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Why optimism may not be enough to carry us through times of crisis

If leaders' optimism and confidence matter more during a crisis than their actual talent and competence, shouldn't we encourage leaders to fake positivity?



[Photo: Harry Quan/Unsplash]



BY TOMAS CHAMORRO-PREMUZIC

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in control of the situation? Perhaps more importantly, if leaders' optimism and confidence matter more during a crisis than their actual talent and competence, shouldn't we encourage leaders to fake positivity?

Conveying a false sense of positivity may have only short-term benefits for the leader—including masking their incompetence—while having negative long-term effects for their followers and subordinates, such as keeping them detached from reality and perpetuating an unwarranted level of hope.

During this global crisis, there is no shortage of examples that highlight the different styles of leaders. They're particularly apparent precisely because leaders are faced with the same problem.

President Trump approaches his press conferences with a clear focus on [promoting a positive outlook](#), as in "I think Easter Sunday we'll have packed churches all over the country." German chancellor Angela Merkel has focused on providing a [brutal reality check](#) and gloomy assessment of the situation, saying, "Experts say that 60%-70% of the population will be infected." Along the same lines, there is a clear difference between New York governor [Andrew Cuomo's resilient](#) pessimism in a statement such as "This is going to be a long day, and it's going to be a hard day, and it's going to be an ugly day, and it's going to be a sad day," and Florida governor [Ron DeSantis's laid-back](#) optimism in "We have 20 counties that have zero cases at all and about 25 counties that really only have a few cases." It's tempting to use these prominent cases to determine whether optimism or pessimism may represent a better crisis management strategy for leaders. A better way to answer this question is to examine the large body of scientific research in this area.

When optimism is grounded in facts, such as [healthy financial performance](#), it unquestionably pays off. This doesn't mean that there aren't any self-fulfilling effects of optimism on subsequent performance outcomes, or that leaders can just artificially create optimism and expect results. If optimism is advantageous, it would have to be beneficial even when it's irrational.

Imagine two leaders in the same situation, but one of them displays much more optimism than the other. Which leader's group or team will be better off? While this is obviously hard to test, as no two leaders are in exactly the same situation, there are scientific studies that examine the link between optimism and leadership performance while controlling for confounding factors, such as past performance, external circumstances, and a leader's competence.

This is our best source of data to quantify the actual ROI of optimism. For instance, military leaders tend to be [rated more highly](#) on leadership potential when they gravitate toward optimism, but their optimism levels have no impact on their actual leadership performance. For business and political leaders, the [combination](#) of a certain degree of internal underconfidence and pessimism, which helps them see deficiencies and foresee problems and threats, and a degree of external overconfidence and optimism that nurtures hope in others seems to work best. This feels intuitively better than being internally overconfident while projecting external insecurities.

Positivity also tends to [improve most aspects](#) of job performance, and [leadership is no exception](#). But you can't simply turn a negative or realistic leader into a natural optimist, or expect them to persuade others that they are optimistic when they aren't. The data show a positive, albeit small, ROI to having a positive pers

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is one of the most consistent, prevalent, and robust biases documented in psychology and behavioral economics.”

Although there are cultural and individual differences in optimism, which make some people more realistic (and pessimistic) than others, [humans](#) in general are more likely to gravitate toward optimism than pessimism or realism. As Daniel Kahneman, the Nobel laureate who cataloged the pervasive list of biases that contaminate our thinking, [noted](#): “We’re generally overconfident in our opinions and our impressions and judgments.”

Understandably, optimism is most needed when times are tough and the future looks bleak. When we are aware of that fact, it is much harder to distort reality in our favor, for it requires a higher degree of denial than we are usually capable of experiencing. This is where leaders come in, with their confident optimism, giving us reasons to be hopeful when we seemed to have none.

The obvious question, then, is whether we can conclude that optimism is truly beneficial, or just a morale booster. In many areas of life, there is often a gap between what people want and what they actually need. Even if people crave optimism in tough times, our objective well-being is more important than our subjective well-being, and that depends more on competence than confidence.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Dr. Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic](#) is an international authority in leadership assessment, people analytics, and talent management [More](#)

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