

# 053-Optimism-versus-Pessimism-ProductivityCast.mp3

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## SPEAKERS

Art Gelwicks, Voiceover Artist, Raymond Sidney-Smith, Francis Wade, Augusto Pinaud



Voiceover Artist 00:00

Are you ready to manage your work and personal world better to live a fulfilling productive life? Then you've come to the right place productivity cast, the weekly show about all things productivity. Here, your host Ray Sydney Smith and a goose open out with Francis Wayne and our gal wicks.



Raymond Sidney-Smith 00:17

Welcome back to productivity cast, the weekly show about all things personal productivity, I'm Raisa D. Smith about was tripping up. And that's



Francis Wade 00:25

a suede.



Raymond Sidney-Smith 00:26

My workout works. Welcome, gentlemen, and welcome to our listeners to another action packed episode. Today we are going to be talking about an interesting psychological

construct, which is optimism and pessimism are two constructs. And the idea here is for us to talk about optimism and pessimism as it relates to our own personal productivity. When we talk about optimism and pessimism, I think it's good to understand the definition of that. And so that's what we'll do out the gate will define optimism and pessimism. And kind of in the context of personal productivity to some great extent, will each tell whether or not we're optimists or pessimists, generally or otherwise. And then we'll in our third segment, talk about how we actually use our own optimism or pessimism, our outlook on the world to affect greater productivity or how we overcome it. If we are, our productivity is lessened by the impact of our outlook. So let's get started. optimism and pessimism. optimism, pessimism can really be defined very simply as optimism as a general outlook on things, having possibilities having opportunities, you see the see the world with the glass half full, as opposed to the glass half empty, and more of a personal productivity perspective. I see it more as the fact that in in a moment, we define risk differently as optimists than we do as pessimists, right, we see the the opportunity of overcoming a risk, more likely than not overcoming that risk. And I think that can be actually a very positive thing, right? Studies show that optimists tend to be more successful, happier in relationships, they tend to have less depression. And so just generally healthier people than pessimists. But there are some good positive benefits to pessimism. pessimism, on the other hand, is an outlook on the flip side, which is that you see the glass half empty, most of the time, not all the time, but most of the time. And that means that you see the risk, the obstacle, the challenge, as being greater than the opportunities available to you. So we as pessimists, then have to decide how do we set Low, low expectations for ourselves while still being productive. And when bad outcomes do come not allowing them to de motive beta, and to cloud our judgment in terms of perspective outcomes in the future, or that is just perspective outcomes?

A

Art Gelwicks 03:08

When I think about optimism, pessimism things to me, they're very much extremes for personalities, they create this image, either the optimist of sunshine and rainbows and rose colored glasses, the pessimistic is he or from Winnie the Pooh. And somewhere in the middle is where everybody seems to follow. We were talking about this a little bit before the show. And I think if I had to define myself, I would say I am probably more of a procedural optimist. What the heck does that mean? I start off as a pragmatist, wanting to know, okay, what's the situation glasses and half full or half empty? I just want to know what's in it first, then I become a pessimist. Well, what's the worst thing that can happen right now? plan for those worse things? And know that because I understand the situation because I plan for the worst case, I think, a very good chance of things working out for the best, therefore winding up as an optimist. Yeah, it's a really long circuitous route to get to the end. But that pretty much defines the way my brain mechanic works on this.



Augusto Pinaud 04:13

I tend to be more on the optimistic side, to be honest, I, I wish to be more in the center, as are defined, but I tend to look at things from that optimistic lens, that I think, to an extent is what sometimes allow me to do some of the things I do because without that hope on that positive and they may not be some of them even possible. So understanding that and I agree that optimism and pessimism goes on that extreme or are both extremes.



Francis Wade 04:48

They started out more as an optimist, but have become more pessimistic over time. So I'm wondering if, if what happens is that we we start off at one of the extremes in our younger years, and then over time with experience will become more pessimistic. So this sorry, more pragmatic. So we become more realistic, just because we have more data to work with. I still think I remain pretty optimistic. But I'm better estimate or risk. So I'm not sure where that puts me



Art Gelwicks 05:22

that risk estimation pieces of big part of this too. I think you're right, it does come with experience, as if you are perpetually optimistic, and you wind up getting burned, which always happens not always happens, but it does happen to everybody. You start to incorporate that into your analytical processes and start to say, Okay, this is what could happen. I'm going to have to backtrack a little bit and see, what can I adjust for this to work out to the best positive reaction? I think



Francis Wade 05:52

there's a practical also example that I use in my work, which is our own time estimation. And the plan fallacy, which for our listeners, has to do with the the tendency for people to underestimate how long a task will take. So it's a psychological effect, where we think it's going to take FAR shorter than the task actually does. And I've been sort of working on that for a bit in sort of my work and looking at how do people become better estimate dissolve time durations, which is essentially, if you're a someone, for example, in project management, or if you're someone who is just extremely busy, estimating your time becomes a very, very critical tool.



