



QO₂

Opportunities-Obstacles



By Dr. Dick McCann



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Preface

This e-book is part of a series that describes the concepts forming the core of TMS technology. In this e-book I look at the concept of Risk-Orientation and the key components that will help determine whether someone is likely to be risk-averse or risk-accepting. The concepts are well summarised by the differences between the two images below. **Can you spot the difference?** Find the answer at the end of this book!



Risk-Orientation fills the middle section of the Workplace Behaviour Pyramid, which was the subject of another e-book in this series (McCann, 2003, 2020a). The base of the Pyramid was dealt with in the e-book, *Window on Work Values* (McCann, 2003, 2020b), and the apex of the Pyramid is discussed in the e-book book, *Language of Teamwork* (McCann, 2004, 2020).

Knowledge of how people approach risk is important to managing them and maximising their potential. Someone who is very accepting of high risks may be happy undertaking entrepreneurial activities. Someone who is risk-averse may make a major contribution in disaster recovery, contingency planning or security areas.

Individuals' approach to risk can have a major impact on team dynamics. If everyone in a team has a high level of risk-acceptance then the probability of failure increases. If everyone has a low tolerance for risk then change may never happen. Where there are individual differences in risk levels then debate in the team may be heated and conflict may not be far from the surface. Simply by understanding how different risk approaches play out in behaviour at work can make individuals and team leaders far more effective.

Dick McCann
Author

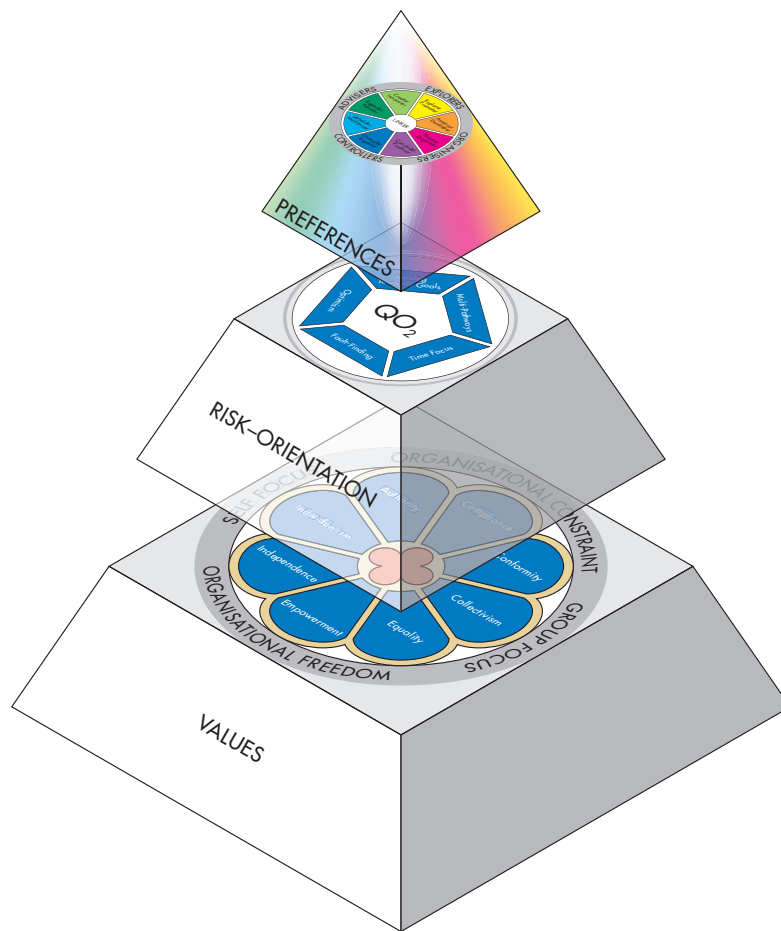
Introduction

In the e-book, *The Workplace Behaviour Pyramid*, I introduced three levels which help to explain why people behave the way they do at work.

At the apex of the Pyramid are Preferences, which measure dimensions of individual differences in tendencies people have to show consistent patterns of relationships, thoughts, feelings and actions. They give an indication of the conditions we like to establish at work so that our mental and psychic processes can flow freely.

Preferences can be assessed by looking at how people like to relate with one another (Extrovert or Introvert); how they like to gather and use information (Practical or Creative); how they like to make decisions (Analytical or Beliefs-Oriented); and how they like to organise themselves and others (Structured or Flexible).

Figure 1. Workplace Behaviour Pyramid



At the base of the Pyramid are Values. These are fundamental concepts or beliefs which people use to guide their behaviour in the workplace. Values will drive our decision-making and cause us to summon up energy to preserve what we believe in. They go beyond specific situations and determine how we view people, behaviour and events. Whereas Preferences describe what people are like rather than the intentions behind their behaviour, Values define what people think is important – the goals or motivations that shape their behaviour. Values are described in more detail in the e-book, *Window on Work Values*.

The middle part of the Pyramid deals with Risk-Orientation – whether people tend to be risk-averse or risk-accepting. Most people will try to work to their preferences, but in gathering information they may well ‘filter’ the data so that it is biased to either the opportunities or the obstacles. It is this bias that determines how they approach risk.

In this e-book we explore in more detail the middle part of the Workplace Behaviour Pyramid.

Figure 2. The middle part of the Workplace Behaviour Pyramid



The Risk-Orientation Model is used to measure five concepts that determine our approach to risk: MTG Energy, Multi-Pathways, Optimism, Fault-Finding and Time Focus.

MTG Energy

The second component of measuring Risk-Orientation is Moving Towards Goals (MTG) Energy. This is a form of psychic energy – the energy that gives us the determination, enthusiasm, and resilience to formulate and achieve our goals in life. People with a high MTG Energy are those who see opportunities and are often prepared to take risks to seize them. People with a lower MTG Energy will often see obstacles in the way of any goals they have and when the going gets tough they will give up earlier than those with higher energy.

What gives a person high MTG Energy?

It seems that high MTG Energy is acquired through life's experiences. When we are children, goals are either set through our own innate desire to succeed (intrinsic goals) or through the expectations of our parents, schoolteachers or significant others (extrinsic goals). In many cases the extrinsic goals help formulate the intrinsic ones. Whenever we achieve any of these goals we are usually rewarded in some way by prizes, admiration or concessions. Very soon an expectation of succeeding is established; if a goal is set, we will believe we can achieve it and therefore our MTG Energy is developed.

