

The 6 secret thoughts of high performing optimists.

The formula for success, convention states, is a mix of ability and desire – when failure occurs it is either because there was insufficient talent or motivation was absent. However, Martin Seligman asserts that a third factor is equally important in the achievement of a positive outcome: how you explain events to yourself (your attribution style).

What assured his place in commercial history is that he proved it – 100 agent applicants for Met Life in the USA, who scored badly on the conventional profile (and no one would employ), but did well on his/her ASQ (attribution style questionnaire), were hired.

In their second year, this group outsold the regular force by 31%.

The ‘special group’ of agents were no more skilled or motivated than anyone else – they just attributed what happened to them differently. Their self-talk was different.

Below is an example of the thinking styles employed by the two groups, when exposed to certain events:

Question	The Event	High-performers would say to themselves	Poor performers would say to themselves
1	The project they were in charge of was a great success	I kept a close watch over everyone’s work	Everyone devoted a lot of time and energy to it
2	They ran for community office and lost	The person who won knew more people	I didn’t campaign hard enough
3	They hosted a successful dinner	I am a good host	I was particularly charming that night
4	They fell down a lot while skiing	The trails were icy	Skiing is difficult
5	They got a flower from a secret admirer	I am a popular person	I am attractive to him/her
6	Their shares reached an all-time low	I didn’t know much about the business climate at the time	I made a poor choice of stocks

The questions above fall into one of three categories : personal, permanent and pervasive.

Personal: High performers take personal credit for the good (Q1), and ascribe negative outcomes to things outside their control (Q2).

Permanent: High performers see good events as permanent (Q3) and bad events as temporary (Q4).

Pervasive: High performers believe that good events will enhance everything they do (Q5), and bad events have specific causes (Q6).

What you should notice is that no one explanation is better or more logical than the other – and that's where the trick lies – high performers distort reality. Healthy thinking is not logical thinking!

Seligman refers to the thinking styles as optimistic (high ASQ score) and pessimistic (low ASQ). Optimism seems to be a quirk in human thinking required for the survival of the species – we need to feel that reality will turn out better than it actually does (ever heard a wedding speech that takes into account the 50% divorce rate?) :

Many people believe there is no God, that the only purposes in life is what they manage to create for themselves, and when they die, they rot. If this is so, why are so many of these people cheerful?

(Adapted from [Learned Optimism](#), p108)

Pessimism is not a mistake of nature - there is a place for it. Pessimistic people have been found to be more accurate than optimists – there are times when a pilot needs to de-ice the wing 'just in case', or your financial officer wants the original receipt. We expect them not to wing it and hope for the best – we depend on their pessimism.

Constructing a winning strategy, requires that you balance the wishful thinking of the salesman with the pessimistic scrutiny of the homicide detective. You can be a pessimist when you run the data – check and double-check if it does not feel right. Or run it by a colleague. But once you've collected all the facts – have unfettered optimism about your ability to do the job. And when the job is done, be careful - be very, very careful - not of what the audience say to you, but of what you say to yourself.

Further reading

[Learned Optimism](#) by Martin Seligman.

You can test your level of optimism (and many other personal attributes) at the following website: www.authentic happiness.com – do not be put off by the trivial-sounding name.

About the author

Sid Peimer, the eternal optimist, lives in an old Victorian cottage without a surge protector on his computer. You can visit him at his [website](#), which is always up.