Art Gelwicks 06:40

See, this is also one of those things that can really derail, trying to get some things

accomplished. If you're overly optimistic, you're right, your estimates are going to be off, you're going to miss things in the analysis that you have to do if it's a project or plan. If you're always really pessimistic, you can wind up in analysis, paralysis in a heartbeat. Because you get can't get past the things that seem to become the impossible roadblocks. You've got to have a mental methodology to be able to get you through those different stages. As you start to plan out whether it's personal activities, or professional activities, or, or really anything. I mean, if you focus on one of those two extremes too much, you're never going to get a realistic perspective, and you're never going to be able to put things in place to be able to execute. Like, I think it was, Franklin said all things in moderation. Well, this qualifies, especially when you're trying to get work accomplished.



Raymond Sidney-Smith 07:47

And in response to Francis, you know, the the idea of time estimation, it's been well documented that the younger you are the more impulsivity, and so therefore, the more likely you are are to think a minute lasts less than an actual minute. And that the older you get, then the more likely you are to be more accurate about time registration. So taking into account that I think the answer to the question is, is that for those of us who are over the age of 24, and probably under the age of 65, in that in that timeframe, when we're, you know, in our in our peak mental health, and I probably mean that that upper age limit is probably increasing as our longevity and our lifespan increases. But the point is, is that we, during that timeframe, it's practice. And so for people who like in a project management perspective, you gave that example, Francis, those people, they can estimate time well, because they have seen it over and over and over again, right, they've seen all the various options that can happen, all the problems that can occur. And because they can look at back data, they have that they have that intuition, to be able to use that that database of past experience to use for future experience. I think for the rest of us, we have to start better tracking our data, better tracking our time. And that's what that is what allows us to be able to say this is going to take that amount of time. And the best response I can ever give to that question, which is, do you know what you've done in the past? You know,



Art Gelwicks 09:25

this can dovetail easily into things like, you know, just executing a meeting. And we've all been in meetings where one pessimistic person derails the meeting, or one overly optimistic person makes it impossible to come up with estimates.



Augusto Pinaud 09:40

So coming from the optimistic perspective, you know, and I was laughing, as you were saying, as you get younger, so that means I have not get old one hour of since I started my life, and it's a good thing to know that I'm still that young. But I agree, and in part was what you said, I think it comes to how also to leave the life you have and how do you do certain things, you know, if you are more or less an entrepreneur person, in your mind, I think that applies. I think, when you tend to work with creative people and entrepreneur people, you know, that optimistic part, it's still present, and he's heavily present. And, and I have seen it on both categories on both day, the entrepreneur as well as with the the creative people to create a group of people where they keep a level of optimism that I don't see when I work with more business like people. And I don't know if that's something that you guys can relate on the same way.



Raymond Sidney-Smith 10:58

I was too busy looking up the studies that I was talking about. And this is 2000 study that says that it says the results suggest that young participants attempt to balance speed and accuracy to achieve the most correct answers per unit time. Whereas older participants attempt to minimize errors, if they have to respond quite slowly, if they must respond quite slowly to do. So.



Art Gelwicks 11:25

That raises an interesting thing about this, though, is that what they're being taught is not to get totally out of the productive productivity realm here. But at a young age, they're taught to work quickly and work as accurately as possible, but sometimes even faster than accurate. And it's only by making mistakes over time, that we start to learn that it's better to not have to do rework. I mean, we start to incorporate in basic lean methodology principles into this here becomes the question are we do a disservice to younger people, by teaching them a skill set that will ultimately not render them completely productive till much later on?