This is why goal-setting is so important in children. Goals must be set that challenge and stretch the individual rather than those that are easy to reach or too far away. In sport the concept of the personal best sets the right goals. This can be extended easily to cover all parts of childhood development. If goal achievement is established at a young age it can be easily carried through into adulthood. If not, then MTG Energy will need to be developed later in life.

If goals are easy to reach, then people's potential is not maximised. They may have an easy and enjoyable time as they readily achieve their goals, but sooner or later will realise that they could have done more with their life. Usually they will have an average MTG Energy, which could easily have been further developed. Some people fear failure and react badly to it with strong feelings of lack of confidence and low self-esteem. To avoid these debilitating characteristics they will often formulate easy goals to bolster their feelings of self-worth. Such people may have an untapped potential that can be released through goal-stretching programs.

If the goals lie well beyond someone's capabilities then no amount of rewards or cajoling can realise those goals. Such people will usually find a reason to give up as soon as they can. Sometimes they see so many obstacles to the goals that have been set that they simply give up before they start. Many of these obstacles are imaginary. Such a pattern encourages a low MTG Energy, no matter what the goal. It is not long before lack of confidence and low esteem set in.

Because higher MTG Energy is aligned with seeing and seizing opportunities, it is important to develop it to a high level. However there are situations where too high an MTG Energy can cause problems. Overconfidence can result, causing these people to be blind to serious obstacles that will impede their progress. What level of MTG Energy is maximum is difficult to predict. It very much depends on the individual, which is why goal-setting programs need to be personally tailored.

My research has identified two main ingredients that can help develop MTG Energy – Stretch Goals and Persistence.

Stretch Goals

Stretch Goals are all about one's 'personal best'. Athletes are constantly striving to break through their PB, as they call it. Their coach cajoles them and they stretch themselves to the limit. When they break their PB then the goal is set a little higher. It is this process of setting a 'stretch goal' and then celebrating the breakthrough, which develops over time a high level of MTG Energy. At work the same effect can be achieved by managers setting stretch goals for their direct reports and then giving them all the support they need to give of their best - such as training, coaching, mentoring and positive feedback.

As we reach each stretch goal we are gaining confidence in our ability and our MTG Energy builds up to a level where we know we can seize opportunities that come our way.

Persistence

High levels of persistence are also associated with high levels of MTG Energy. As Alfred Brandt has said, "*Failure is the line of least persistence*".

In so many cases it is easier to give up than to try again. Recently a team of Australian mountaineers failed in their first major climb in the Himalayas. They were beaten by bad weather and inadequate equipment. They only managed to get one-third of the way to the top before they decided there were too many obstacles in their way and aborted the climb. It would have been so easy for them to quit for good as their problems were mainly caused by a chronic shortage of money. They had bought cheaper gloves that proved inadequate against the severe cold and most of the climbers suffered frostbite. However, after they returned home, they were soon back preparing for the next attempt. They trained harder this time and put more effort into gaining sponsorship. Eventually they were ready for their next attempt. There were four years between each climb, but they had refused to let any obstacles deter them. They had high hopes that they would succeed the second time.

Robert the Bruce, leader of the Scots in the Scottish War of Independence, is said to have been inspired by the persistence of a spider trying to weave its web. Routed by the English, he was hiding out from his pursuers in a cave. Exhausted from the never-ending struggle, and in despair, he wondered whether he should give up, flee to France and live out his life in comfort. He noticed a spider spinning its web. It kept trying to swing across the ceiling, over and over again, until at last it reached the other side and anchored the first strand of the web. 'If at first you don't succeed try, try, try again' was the message the spider gave as it persisted in building its web. Bruce adopted the same motto and spent the next eight years fighting the English occupiers of Scotland until they were at last driven out.

There are hundreds of stories about survival against the odds and overcoming diseases. Almost every week the newspapers have a story about someone overcoming adversity through persistence and determination. So developing persistence is the key to gaining MTG Energy, which in turn makes goals attainable. As Helen Keller, the deaf and blind American author and teacher, has said, "*To fall down is a mistake; failure is in not getting up again*". It seems that Stretch Goals can only be achieved through high levels of persistence.

In summary, MTG Energy is correlated positively (0.75) with Seeing Opportunities and negatively with Seeing Obstacles (-0.50). A person with high levels of MTG Energy is therefore more likely to be risk-accepting rather than risk-averse. The opposite is more likely to occur with lower levels of MTG Energy.

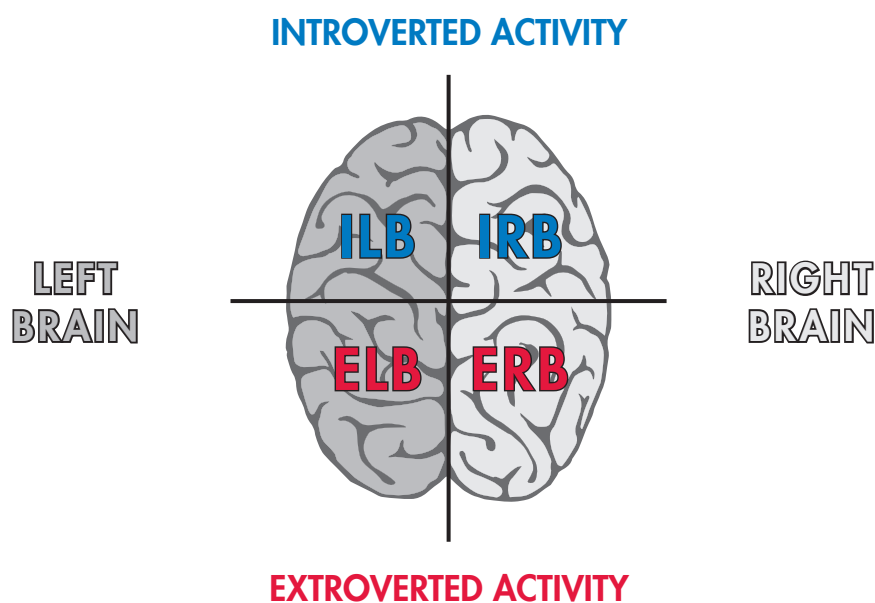
Multi-Pathways

Not a stumbling-block, but a stepping stone

People who see opportunities and grab hold of them are those with the capability of Multi-Pathway generation. When an obstacle occurs they are able to generate lots of possible pathways and ultimately select one of them that effectively removes the obstacle. People without Multi-Pathway skills tend to follow a single pathway to achieve what they want. Often you may hear them say, 'There is only one way to do things well and that's the *right way*'. People with a high level of MTG Energy but a low Multi-Pathway capability can succeed in removing obstacles but they need a high level of determination and persistence, otherwise they will give up and turn their attention elsewhere.

