

The Twelve Principles of Personal Leadership

Principle #11 – Passionately Positive

-One Leader's Perspective

By Greg L. Thomas



Many years ago I heard the story about a father who had two sons. One of his sons was extremely optimistic about life while the other was very pessimistic. The father wanted to challenge the boys, so he decided to put them into two different situations. First, he took his pessimistic son and walked him into a playroom that was encircled with many new gifts. Each one was brightly gift wrapped and had a toy inside. Next, he took his optimistic son and walked him into another playroom that had only two large buckets of horse manure in the center of the room.

The father left the boys alone for awhile, and then decided to check on them to see how they were doing in their different environments. As he approached the playroom of his pessimistic son he noticed it was very quiet. As he opened the door of the playroom he could see that every new gift was opened and out of the box. Some toys were already broken and some had not even been played with. His father asked him, "How are you doing?" Alone in a corner of the room was his pessimistic son who uttered with a sad voice that "I am sad and bored"!

As the father left this room and approached his other son he heard screaming and howling through the walls... "yippee" and "yahoo" were loud reverberations that came from this room. As the father opened the door he noticed that the horse manure was everywhere... walls, ceiling, floor and even all over his son. There was his son beaming with joy in the middle of the room. His father asked him also, "Son, how are you doing?" His son replied, "Great dad, I'm having lots of fun and I figure with all this horse manure around here... there's just *got* to be a pony somewhere!"

This story is as good as any *definition* I have ever heard to explain the difference between an optimistic and pessimistic attitude or personality. An optimistic person finds potential and possibility in virtually any situation. On the other hand a pessimistic person finds lack or dissatisfaction in virtually any situation. Which one of these types are you?

I first became aware of these differences in people when I was in my 20's in college. As a married student I was under a lot of stressors that most students didn't experience. I had to

not only attend classes and study... but also work 30 hours a week and cover the costs of college, a rented home, a car and utilities. In addition to this I wanted to spend time with my wife and baby daughter. I immediately noticed in the college environment that people reacted differently to the exact *same* circumstances. If the college changed a policy or rule, it typically affected everyone to about the same degree. Some of my peers reacted like it was just another minor inconvenience while others acted like it was a *revolutionary* denial of their basic human rights. Some, who were often affected the most by the change would simply “deal” with it, and perhaps find some positive virtues of a new policy. Yet others who were often the least affected became bitter and angry.

Our human mind is the most powerful tool we possess in this world. How we approach life and its daily problems will determine our degree of success and personal satisfaction. Give an optimist mediocre talents and their positive enthusiasm will make the most of their limited abilities to achieve great things. Give a pessimist great talents and their attitude will obstruct their ability to make the most of them. More often than not, they will live a life of mediocrity and constant frustration. Negative people focus on the problems of the present, while positive people focus on the great possibilities that lie ahead.

We draw in toward us what we constantly think about! It is a contradiction to go through life thinking negative thoughts and expecting good things to happen. Like most things we face in life, we must make a personal choice that no one else can make for us. In my automobile is an automatic transmission lever attached to the steering wheel. This lever gives me the ability to put the car in forward (low gear), or forward (high gear), or neutral or reverse. It doesn't take any *more* effort for me to put the car in forward-high gear than it does to go backward but it makes a tremendous difference in the direction I want to go. After I start the car, I have to make the *choice* of which direction I want to go in. Regarding my attitude, I face the same choice when I wake up every morning and so do you! We can choose to live in the *past* and put our new day on the path of reverse or natural... or we can choose to go *forward* and make the most out of today's opportunities. The reason to do this upon rising in the morning is that it sets the tone for the entire day. It starts a momentum that will take us in one direction or the other all day long.

What does it mean if we choose to go in *reverse* for the day? This means we will have a pessimistic view of everything and dwell on what we can't do, what we don't have, and why good things never happen to us. It means we find *fault* in everything and everybody. We will carry baggage from the past with us and have a proverbial *chip on our shoulder*. What does it mean if we choose to go in *neutral* for the day? This means we don't choose to be optimistic. It means that we start the day undecided as to its outcome and throughout the day we simply respond to whatever happens.

