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Hope Theory: How Belief and Behavior Drive Performance

The most significant - and often overlooked - element in the workplace today, hope is the critical component that drives success.

By Libby Gill

When poet Emily Dickinson famously said, "Hope is the thing with feathers," she neglected to mention that it is also the thing with talons. Soaring and magical, hope lifts our sense of what is possible, but it also gives us the tenacity to hold tightly to our vision despite the obstacles. Since I began writing about this topic in 2001, I've thought of hope as the jet fuel for the journey of life. And for the nearly thirty years that I've been involved in helping to shape excellence in the workplace, I've observed how hope, or the lack of it, affects performance.

Willpower and Waypower

The word hope is derived from the Old English and literally means to "leap forward with expectation." Hope plays such a pivotal part in our lives that scientists have endeavored to define its role in what's known as "hope theory." The concept was pioneered by the late Dr. C.R. Snyder, a professor of psychology and, from 1974 to 2001, director of the graduate training program in clinical psychology at the University of Kansas, Lawrence. Encouraged by the noted psychiatrist Dr. Karl Menninger, who once spoke about hope at a conference of the American Psychiatric Association only to have his concepts derided by his colleagues, Dr. Snyder became intrigued with the significance of hope and its role in helping us reach our goals.

Dr. Snyder defined hope as a clear conceptualization of goals based on both "willpower" and "waypower," where one is able not only to create the pathways to realizing a vision, but also to sustain the mental energy and perseverance to travel those pathways effectively. He likened this process to the old adage of "having the will and the way." Today, with the workplace focused on ideas and innovation, rather than merely output, the most successful employees are often the most hopeful. One of the primary reasons is because they see multiple pathways, rather than the way, to arrive at a successful outcome.

Among the advantages of having a high level of hope (not to be confused with optimism which is an overall outlook on life independent of one's abilities and circumstances), Dr. Snyder's research showed that hopeful people are more likely to:

- Set a great number of goals
- Have goals which may be more difficult to attain
- Be more successful at reaching their goals
- Have less distress and greater happiness than low-hope people

Belief and Expectation

Adding to the pioneering work of Dr. Snyder was Harvard-trained oncologist Dr. Jerome Groopman, one of the world's leading researchers on cancer and AIDS. Author of *How Doctors Think* and *The Anatomy of Hope*, Dr. Groopman believes that hope is based on two key components: belief and expectation. More specifically, belief that change is possible and the expectation that the actions of an individual can result in a better future.

As a clinician, Dr. Groopman learned that when he gave cancer patients too much information regarding their prognosis, he often robbed them of hopefulness, which he believed was instrumental in the healing process. On the other hand, when he gave them too limited information, he sometimes created the false impression that they had little about which to be concerned. It was the challenge of finding that delicate balance between true hope and false hope that propelled Dr. Groopman's own significant research in the field of hope theory.

How Belief Drives Behavior

Although Snyder and Groopman approached hope theory from different perspectives - medicine and psychology - it is clear that both saw it as a combination of feelings and actions. Or as I see it in the workplace, it is the interconnection between beliefs and behaviors. If you believe that change is possible and that your actions will have a positive influence on outcomes, you're less likely to preserve the status quo and more likely to take positive risks, inspiring others with your behavior. Conversely, if you believe the opposite is true, that change is impossible and it makes absolutely no difference what actions you take, you're apt to stay stuck in mediocrity. Or, as Henry Ford put it, "Whether you think you can or think you can't, you're right."

So what can you do to inspire positive beliefs that result in effective behaviors? How do you infuse your corporate culture with hope? It's not as difficult as you might imagine. Try these strategies for starters:

Find opportunities to feed hope, rather than starve it, within your organization. Leaders who inspire hopefulness by listening deeply to others, taking

suggestions seriously, and granting ownership and authority to team members, help infuse hope into the corporate DNA.

Encourage "original mistakes." While you don't want your team members repeating the same mistakes over and over, when you allow risk-taking and even failure, you reduce fear and foster innovation. Applaud the big, bold, and "original mistakes" from which you and your team glean new insights.

Recognize the difference between True Hope and False Hope. Set realistic standards and measure outcomes rather than processes to ensure that you are moving aggressively toward pre-determined goals. Focus on what you can control and remain positive despite inevitable setbacks, but don't hide behind rose-colored glasses.

Be tough on outcomes and tender-hearted toward your team. Being hopeful doesn't mean you have to coax, coddle, or worse, simply hope that people will do their jobs. It means that you can hold them accountable to extremely high standards and measure them on results while still treating them with trust, respect, and kindness.

The last stanza of Dickinson's beautiful - and hopeful - poem states: I've heard it in the chilliest land / And on the strangest Sea / Yet - never - in Extremity / It asked a crumb - of me.

Hope asks for nothing from us. It is accessible to all, available in abundant supply, and totally cost-free. All you need to do is decide that change is, indeed, possible and that your actions will result in a better life for you and others. I hope you'll put these strategies to the test!

*Libby Gill is an executive coach, leadership expert, and international speaker. She is the former head of communications and PR for Sony, Universal, and Turner Broadcasting. Author of award-winning **You Unstuck: Mastering the New Rules of Risk-taking in Work and Life**. Her new book, **Hope IS a Strategy: Leading Through Change, Challenge, and Chaos** will be published in Spring 2018. You can learn more about Libby's work at www.LibbyGill.com or take her career assessment at <http://www.YourCareerQuiz.com>.*

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