When an obstacle arises to thwart your plans it is useful to follow the Multi-Pathway Generation Model to find a way around the obstacle. This model gives four possible routes to follow and the best results are achieved by using all four thinking modes (see Figure 3).

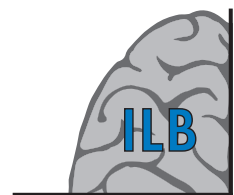
Figure 3. Multi-Pathway Generation Model



Introverted Left-Brain (ILB) Thinking

This process involves a logical analysis of what the obstacle is and what is causing it. The technique I prefer to use here is sometimes known as the Why-Why diagram, although there are many other good techniques available. An excellent source book is the handbook by James M. Higgins (2005), *101 Creative Problem-Solving Techniques*.

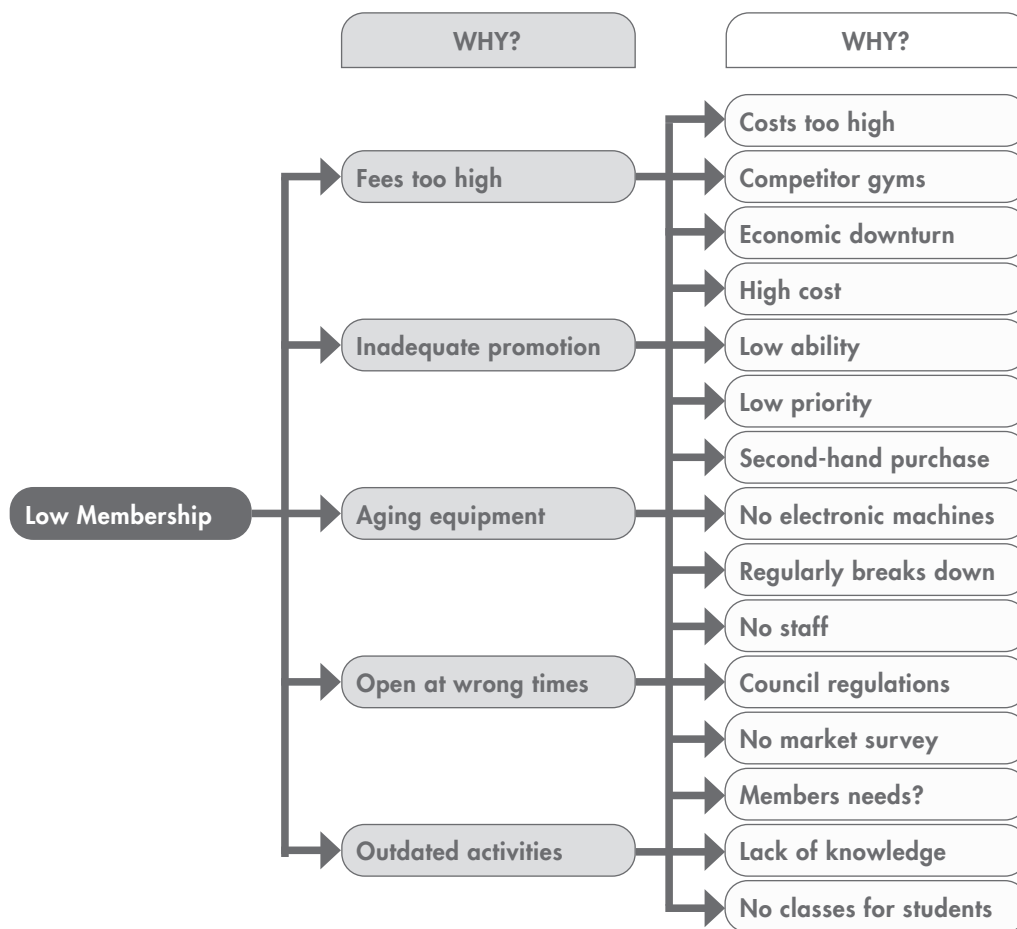
A Why-Why diagram will help you identify a series of obstacles rather than just the obvious one you may have thought was the primary cause. It is a process that gives you a perspective on the problem. The example in Figure 4 is taken from *The Workplace Wizard* (McCann, 2002) and was used to determine why there was a low membership at a gym owned by a character in the book, Polly.



To use a Why-Why diagram, first of all write down the obvious primary obstacle. Then consider at least five possible causes of this by asking the question 'Why?' Next the question 'Why?' is asked again for each of the five possible causes generated by the first question. This then generates a third column with at least three further causes derived from each obstacle listed in the second column. A column with 15 detailed obstacles is the result. Now that an expanded list of the primary obstacle is available, the next step is to prioritise all the obstacles so that the most important ones can be worked on first.

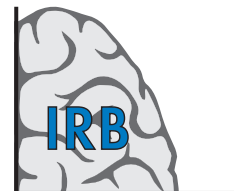
ILB thinking requires all possible information concerning the obstacle to be gathered. This can be obtained by reading, attending conferences and generally asking anyone who might have information to help. If the obstacle is a severe one then it is important to have the intent and resolve to come up with a solution that is truly robust. This requires the constant examining of the obstacle, visualising scenarios of possible solutions, and gathering even the most tangential of facts that might be relevant to the problem.