Raymond Sidney-Smith 12:11

I think there I think there is probably a bit of education there. And again, this is probably, you know, also culturally based because you have, you have different cultures, teaching younger people, different things, and different value systems,



Art Gelwicks 12:26

which of the three that we've talked about so far? positivity, negativity, and I wouldn't use those terms, because I think pessimism kind of waters a little bit, or pragmatism is the most useful mindset to encourage people to have if they want to be at a maximum level of productivity. Where on that scale do we think people should be? Well, you know, I'll start off by saying that I think that it is context based, it's contextual. And if you are in a situation where there is immediate, risk, immediate, potentially ality for an obstacle, a challenge to be in front of you, then I think the pessimism is helpful immediately. And then you need to, because that's just how your how every brain works, right? When when, when a risk is is presented to us, we immediately go into fight flight or freeze response. So the goal for us is to be able to get through that period, and then on to whatever else we need to in order to get that thing done. So when it's when it's when there's an immediate challenge that's going to happen no matter what I think it's, it's when it's not an immediate risk, it's potentially ambiguous or unknown, but not a risk, where our biology sometimes can fault us if we're pessimists, because we're meeting going to see the dark side of things. In reality, it's still good to be, as you said, pragmatic or realistic about potential risks. But don't hold that back hold you back from deciding on what the best action is to go forward. Yeah, see, when when I think about this, in the project management space, when you're doing time estimations on work, you you look at what's there's actually a formula, I'm drawing a blank on it. But there is a formula for doing this, where you're taking the most optimistic estimate the most pessimistic estimate. And then you factor it by some other factor that can't remember, but it's allowing for both of those situations. Now, again, we're starting to talk about something that's very mechanical, and very formulaic. People don't operate that way, people swing to those sides. And for some reason, that jumps into my mind that there was a movie out a while ago called World War Z that Brad Pitt was in. And it talks about a situation called the 10th. Man and the 10th, man is is that if you have a group of 10 people, and nine of them all 100% agree, it is the obligation of one person to take the opposite position to make sure nothing's missed it and I think when if we boil that back into our own, just basic productivity, and we look at the things that we're assessing, it obligates us to take that role of the 10th man against ourselves, with everything we evaluate and everything we're planning out. So if I'm planning on taking a trip out to visit my daughter college, I need to be prepared about what possibly could go go wrong, and make sure I have those things covered, not assuming it will go wrong. But I have to take that 10th man position to be able to have an optimistic outlook, ultimately, that the trip will be successful. And I think we have to do the same thing with projects with task lists, whatever we're planning out, if you've taken the worst case scenario, addressed it and feel comfortable that you are prepared in handling what comes across, then you can take an optimistic stance, because you are better prepared. And that's what I think not only young people, but people our age, anyone needs to learn that mechanism. If they get tripped up too much on one side of the

extreme or the other, they're never going to be operating in a level of productivity that they're they will ultimately be happy with.



**Raymond Sidney-Smith** 16:37

Let's move on to how we actually use optimism, pessimism or positivity, negativity and pragmatism or realism in our own personal productivity systems. I'm curious from all of us how in different not only modalities, but contexts we use our own natural inclination toward these things. Do you feel like you're more optimistic or pessimistic? So let's start there. And then let's give maybe a few examples from our own personal productivity systems as to how we use that.



**Francis Wade** 17:16

I think optimism and pessimism are more sort of rear view judgments. That they're they're useful as you look backwards, but I don't think they help much in terms of looking forwards. What I mean by that, what I think they're more explanatory in the sense that you can look back and in retrospect, say, Oh, look, I was very optimistic. All locals are pessimistic. And that speaks to some kind of emotional state. But going forward, I don't select an emotional state, and say, I'm going to be optimistic emotionally, or I'm gonna be pessimistic emotionally. I don't think that's useful. I think it's more useful to go along the lines of what we've been discussing so far, which is to use as much current data real data as possible, and to be to make, I guess, unbiased estimates, as much as possible not to inflate or to deflate. So there's sort of the mechanical sort of aspect of it that are talked about that makes you very pragmatic going forward. So I think optimism and pessimism are their psychological states. They're, they're not, I don't use them, I should say, for myself, I don't use them operationally, going forward. Now, I may, I may pick an estimate. And I may say, what's on the high end of that estimate? What's on the low end? But I, I wouldn't go the next step and then say that's an optimistic estimate, as a pessimistic estimate. I think that kind of language is best reserved for psychological feelings and states, rather than for the kind of mechanical cord analysis you need to do about stuff going forward? That's my take?