Yet, when we decide to go forward for the day, a different and powerful perspective takes over. We decide we want to succeed and feel like we can overcome any obstacle. We actually expect good things to happen to us. We begin to see the possibilities in every situation. In essence, we pre-condition our mind early in the day to glean the most out of life, and enjoy the day no matter what challenges or roadblocks arise. What happens if the day is disappointing and doesn't live up to our expectations? The pessimist says, “I just *knew* this would happen”, while the optimist says, “yes, today was a big challenge but tomorrows another day”.

When most people hear the name of Henry Ford they think of a successful man who achieved 161 U.S. patents, founded the Ford Motor Company and became one of the richest

men in America. What you don't often hear about is his previous company named the *Detroit Automobile Company*. By 1902 he had driven it into bankruptcy because he focused too much on engineering and not enough on marketing. This kind of failure would have devastated most people but not Henry Ford because he was a man with a mission. He used this negative experience to learn something positive out of a business failure. Henry found more investors and within a year began the Ford Motor Company. Actually, there may have been earlier business failures for Henry Ford even before the Detroit Automobile Company, but some researchers believe this history may have been hidden after Ford became successful.

Another example of someone who saw possibilities in every situation was Colonel Harland Sanders. He was born in 1890 and most of us know him for the business he began called, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Yet, the Colonel was not an overnight success and was considered by many to be a complete failure when he started the famous business at the age of 65. His earlier life included jobs like working on a farm, serving in the military, conducting streetcars, being a railroad fireman, serving as a justice of the peace, operating a steamboat ferry, selling insurance and tires, and running service stations. By the age of 40, he began cooking food for travelers who stopped at his service station. His food soon drew greater crowds, and he later opened an actual restaurant to serve food. But that business failed... and at age 65, he took his \$105 Social Security check and started his legendary fried-chicken franchise chain. How recognizable did this senior citizen become? In a 1976 survey, the Colonel was named as the world's second most recognizable celebrity.

What was his secret to success? No matter what happened to him he maintained the drive and positive "can-do" optimism to try yet again and have a breakthrough in life. Harland looked for opportunities in each day. He learned from his life experiences and failures while moving forward rather than wallowing in regret or negativity. If we look hard enough, we can find positive lessons in virtually any situation.

Possessing positive optimism doesn't mean we have to deny the seriousness or gravity of situations or problems. Life is full of challenging and difficult days. The difference is how we personally *interpret* the challenge or difficulty by looking for the good. This principle also affects how we feel physically. A pessimistic attitude can make us feel tired and depleted both physically and emotionally. Sometimes our body will not feel energetic, or have the capability of being healed until our minds allow it to.

If you have a pessimistic approach to life you need to reprogram your thinking processes. Being negative and pessimistic is a habit that is developed in childhood or through difficult experiences in life. In time you have trained your mind to be negative and you now view the world through a gloomy lens of doubt or wariness. It becomes a conditioned response to whatever happens. Then, whenever an unexpected or unusual situation occurs the mind is immediately flooded with suspicion, cynicism, disapproval and criticism. But, just like we may have developed a habit of pessimism, we can re-train our thoughts and develop a habit of optimism.

I would like to give just a couple of keys that I believe is the antiserum to the disease of negative pessimism. The most effective *medicine* is gratitude. When you have gratitude you don't focus on what you *don't* have... you focus and appreciate what you *do* have. When you do this, life takes on a totally new perspective. You say you have financial troubles? Be glad you live in a nation of plenty where you can rebuild your wealth or start over. Remember the financial problems Henry Ford and Harland Sanders once had? You say you have declining

health? Take a walk through a graveyard and you will see that you still have some good time left. You say you are driving an old unattractive looking automobile? There are millions of people who have to walk everywhere on foot who would love to have your car. Do you presently have a job you don't like? As you prepare yourself to achieve a better one, remember that there are millions who would like to have *any* job and receive the salary you do. You say you are not getting along with your spouse? If you don't begin to show more gratitude toward them you may find there are dozens of others who would love to spend their lives with them. As a man once said, "When you are contemplating your wife's faults, don't forget that it was those very faults that stopped her from getting a better husband!"