Figure 4. Example of a Why-Why Diagram



Introverted Right-Brain (IRB) Thinking

When a solution out of the ordinary is required, it is often necessary to venture into the IRB quadrant. There are many techniques to use here, but visual maps (sometimes known as brain maps, idea maps or Mind Maps®¹) can be very useful. Mind-mapping was originated by Tony Buzan (1983) of the Learning Methods Group in the United Kingdom. His technique resulted from studies which showed that the brain works best with key concepts which radiate out from a centre.



Visual-mapping is an individual brainstorming technique where you generate many possible ways around an obstacle without evaluating the merits of any of them. This is true Multi-Pathway stimulation where you allow your mind to run free wherever it desires. Evaluation comes later when you move back into ILB thinking.

The visual-mapping procedure follows a structure that I have found particularly useful in finding a way around obstacles. Firstly write the obstacle in solution-oriented form in the centre of a sheet of paper and draw a circle around it. In the 'Polly' example the obstacle in solution-oriented form is 'How can I promote the gym?' Then create branch lines off the obstacle, with as many ideas as you can generate. At this stage don't worry about the practicality of what you are doing. Just get as many alternatives down on paper as you can. If a few far-out ideas occur to you write them down too. You never know when a crazy idea might provide the seed for a more rational and workable idea.

Each idea can be developed further by creating branch lines, which will eventually lead to a map-like structure of all possible ideas.

Sometimes a simple technique like visual-mapping is insufficient to overcome major obstacles and a period of further right-brain activity or incubation may be required, where the mind 'ticks over', trying to piece together the various bits of information. Very often the problem may be forgotten for a time, or passed into the unconscious, while the conscious mind goes offline into a relaxed, daydreaming, or meditative state, or even sleep.

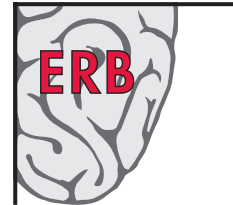
¹ Mind Maps® is a registered trademark of the Buzan Organisation Ltd.

An eminent mathematician, Andrew Wiles, solved the puzzle of Fermat's last theorem, a problem that had eluded mathematicians for 358 years. In describing his eight-year concentrated effort to find the solution he worked in a highly introverted mode, talking to no-one about his ideas until he had discovered the solution. In the book *Fermat's Last Theorem* by Simon Singh (1997), he describes his way of working:

"Basically it's just a matter of thinking. Often you write something down to clarify your thoughts, but not necessarily. In particular when you've reached a real impasse, when there is a real problem you want to overcome, then the routine kind of mathematical thinking is of no use to you. Leading up to that kind of new idea there has to be a long period of tremendous focus on the problem without any distraction. You have to really think about nothing but the problem – just concentrate on it. Then you stop. Afterwards there seems to be a period of relaxation during which the subconscious appears to take over and it is during that time that some new insight comes."

Extroverted Right-Brain (ERB) Thinking

Many obstacles that arise in the work situation are team problems rather than individual ones and it is often left to the team to come up with ways around the obstacle. Group pathway generation can provide a superior solution to that of the individual, as collectively there is more information available. However the group process must be conducted effectively for this technique to work.



The most well-known method for ERB thinking is that of 'brainstorming', developed over 70 years ago to increase the quantity and quality of advertising ideas. The process was called brainstorming because the participants' brains were used to 'storm' a problem.

The process requires a leader/facilitator, a recorder and a group of people. Probably at least five people are required to generate ideas and when there are more than ten people the groups can become unwieldy. Introverts in particular may become less comfortable with a larger group.

Four ground rules are essential for this process to work:

1. No judgments are made about anyone's suggestion.
2. All ideas, particularly absurd or impracticable ones, are encouraged.
3. Quantity of ideas is the aim, not quality.
4. Ideas should be combined, refined and piggybacked.

The features of spontaneity and absence of criticism encourage a positive atmosphere where participants know that no-one is going to 'put them down' for a silly suggestion.

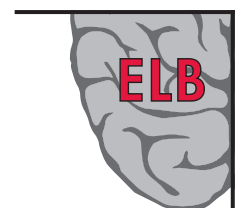
The leader's role is to start the session and explain the ground rules. Leaders must get the group to relax and feel comfortable. Often anecdotes or humour can help here. Once the session is underway, their role is mainly one of facilitation. In addition, they must insist on the ground rules being followed. The most important ground rule is number one – no judgments about anyone's suggestions. If criticism occurs while ideas are being generated then the whole point of brainstorming is lost.

The recorder's role is to list the ideas on a whiteboard for all to see. It is invaluable to use a person with clear writing and some artistic skills. Many of the ideas can be represented in pictures. Variation in colour also helps stimulate further ideas.

Sessions should be constrained to a maximum of 45 minutes in any one sitting. It is important to take a break after this time, as usually participants will be mentally exhausted.

Extroverted Left-Brain (ELB) Thinking

After a series of ERB sessions it is useful to converge on a solution or series of solutions so that an action plan for implementation can be developed. In this session ELB thinking is used.



Again there are several ground rules that are useful:

1. Be objective.
2. Be critical.
3. Attack the ideas, not the person.
4. If it is your idea don't be defensive when it is criticised.
5. Focus on the benefit/cost.

If there are a large number of ideas it is best to cull them quickly, rejecting those that are universally considered by participants to be doubtful. Those remaining are then subjected to an intense analysis, asking questions such as, 'Why is it up there?', 'Will it work?', 'How will it work?', 'Is it efficient?', and 'Is it effective?'

After this process the possible solutions are ranked in order and left for further discussion at the next ELB session. In the meantime, participants are encouraged to ponder on the issues using the ILB and IRB thinking modes.

In summary, Multi-Pathways people have the ability to generate lots of alternative ways around obstacles and select the one that takes them forward. The Multi-Pathways Generation Model defines four modes to help people develop Multi-Pathways skills. These are the thinking modes of ILB (Introverted Left-Brain), IRB (Introverted Right-Brain), ERB (Extroverted Right-Brain) and ELB (Extroverted Left-Brain).

Multi-Pathways is correlated positively with Seeing Opportunities (0.85) and negatively with Seeing Obstacles (-0.53). Therefore those people with high abilities in Multi-Pathway generation are more likely to be risk-accepting. Lower Multi-Pathway people are more likely to be risk-averse.