**Augusto Pinaud** 18:59

Well, no, no, because depending on the kind of project and I go back to, to what you do, you do for a living, you know, you will tend to look more in detail to this pessimistic or optimistic approach. If you know, again, when you deal with trumpet awards, and you deal with artists, and you tend to have, you know, the way they can go through the

motions of the day today is pretty sub domestics. Yes. The last seven months has been terrible. But this is the moment that things are going to change. You know, I was on a meeting over the weekend, small business entrepreneur at the end of the day, who has been seven years in the red. And they have not changed anything under methodology, they are not going to change anything on the methodology. But this is the year that is going to everything is going to change and they're not going to have there are not going to be any more in the red. Okay? And I think is exactly that attitude. Regardless of this realistic or not, that it's us make them push for seven years in a row. Because if you see it from the outside perspective, from the cold perspective, you will say Please pack your stuff and go. But when you look at it from the other perspective is when people see Okay, let me push because this means this is maybe the time that things are going to change. So well, while a pessimistic person will have look at that same opportunity, okay, and said, You know what, no, I will not even try because there is no way I will be able to make a living out of this. On the other side, when you go to suffer as art was using as an example, then that pessimistic person is awesome to have on the team. Because that person will find everything that he's going to make this piece of software or project to fail, that the optimistic white guy will then look at the product and say, Oh, it's going to be perfect, you know, that first round of code is going to work and he is going to be book free. Okay, so I think the word you need the tree, the pragmatic, the optimistic, and the pessimistic. It will depend on that specific project. The problem is, as human beings, we tend to believe more on one of them than the other. And what we need to figure it out is, what are we doing and how this is helping us move forward or not? is

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Francis Wade 21:45

I think, I think we're getting into the sort of the naming of behavior. And it's a bit of a challenge, because you think of politics. And I saw some, I thought, I just read an article on sort of conservative thinking in the US. And because thinking in the US politically, is not the same as conservative thinking in other parts of the world, around topics like gun control, for example, where conservatives typically take the opposite tack that they do in the US. And it's it's a matter of the the term that you're using not quite fitting the behavior. So therefore, you have to go to other terms, in order to be more accurate in the phenomena that you're describing or prescribing. So to use a goose example, if you're going to bring into a project, and you want to have a balance of people on the team. I think optimism and pessimism are, are, as I said before their emotional terms. I wouldn't use them to choose the person I would I would go a level below that and say, Okay, what are the behaviors they want? And I think what I took, for example, the 10th man is a particular behavior by a particular person. And the I wouldn't call that person optimistic or pessimistic. Just because it's not precise enough, I would say I want you to be the contrarian. And here are the five behaviors I want you to display as a contrarian. If



somebody is great at creating visions, I would say, Great, I want you to be the visionary person. Because the reason I'm string I'm sort of encouraging and straying away from the use of optimism and pessimism is because they're very, sort of high level, big bucket terms. And especially when you're planning a project going forward, I think it helps to be sort of ultra specific, like visionary and 10th. Man, because it's easier to plan using specific behaviors as you go forward.



Raymond Sidney-Smith 23:50

So Francis, what you're talking about is actually the use of something like six thinking hats by Edward de Bono? Is that what I'm hearing? I wish I could say



Francis Wade 23:57

yeah, but I don't know what that is.



Raymond Sidney-Smith 24:02

So so I'm going to say I'm going to say yes, in the sense that so to give kind of a basic understanding for listeners, six thinking hats uses a series of colors, to identify thinking roles that Dr. De Bano has identified for us all. And there are six different colors which match to sift six different emotional or kind of lenses through which you see the world whether that be optimistic, negative, you know, analytical and otherwise decision making, and so on, so forth. And so I think that, that attitude and productivity really does make a huge difference. So I would, I would highly recommend people look at six thinking hats by Dr. Edward de Bono. And, and also there is a fantastic book called The positive power of negative thinking by Dr. Julie Northam. And and and so, what Dr. Norm talks about in the positive power of negative thinking. And again, I'll put links to these in the show notes. What she talks about is the idea that we have not just the the big buckets that you're talking about Francis she actually distills them down to what she calls strategic optimists, and defensive pessimism. And again, going back to psychology, speak defensive pessimism itself is is something where are people who, despite seeing opportunities in the past, seeing the outcomes being positive in the past, they still consider all the alternatives that could go wrong before they do a project or a task. And I think that that's really important for us all, including on the strategic optimism side, which is kind of the same thing, right? It's okay, let's look at what could go right in all of these capacities. And in the face of seeing what has gone wrong in the past, still seeing the possibility for opportunity, and good outcomes to happen in the future as strategic optimists, I think that no matter which side of the coin you land on, you need to be able to take the the other view, just