Sadly, we often don't truly appreciate things until they are gone. Then when they are gone we wish we had said or done things differently. If we are really grateful for the many things we have in life, and show it... we may avoid behaviors that cause us to lose them.

When you have gratitude you realize that there are some things in life you can't change. But rather than focus on what's lacking, or who's at fault in these situations, you choose to look for the possibilities in them. Each day you will wake up believing that today is special and whatever happens, I am going to get the most out of this day.

To sustain a positive approach to daily living also requires a second step. Every day we are bombarded with thousands of messages. In conversation, books, radio, the Internet, newspapers, magazines, billboards and television we are fed a steady diet of what "others" want us to hear. We are told, "buy it now", "warning", "hurry", "try it", "danger", "try it for free", and "on sale here". These messages are fighting over our agreement, money, allegiance or attention. Most of these messages are designed to *get* something from us and are negative. If we want to improve our attitudes and outlook on life we need to turn off many of these messages and be careful that only ones of value get through to us.

Take a few minutes to read a daily newspaper and you will see my point. Though few of the events described will truly affect your life, most articles are negative, discouraging and not worth the time to read. Later, after we have forgotten the actual contents of the article we may wonder why we feel frustrated or discouraged. It is because of what we allowed to enter our subconscious. The radio is another example. If we are not proactive about what we listen to we put ourselves at the mercy of the announcer or disk jockey. Will the music they provide be uplifting and encouraging? Or will it be demoralizing and cause anxiety? I am reminded of the story about a person who took a 20-year old recording of their favorite country music artist and reversed the motor on their record player so it would play the record backward! In the country song, the singer got his truck *back*, his job *back*, his dog *back* and his fourth wife *back*...

If you want to be passionately positive you must learn to turn most of this off and control what you listen to and what you allow to enter into your subconscious. Your mind is like a fertile flower garden. If it is neglected it will be overcome with every type of noxious weed including faulty, distorted and discouraging messages. Soon positive thoughts and messages will immediately be choked out by an accumulation of destructive messages. Not actively choosing what you listen to is neglectful, and in time will produce undesirable results. If you find yourself in this condition it is time to do some serious self evaluation by digging and uprooting the weeds you have been ignoring.

Here are some tips to help you do this. When reading a magazine or newspaper, focus on the articles that really affect you and are not just sensationalism masquerading as journalism.

If other articles catch your attention, usually the first paragraph reveals the heart of the story without all the pessimistic details. When watching television look for programming that makes you feel enlightened or uplifted when the episode ends. The remote's "mute button" is also a great way to avoid listening to the obnoxious commercials that treat you like you have the maturity of a five-year old child. In you find yourself in a waiting room or lobby consider bringing your own reading or listening material. Listen to your own music CD's in the car rather than the radio. Remember that Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, "A man is what he thinks about all day long".

Be selective on what you allow to enter your mind because it will eventually determine what you think and how you feel. If you cultivate your mental flower garden you can replace what is there by planting the seeds of new ideas, deepening your convictions, and fertilizing your creativity. If you water these thoughts with hope and faith you will eventually achieve a positive outlook that is warmed by the sunlight of solitude and peace.

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Greg has an extensive thirty-five years experience in public speaking and has spoken to hundreds of audiences worldwide. Greg has a Master of Arts degree in Leadership from Bellevue University, where he also has served as an adjunct professor teaching courses in business management and leadership since 2002. His first book, [52 Leadership Tips \(That Will Change How You Lead Others\)](#) was published in 2006 by WingSpan Press. His second book, [Making Life's Puzzle Pieces Fit](#) was published in March 2009. Both are available at amazon.com. Greg is also the president of [Leadership Excellence, Ltd](#) and a Managing Partner of the Leadership Management Institute. Leadership Excellence, Ltd. effectively builds individuals and organizations to reach their highest potential through enhanced productivity and personal development using a number of proven programs. He is also the president and founder of [weLEAD Incorporated](#).