Optimism

Always look on the bright side of life *(Song from the movie 'Life of Brian')*

Optimism is a characteristic that is the basis of positive thinking. It is a psychological resource that gives people a generalised expectancy that they will succeed in their endeavours. Expected success, in turn, gives people the will to expend effort to realise their goals. If they expect failure then they will put less effort into a task and are more likely to give up as soon as an obstacle appears.

The literature abounds in studies on optimism as a dispositional characteristic (Lightsey, 1996). Many studies have shown that an optimistic outlook on life leads to fewer incidences of postpartum depression and distress, and greater subjective wellbeing and life satisfaction. It has also been positively correlated with goal-setting and achievement and negatively with goal abandonment and resignation to fate.

People who are optimistic will often see more opportunities than those who are pessimistic. They are able to put problems behind them and take a positive view of the future. Optimism is an attitude to life that prevents people from becoming apathetic or giving up hope. Their belief that things can only get better is often a tonic for those around them. Their optimistic view of the world can be infectious and influence those they interact with.

In his book, *Optimism: The Biology of Hope*, Lionel Tiger (Tiger, 1995) argues cogently that optimism is not an optional characteristic in humans; it is as 'natural to man as his eyes that see, and as irreplaceable as hair.' Through evolution we have developed a species-wide tendency to overestimate moderately, the odds in our favour. In other words, optimism is a biological phenomenon. George Bernard-Shaw captured this elegantly when he said, "*Love consists in overestimating the differences between one woman and another.*"

It seems that optimism has been central to the process of evolution. It has greatly influenced the way humans think, work, play and respond to fundamental issues such as birth and death. It is a force that has been used as a lever in the hand of politicians and a weapon in the hands of dictators. Both groups use optimism as a way of controlling people and harnessing them to a cause. If indeed, Tiger's belief that optimism is a biological phenomenon rooted in the genes is true, then it gives us another technique to use in people management processes.

Optimism appears to be socially desirable in all communities. Purveyors of optimism are generally accepted whereas those who spread doom and gloom, panic and hysteria, are treated with contempt. Many of the world's religions are adherents to the doctrine of optimism. The sufferings of this world, the vicissitudes of life, the pain of disease and death are all mitigated by the expectancy of some future favourable outcome, maybe not in this world but certainly in some other. Religions allow communities to organise their fears and their futures by establishing a set of rules and beliefs for everyone to follow. In this way earthly fears are relegated to the arena of trivia and society becomes more manageable.

Optimistic speeches

The importance of optimism to the human species is shown by Martin Seligman's work (Seligman, 1991) in analysing USA political speeches using his CAVE technique – Content Analysis of Verbatim Explanations - where he analysed the nomination acceptance speeches of candidates for the USA presidential elections. In the twenty-two presidential elections from 1900 to 1984, Americans chose the more optimistic-sounding candidate eighteen times. In all elections in which an underdog pulled off an upset, he was the more optimistic candidate. The exceptions were three elections contested by Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Humphrey-Nixon election of 1968. Roosevelt's proven ability in a crisis and the impact of Chicago riots at the time of Humphrey's speech seemed to have more than negated the opposition candidates' more optimistic speech. It does definitely seem that people want to hear about rosy futures and will support those people who help create a sense of hope, optimism and well-being within an individual.

Seligman has spent many years researching the concept of optimism and pessimism through his work on attributional styles. He has found that people with an optimistic attributional style will attribute negative events differently to those with a pessimistic explanatory style. When setbacks occur, pessimists blame themselves. 'I am just no good,' or 'Nobody wants me,' are phrases that soon flow from the lips of such people. They believe the cause of their misfortune lies within them rather than being due to external or extenuating circumstances. Pessimists also believe that misfortune is long-lasting ('Things will never get better') or repetitive ('If I have failed once, it will happen again'). It is also global or 'pervasive', that is, 'If misfortune befalls me in one part of my life, then it will happen to my whole life.' These three characteristics of the pessimistic explanatory style for negative events are known as the three Ps – Personal, Permanent and Pervasive.

Pessimism

Whether a tendency to pessimism is inherited or learned is a debate that has raged among psychologists for many years. The truth is probably somewhere in between. People growing up in a pessimistic environment can be greatly affected by negative events. Witness, for example, the progression of pessimism among the unemployed. The first-time jobseeker starts off in a positive way, believing that a job is just around the corner. Many unsuccessful interviews later they believe they will never get a job and their whole life can degenerate into one of despondency.

Many controlled experiments have been carried out showing that a pessimistic mood can be induced by just listening to gloomy stories, watching a depressing movie or listening to melancholy music. Likewise being exposed to a person who is continually focusing on the obstacles can create pessimism in you. Like wildfires, this pessimism can spread quickly, affecting everyone in its path.

Ruminating

People with low optimism often have feelings of fear and uncertainty about the future.

In some cases this leads to high levels of anxiety. This anxiety can then lead to the debilitating activity of 'rumination'. Rumination is a term often used to describe a negative internal dialog that people have with themselves. If your level of optimism is low then you may well imagine all the things that could possibly go wrong.

Negative self-talk becomes an unstable cycle. The more you think about the terrible things that might happen, the more vivid they seem and the more cautious you become. Your very fear of the future event is magnified through rumination. So when the event actually takes place, you are more likely to be tentative and unsure of yourself. This very attitude creates a self-fulfilling prophecy and the imagined negative outcome becomes a reality. Your worst fears, your pre-programmed 'movie' of the event is played out in real life. Sometimes negative self-talk becomes so bad that it occupies much of your waking time and may even prevent you from sleeping at night.

For many years researchers have continually shown the close connection between the mind and the body. Negative self-talk will cause the body to act in alignment and your actual behaviour will mirror your mind image. In other words, negative thoughts stimulate negative behaviour.

Positive imaging

One of the most effective ways to prevent rumination is to replace it with positive self-talk, together with imaginal thinking or 'image-ination'. Imaginal thinking involves constructing a desired future model of a situation you would like to experience and then running that model several times over so that it is programmed into your mind.

The 'movie' you create should also have a soundtrack containing the words you would like to hear yourself saying. The trick is to become your own 'Steven Spielberg' and create the blockbuster movie of all time, starring yourself!

