



## Positive Thinking or Relentless Optimism?

You might have read about a recently published book: *Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World*, by Barbara Ehrenreich? According to the Guardian it's a study of American optimism and its potential delusional consequences. Now, I would never suggest that always being pessimistic is necessarily a good thing, but I do agree with Ehrenreich, that a seemingly relentless upbeat emphasis on the positive is counter-productive when we are faced with unpalatable decisions or complex situations. Ehrenreich suggests that the collapse of Lehman Brothers can be linked to their senior executives' over-reliance on gut-feel intuition rather than rationality and on the prevalence of an atmosphere of facile optimism; any analysts who expressed concerns were dismissed as 'negative' thinkers. It is all too easy to ignore, or worse, punish the bringers of bad news and describe those people who can see both sides of a situation as either unhelpful or unconstructive thinkers - which they rarely are. Are they simply more realistic perhaps?

If you were to ask 'negative thinkers' how they perceive themselves, I bet they wouldn't describe themselves as being negative at all! Many of us who seem to be less than outwardly bubbling with constant enthusiastic optimism are, in fact, merely demonstrating different preferences of Thinking Style. Make no mistake, we are as focused on achieving a positive outcome as anyone else, but we are also able to imagine the consequences of possible problems or even failure – something which allows us to anticipate and plan for alternative scenarios. The 'yes butters' amongst us are not necessarily being either deliberately downbeat or unenthusiastic – we may genuinely have already 'been there and done that' and are keen to pass on our experiences. We are very good at imagining future scenarios that we think need to be taken into account. So, let's celebrate the negative thinkers or, as Thinking Styles calls them, the Troubleshooters; those of us who prefer to reflect and consider the possible consequences and implications of our actions and those of others.

In fact, let us celebrate those people who can do both – that rare breed of cognitively fit individuals who know when to be realistically positive and emotionally resilient, but who also understand that 'sod's law' may well exist, that life is not always fair and that as responsible adults in the complex world of work the feel-good Pollyanna approach of relentless optimism is not enough.

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