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The Strategic Power of Hope

Behavioral science has shown that hope can power positive outcomes for both people and organizations. *by Jamil Zaki*

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"Always predict the worst," the satirist Tom Lehrer once said, "and you'll be hailed as a prophet."

Lehrer made that remark ironically, but some leaders treat similar ideas as gospel. Famously, Andrew Grove, the CEO of Intel, praised leaders who constantly focus on what might go wrong as their industry evolved.

In work and life today, we pay close attention to what such people say. Negativity attracts attention: Each negative word in a news headline, for example, has been shown to increase the clicks it receives by two percent. Negativity is also often understood as intelligence. In one classic study, critical book reviews were rated as smarter than laudatory ones. In another study, when participants were instructed to appear competent, they responded by acting prickly and removing positive language from their emails. Reflecting on these sorts of behaviors, Teresa Amabile, of Harvard Business School, has noted, "Only pessimism sounds profound. Optimism sounds superficial."

Focusing on what might go wrong can help organizations stay safe, of course. According to the "smoke detector principle," false alarms are a feature, not a bug, of our threat-defense system — they might detect threats where none exist, but that's only because they're sensitive enough to catch the real threats. In evolutionary terms, being hyper-defensive has helped us survive.

But adopting a permanently defensive posture can diminish you. Think of what happens in sports: If you play a game fearfully and focus simply on not losing, you'll narrow your focus, which in turn will reduce your creativity and make it hard for you to recognize opportunities. You may avoid losing, but you probably won't win much.

Hope provides a bulwark against this self-defeating behavior — and if leveraged appropriately, it can be a powerful force in helping organizations thrive. Saying that might sound squishy or pollyannish, but that's only because most people misunderstand the concept.

What Hope Is

Behavioral science has shown that hope can power positive outcomes for both people and organizations. Here's why:

Hope is more active than optimism.
If you're optimistic, you believe that the future will turn out well. Optimists tend to be happy but complacent, waiting patiently for a bright tomorrow. Hopeful people, on the other hand, believe that things *might* turn out well — but they also believe that in that context of uncertainty, actions matter. Being hopeful doesn't just involve imagining positive outcomes, in other words. It also involves *willpower* (a desire to bring about hoped for outcomes), and *waypower* (the charting of a clear path to achieve them).

Because hopeful people make plans for and work toward the future they want, they're more effective than optimists. In one study, hope, but not optimism, predicted performance among law students. In another study, hopeful executives from Fortune 100 companies performed more effectively at work and produced more creative solutions to problems than less hopeful ones, even when accounting for their intelligence.

Hope ignites virtuous cycles at work.
Hopeful individuals work hard and think broadly. A recent meta-study of more than 11,000 employees found that hope was correlated with wellbeing and positive morale at work. Hope also encourages virtuous cycles among colleagues. In a 2024 study, workers who felt supported — especially by their supervisors — experienced greater waypower and used that power for good. In doing so, they grew more committed to their organizations and helped their colleagues more frequently.

In many workplaces, these cycles of kindness can feel miles away, especially when negative bias drives conversation. In my lab we've found that people gossip three times more often about selfish people than helpful ones. At work, that sort of gossip makes people defensive and chilly, encouraging them, for example, to hoard knowledge instead of share it. An office full of people who focus only on potential threats

might dodge disaster from the outside but in doing so create it among themselves.

Hope is a learnable skill.
In some cultures, hope might feel like a swim upstream, but it's also a skill that anyone — and any group — can learn through practice. Our culture has stereotyped it as naïve, privileged, and even dangerous, but in fact it can be a useful tool for producing innovative ideas and finding ways to deliver on them. Organizations that tap into it, aligning their people's imagination and will, can better execute their most ambitious strategies.

Hope as a Strategy

Researchers have often focused on building hope among people facing adversity, such as disadvantaged students or patients suffering from chronic illness. But insights from this work can also help organizations. I draw from them, for example, when I work with leaders to create hopeful cultures. In particular, I ask leaders to take these three steps:

1. Set goals grounded in shared values.
When I've surveyed college undergraduates, medical teams, and C-suites about their values, participants report feeling deeply invested in connecting with peers and doing work that helps others — but they fail to recognize that the people around them feel the same way and want the same things. Communities tend to overlap more than they know. If hope requires a goal, organizational hope requires shared goals. Leaders can tap into this by reminding people of what they have in common. For instance, Patagonia's simple but profound mission statement, "We are in business to save our home planet," centers values that resonate with its employees.

2. Find ways to empower your people.

Especially in large companies, feelings of hope can be scarce, because employees are often feel swept up by forces that they can't control. Hope blooms only when people feel agency over their future. That's something that you can help them with — for example, by delegating important tasks and loosening the managerial reins. Google famously uses the "20% rule," wherein some employees are given a day each week to explore their own ideas. Although the company has not measured the effects of this initiative on hope, the autonomy it provides gives employees greater initiatives to set and pursue goals — two key components of hopeful thinking. Leaders can also take a more psychological approach, simply by reminding people of what they can control. At work, that might be delivering a product on time, building a technical skill, or connecting more deeply with your team. The key is to *think globally but hope locally*: focusing your mind on parts of your life and work over which you have autonomy, and building a sense of control.

3. Celebrate progress.

Hopelessness can snowball. When we expect the worse, we treat one another with suspicion, and our tasks with gloom. When things go badly, our pessimism grows and hardens. But in the right hands hope can also build on itself. One way to lock in a sense of efficacy and will is to pay close attention to progress and celebrate it. Focusing people on their wins, and how they have managed to take control of their work lives, makes them more likely to feel agency in the future.

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Pessimism and fear are part of our minds for a reason. These emotions are sentinels, guarding us against the worst. When you feel them well up, consider thanking them for playing that role. But when we confuse these feelings for wisdom and let them dominate our culture, we lose out on countless opportunities. There will be storms ahead, but it's

the hopeful leaders who can best chart a course through them. If you anchor their strategies in hope — not naïve optimism but a deliberate belief in shared goals and action — you can steer your organization toward growth, connection, and creativity. Hope doesn't just imagine a better future; it helps you build one.

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