As well as vision and sound, your internal movie must also create a feeling for you. You need to decide how you would like to be feeling during the future event you are creating. Do you want to feel relaxed, confident, powerful, happy, forceful etc? If you want to be confident and relaxed throughout the 'movie' then you need to edit into your soundtrack a repetitive 'feelings' track where your movie-self repeats over and over again, "*I am relaxed. I am confident...*"

Positive imagining has been recognised for many years under such names as mental practice, imaginary practice, covert rehearsal, symbolic rehearsal and introspective rehearsal. But what is the scientific evidence that it actually works? Driskell, Copper and Moran (1994) have reviewed many studies in the literature and concluded that there is a definite relationship between enhanced performance and positive imaging. Results show a significant performance enhancement whose magnitude depends on the type of task being undertaken, the interval between rehearsal and performance and the duration of the 'practice'.

The effect was more significant on cognitive tasks rather than physical tasks. For physical tasks there is, as expected, no substitute for practice. However for improved performance in management skills such as negotiations, there is often no room for practice as the events are 'one-off', with just the one opportunity to get the best result. In these situations positive imaging is a definite advantage. Another conclusion is that the effect of positive-imagining training halves after a two-week period and reduces to almost zero after three weeks, indicating the need for continual refresher training. Also a total duration of about 20 minutes positive imaging seems to be optimal, indicating the desirability of short practice sessions, something that busy executives will no doubt appreciate!

Optimism and risk

Research studies (McCann 2002) have correlated Optimism positively with a tendency to look for the Opportunities (0.72) and negatively to look for the Obstacles (-0.85). It is the ratio of these two measures (Opportunities-Obstacles) that gives a good indication of someone's approach to risk. Those high on Optimism are more likely to be risk-accepting whereas those low on Optimism are more likely to be risk-averse.

Fault-Finding

The best laid schemes o' mice an' men gang aft a-gley *(To a Mouse, Robert Burns, 1786)*

Some people will expend considerable effort in looking for the faults in any ideas or projects presented to them, whereas others tend to make assumptions that everything will turn out for the best. I call this 'looking for Murphy', after the well-known inventor of the famous law – *If anything can go wrong, it will.*

Obstacle-oriented people have a mindset which causes them always to assume the worst. When faced with an opportunity, their first reaction is to look for all the potential faults, by taking on the role of the devil's advocate. Opportunity-oriented people have to force themselves to examine the downside of proposals and can benefit from a structured approach to help them consider the 'what ifs...'

The challenge in risk assessment is to get the balance right between looking too much at the downside or too much at the upside. Risk-averse people tend to dwell on all the things that could go wrong. Risk-accepting people tend to focus their attention more on what could go right.

Potential Obstacle Analysis

A useful technique for examining the faults in any opportunity is Potential Obstacle Analysis. This is a systematic procedure designed to highlight the major obstacles that might be faced when a particular idea, proposal or project is implemented.

The basic procedure involves asking the questions:

- What could possibly go wrong?
- What assumptions have we made?
- What might we do now to minimise the risk?

Potential Obstacle Analysis comprises four key steps:

1. Identifying internal and external obstacles.
2. Ranking each obstacle in importance.
3. Gathering information.
4. Implementing preventive action and/or contingency plans.

Internal obstacles

The first step in Potential Obstacle Analysis is to draw a boundary around the presenting opportunity so that it is conveniently divided into internal obstacles and external obstacles. In the book *The Half Empty Chalice* (McCann and Stewart, 1999) the story of 'Polly' is given in detail. At one stage she decides to purchase an old building to renovate as a gym. However she sees very few obstacles, visualising the finished gym and all the revenue it will generate. Ned, her colleague, sees only the obstacles and carries out a Potential Obstacle Analysis, using a visual-mapping process. He used a structured technique to consider the technical obstacles, the financial obstacles, the marketing obstacles and the people obstacles.

Under technical obstacles Ned identified:

- Thick concrete walls and floor
- Plumbing difficulties
- Floor too hard for aerobics, need wooden floor
- Limited parking – no room to expand the car park
- Low ceilings
- Ceiling fan danger in aerobics classes
- Where do air-conditioning ducts go?
- Fire regulations
 - existing doors substandard
 - electrical rewiring required
 - no fire exit

Under marketing obstacles Ned considered:

- Renovation costs
- High plumbing costs
 - new wooden floor
 - external air-conditioning ducting
 - security system
 - fire system

Under financial obstacles Ned listed:

- Will the new gym attract members?
- Elasticity of membership fees (Will members leave if fees rise?)
- Demographics of surrounding area (Do people living in the surrounding areas have disposable income to spend on fitness and well-being?)

Under people obstacles Ned identified:

- Attraction of members
- Gym is in business district away from residential areas
- Area deserted at night
- Staff inconvenience
- No bus route
- No parking
- Extra time to travel to work
- Resistance of Polly's father (Conrad) who might need to be a guarantor of any loan requirements

Polly, of course, saw none of these obstacles.

The final step of a Potential Obstacle Analysis is to balance the obstacles against the opportunities and make a decision on whether to go ahead with the opportunity. If the answer is 'yes' then the main obstacles need preventive action and/or contingency planning.

With a technique like Potential Obstacles Analysis, even the highest risk-accepting person is forced into thinking about the 'what ifs...'

Inverse Brainstorming

Potential Obstacle Analysis is a skill that is often developed through experience. Many people who use obstacle analysis effectively only do so after learning the value of it through bitter experience. This is why obstacle analysis should be done in both introverted and extroverted modes. Once you think you have identified all the possible pitfalls yourself, it is important to get a different perspective from other interested parties. There will be many colleagues around you who have seen hundreds of problems crop up that should have been anticipated. Their experience will be invaluable in identifying obstacles you may not have thought of.

One technique of extroverted Potential Obstacle Analysis is Inverse Brainstorming. Whereas brainstorming is all about thinking up creative ways around problems, Inverse Brainstorming looks at an opportunity and then considers all the obstacles that might prevent the opportunity from working. The rules of the process are similar to those described under brainstorming. No criticism of the obstacles generated is allowed until after everyone's views are captured.

This technique is very useful in exposing the assumptions that often lie hidden in the unconscious mind when just an individual 'looks for Murphy'. The beliefs and values that we hold may prevent us from seeing the reality of a situation, which can be exposed by considering the alternative views offered by other people.