ever so slightly at the beginning, in order to have a productive outcome. And I would almost say that that's axiomatic. It's universal, that when you don't look at the potential reality of the other side, it's that extremism that art talked about earlier, that really causes problems for you, you're going to have a much smoother project from start to finish. If you're anticipating what's going to be able to go wrong. Also on the optimism side, not avoiding what could potentially go wrong. You know, it's like to say that again, you know, for the pessimists, it's good for them to, even though they're they're focused on what could go wrong. They should also probably look at what could go right. And then for the optimist, they should look at what could go wrong, as much as they should look at what could go right. You're right, because it's natural for them to look at what could go right. That's their inclination. But it's good to say, Okay, well, what are our risks? Right? So I think that the power of positive the positive power of negative thinking, I think, is a great book for just giving context on how to set expectation, what does outlook do for performance. And I think that there's a really important construct here for productivity. I know that Dr. Adam Grant, who's an organizational psychologist at you pen, and he's written about this quite extensively as well. And so I just, I really think that it's important for us to think about the positive side of these pieces that in install in our personal productivity systems that may or may not be on their surface, things that you use, as, as you said, Francis, you know, it's not something that's like everyday, you're thinking about how optimistic or pessimistic you are, but learning the heuristics for saying, when I go make a decision, I should think, from a full bodied approach, if I'm an optimist, my natural inclination is to think about what's what's great and rosy, and, and positive about the situation. So I should spend a little bit of time just thinking about what could go wrong. And that prepares me for it. And if I'm a pessimist, then I should probably do what I normally do. But then when I get done with that, just think about, hey, what could potentially go right here? And is that something that's going to be useful for me and see if that doesn't help. I mean, we're all as I say, productivity scientists here, you're going to, you're going to test and figure out what works for you. And and adjust accordingly. So try it out, see if it works for you. If it doesn't, then change move on move with the cheese, as Dr. Spencer Johnson would say, just

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Francis Wade 28:51

kind of new ones that we can operationalize and turn into four actions, six actions, 10 actions, follow step by step stuff that will help us as we go into our next project or, or next activity throughout the day. And I think that the trick is going from the initial insight to that level of specificity that you're you're getting at. And I think those those examples that you gave are, the two authors are people who have sort of taken that next step on our behalf, let's say, and said, Okay, if you're going to do I won't repeat the examples that you said, but here are the the thinking processes you could use to get better outcomes. And that's, that's that's sort of the big sort of takeaway, I think, from thinking of optimism and

pessimism.



Raymond Sidney-Smith 29:42

Before we close out, I do want to kind of explain the Banos six thinking hats principles. So so in six thinking hats, you have six distinct hats, and I'm reading here off of the Wikipedia page, their definitions, exactly, I probably define them differently, but it doesn't matter. So there are six hats, blue, white, red, black, yellow, and green. And I'll link to this the six thinking hats article on Wikipedia, so you can look at it. But the the modalities or the actions associated with them are managing blue information, white emotions, red, discernment, black, optimistic response, yellow, and creativity, green. And the idea here is that at any given point in time, you can move through these directions for being able to move through not only a meeting, for example, right, we can move from blue hat thinking, what is the subject of the meeting? What are we thinking about? What's the goal? Can we look at the big picture? Then on to white? What information do we have? What information do we need? What are the facts? Then onto emotions? What do we what do we how do we instinctively respond to this particular thing? Then finally, black? What are the things that we should be cautious or conservative about? Right? What's practical and realistic? Again, that pessimism and then we go to optimism, right? What's the logic applied to the benefits? How do we see harmony? What are the what are the bright sunny side of the situation? And then finally, creativity? How do we get creative about this? What are some approaches for being able to move beyond now, this subject to some other outcome? And so six thinking hats is a fantastic method for being able to do that. And it helps to put people in a direction so that they're not constantly stuck in a particular type of thinking. Right? The and I know, Dr. Donna would probably not want me to say this. But you know, the some people tend to always have their black hat on, and they're always thinking in the negativity space. Well, you can actually say in the meeting, okay, we've we've talked about the black hat stuff, let's move on to yellow hat or, okay, we're kind of stuck in the white hat space, we're putting out a lot of facts. We've got the the most important facts on the table. Let's move on to Red Hat thinking. How do you feel about those emotion, emotional responses to? How do you feel about the information that we now have demonstrated here? So I think that there is a is a way for us to be able to look at optimism and pessimism and move beyond its abstraction to the actual principles we can use in being more productive, you can work yourself through those things. I think there's there's a lot of really good material there. So this closes out this episode of productivity cast. And so do you have a question or comment about this cast or something that we discussed, if you're listening from anywhere, other than the podcast website, that is a podcast app or somewhere else, maybe you're in your car, we invite you to jump over to productivity cast.net and go ahead and find there at the bottom of the page, a little comments space where you can leave a comment or question and one of us will be glad

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#### Voiceover Artist 33:56

That's it for this productivity cast. The weekly show about all things productivity with your hosts Ray Sydney Smith and a goose open out with Francis Wade and art gallery.