And Skeptics Look For Results In The Week Ahead

One of Colin Powell's famous guideposts for leadership is, "Perpetual optimism is a force multiplier." I always loved the West Point feeling of it: A "force multiplier" sounds so technical and mathematical and militarily strategic. Snap your fingers: You're optimistic! You're optimistic, your force has doubled! So let me offer not only an example of how optimism works, but also a realistic-skeptical question about how one can—or *whether* one can—willy-nilly make optimism work for them.

One Sunday night in 2008, my wife was complaining of intense abdominal pain on the eve of a trip to the Middle East. The other four of us in the family have been told many times by her, "Don't give it any power." So, given her extraordinarily stubborn optimism, I nearly had to order her to go to the doctor on Tuesday morning. (The line that did her in? "What happens if you're on the plane to Israel, over the Atlantic and this pain gets worse?") She was more than happy when the doctor, after a physical exam, gave her a load of samples of a prescription antacid. She agreed reluctantly to the CT scan that would eliminate any ridiculous long-shot problems. Within 10 hours of the scan, surgeons were removing an obstructed section of her small intestine. Israel and Jordan would have to wait.

She was a patient patient for about two days, but as the meds wore off she quickly became her old self, way more optimistic than patient. Tubes were removed; one after the next. Friday morning I walked into her room to find her in her street clothes. Surprised, I asked "Are you showing them that you're going to will yourself right out of here?" She smiled and in her best Yooper accent said, "You betcha." I suspect that if it had been me, it would have taken me a week to get out of there. She was out in under four days. I am utterly certain in this case: Perpetual optimism was a captivity minimizer.

I am drawn to people of optimism. Obviously I married one. I myself have deep-down faith and hope, but I've never been a cheery optimist, able to summon it at will. I have to work at my attitude constantly. Therefore, I offer two thoughts for your consideration. First, optimism IS a force multiplier. Can you possibly disagree? People who expect good, get it—however much it annoys the rest of us. Second, make a choice to value it. If you can generate it legitimately in yourself, do so, and be grateful you have a gift for it! If you're more like me: Thinking yourself born of gloomy people, raised in a land without sunshine, the victim of sundry bad moments, "blessed" with a skeptical mind and no rose-colored glasses to lighten it up, then recognize that. But look for ways to nudge yourself up the spectrum of hope. Here are a few practices that work:

- Consciously ally yourself with upbeat people.
- Condition yourself to look for the silver lining.

- Make lists of good things that are happening.
- Look for opportunities and not just problems.
- Take little steps that lead to where you want to go.
- Bear witness to the genuine power of optimism in those who are fortunate to be blessed with it as a natural strength and way of being.

On that Tuesday night Jennifer knew she was going to be out of the hospital by the end of the week. What success might you will yourself into this week?