In summary, Fault-Finding is correlated negatively (-0.58) with Seeing Opportunities and positively (0.69) with Seeing Obstacles. Someone high on Fault-Finding is more likely to be risk-averse whereas someone low on Fault-Finding is more likely to be risk-accepting.

Time Focus

**When as a child I laughed and wept,
Time crept.
When as a youth I waxed more bold,
Time strolled.
When I became a full-grown man,
Time RAN.
When older still I daily grew,
Time FLEW.
Soon I shall find, in passing on,
Time gone.
O Christ! Wilt thou have saved me then?
Amen.**

*Times's Paces, Henry Twells (1823-1900).
A poem on the front of a clock in Chester Cathedral.*

Before the age of Einstein, people thought that time was absolute. Einstein changed the idea of time and showed that it is relative. The faster a person moves, the slower the time appears to an outside observer. Eventually when we travel at the speed of light, time stands still.

Tongue-in-cheek, Einstein once explained the theory of relativity to his secretary, Helen Dukas, so that she could pass it on to reporters and laypersons (Calaprice, 1997):

*"An hour sitting with a pretty girl on a park bench passes like a minute,
but a minute sitting on a hot stove seems like an hour."*

What Einstein was talking about here is psychological time – how we subjectively process time. For some people time moves quickly, for others it moves slowly.

Time moves quickly when we are engaged in pleasant experiences (sitting with a nice girl) and slowly when we are experiencing unpleasant situations (a hot stove). Time moves slowly when we are bored and fast when a task is absorbing, challenging or mentally stimulating.

Past-Present-Future

Anthropologists have often focused on the different ways that cultures view time, as a means of explaining many of their traditions and values. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1960) have categorised cultures into three types based on their time focus. Present-oriented cultures focus on the here and now, with very few traditions and little planning for the future. They live each day as it comes. Past-oriented cultures are concerned to maintain past traditions by incorporating them into present-day activities. They want to hang on to the inherited culture and are often reluctant to change. Future-oriented cultures have a vision for their society and generate plans to move their culture towards that vision.

So it is with individuals within any predominant culture. The USA culture could be considered, on the whole, to be future-oriented. However within this society there are many individuals who believe in the good old days and want to maintain the values and traditions of the past. Sometimes they are labelled as right wing but they believe that the path currently being followed will lead to a future inherently worse than that experienced by their forefathers. Equally there are many people who opt out of the 'rat race' and live each day as it comes. The hippy population of the seventies that gathered around San Francisco is a good example of a present-oriented subculture.

Japanese culture during the two centuries they banned interaction with foreigners was one with a focus on the past as was China during many of the Mao Zedong years, particularly those around the time of the Cultural Revolution. Such societies usually experience slower economic and social development than those with a focus on the future.

One of the most useful models for understanding time focus in individuals is that of the NLP (neuro-linguistic programming) timelines. Time runs on a continuum from the past to the present to the future. Some people can span the whole timeline giving equal weight to all states, whereas others like to focus on the past, the present, or the future.

Future Timelines

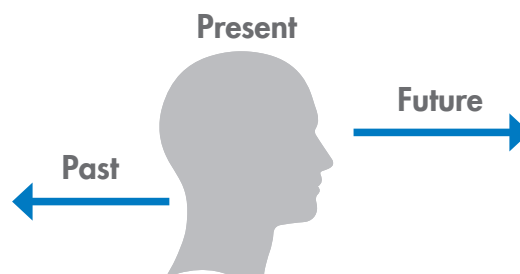
Some people's timelines run from front to back (Figure 5).

The future is in front of their eyes, the present lies embedded within them and the past is behind them. Most of their energy is directed towards the future and they have little interest or memory of the past. In fact, you may well hear them say, 'Let's put the past behind us.'

For them the future is a rosy place, somewhere they want to be. They are full of hope because they know that things will be better than they are now and better than they have been in the past. They can't wait to live in the future and their whole focus is on looking for the opportunities that will help them realise the vision of hope that they so readily conjure up. People with Future Timelines (F-Time) talk with excitement about the future. You can hear the increase in word tempo as they relate their vision. They tend to be more optimistic, positive and seek out situations that are different.

People with very strong Future Timelines often blank out the past. Past memories will merge, being telescoped into one small time unit. The present quickly becomes the past and with that go the memories of any unpleasant events. This is, of course, an important ingredient in entrepreneurship. Many entrepreneurs fail at their first attempt, or even their second attempt. A focus on the future or a collapsing memory of the past will allow them to try again.

Figure 5. Future Timelines

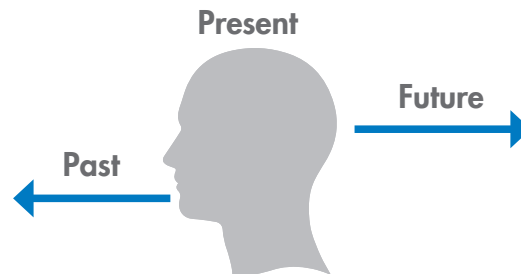


There is much evidence to suggest that people with Future Timelines are strong internal visualisers. They have the ability to 'imagine', to fantasise, to conjure up future possibilities in visual images. Because the present is quickly telescoped into the past they are often poor external visualisers. This means that their observation skills can be deficient and they may not always retain external images for long. People with these characteristics often misplace such items as car keys!

Past Timelines

Some people's timelines may be reversed, with the future behind them and the past in front of them (Figure 6). This is the Past Timeline (P-Time) where energy tends to be more focused on identifying obstacles rather than seeing opportunities.

Figure 6. Past Timelines

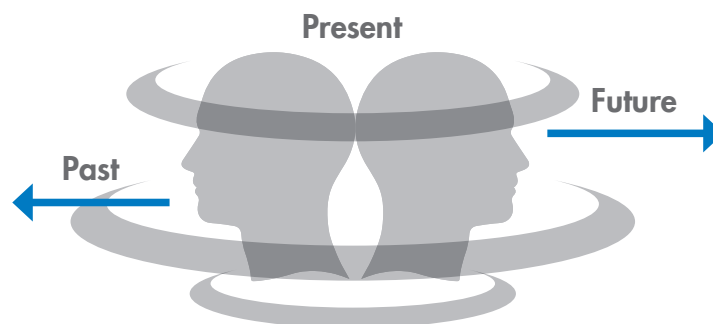


These people may long for the good old days when things were much better than they are now. The future is a very uncertain place and likely to be much worse than the current situation. So it is better to stay anchored in the past rather than risk the uncertainty of the future. When faced with a new opportunity, P-Time people will look for obstacles to support their inner feeling that life may be better with 'the devil we know'.

P-Time people sometimes have difficulty in imagining the future. Their skills in visioning may be less developed than others and this can create uncertainty that may lead to fear of the unknown. Often though, their external visualising ability is good and they can be excellent observers. This orientation to the past correlates well with the Seeing Obstacles pole of the Risk-Orientation scale. People with Past Timelines prefer the safety of how things are now and may even be pessimistic about the future. They prefer 'sameness' rather than 'difference' and are more comfortable with change when it is incremental rather than radical. Strong Past Timelines also seem related to slower psychological time.

Between the above two extremes we have various combinations favouring either the past or the future, with a neutral balance when the timelines are in front of us (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Balanced Timelines



Here we tend to live in the present, from which location we are happy to look towards both the past and the future.

Balancing your Timelines

F-Time people will often have a fast psychological time. The world moves at a quick pace as they focus on the future, striving hard to realise the vision they have generated for themselves. Excessive F-Time can cause people to become stressed and even manic, particularly if their internal clock gets out of control. These people need to regularly slow down and activate their P-Time mode. This can be done by setting aside time for personal reflection where the focus is on the past rather than the present. Any of the relaxation activities such as meditation, massage, listening to relaxing music, or personal hobbies can also help.

Conversely P-Time people will often have a slower psychological time, which at the pathological extreme can degenerate into boredom, inactivity and even depression. These people need to have 'a dream' and helping them to create their own personal vision is one of the therapeutic activities that can balance their timeline. It causes them to focus on the future, a place that can be much better than where they are now.

Interacting Timelines

Difficulties can occur when an F-Time person interacts with a P-Time person. Many change agents in organisations are F-Time people and for them, the need for change is obvious as they can see the enormous benefits of improved ways of working. P-Time people, however, are more focused on the past and will have difficulty in understanding the reasons for change, when current ways of working have been developed to optimise efficiency and effectiveness. 'If it ain't broke, then don't fix it', may well be their motto.

F-Time people, focusing on the opportunities, often interact with P-Time people by concentrating on the future, painting a rosy picture of how much better things will be once the new changes are introduced. The P-Time people, however, are focused more on the past and will only see the problems. So the solution is obvious: when interacting with P-Time people, F-Time people need to slow down and make the connections between what has occurred in the past, what is happening in the present and how this relates to the future. They should point to some successful interventions in the past and show how successful these were for the organisation.

To a P-Time person, changes should be presented as small increments from what is currently happening. No leaps should be made from the present to the future. Each proposed change should be dealt with in detail and the links carefully made between what is happening now and what might happen in the future. All possible problems should be identified and discussed, with adequate time allowed for the P-Timers to reflect on whether every potential obstacle has been identified. This procedure may take some time, but it is well worth the investment if it leads to acceptance by those with P-Timelines.

Likewise P-Timers, when influencing F-Timers, need to look more to the future and be prepared to discuss possible opportunities. Opening up a dialog about future scenarios will allow F-Timers to feel committed and enthused about the future that lies in front of them.

In summary, the future focus pole of the Time Focus scale is correlated positively (0.68) with Seeing Opportunities and the past focus pole of the same scale is correlated positively (0.61) with Seeing Obstacles. Someone high on Future Focus is more likely to be risk-accepting whereas if they are high on Past Focus they are more likely to be risk-averse.

The Risk-Orientation Model

The five sub-scales (Optimism, MTG Energy, Multi-Pathways, Fault-Finding and Time Focus) load together to give us an overall view of a person's approach to risk. Figure 8 arranges the sub-scales into a pentagon that gives a visual representation for the key risk factors. This is the Risk-Orientation Model, sometimes known as just the QO₂TM Model.

Figure 8. The Risk-Orientation Model

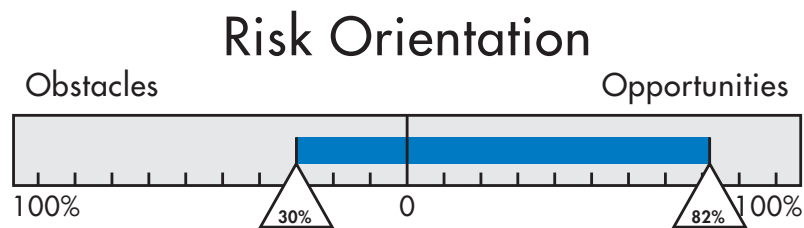


This model is used to calculate an overall number (the QO₂TM) which combines the sub-scales and enables people's approach to risk to be assessed. This number is generated from a 50-item profile questionnaire (McCann, 2000) which calculates a person's score on each of the subscales.

The Opportunities-Obstacles Quotient (QO₂TM) is defined as the ratio of the energy put into seeing opportunities to the ratio of the energy put into seeing obstacles. The resulting feedback is a seven-page report indicating how the respondent is likely to approach various situations at work.

Looking at the example in Figure 9, a typical result shows an 82% score towards the Opportunities side of the scale and 30% score towards the Obstacles side. The QO₂TM score is calculated by dividing the Opportunities score by the Obstacles score. This result indicates that this person would be 2.7 times more likely to see the opportunities rather than see the obstacles.

Figure 9. QO₂TM score of 2.7



What does it mean?

In the business world, a balance is necessary across the Opportunities-Obstacles scale. As Zen wisdom says, "Nothing is possible without three essential elements: a great root of faith, a great ball of doubt and a fierce tenacity of purpose." In business we need that root of faith; it helps us look for the opportunities that match our beliefs. A tenacity of purpose gives us the persistence to 'hang in there' and seize the opportunities that come our way. However, also essential is a measure of intelligent doubt to prevent us from 'tilting at windmills' or 'waiting for Godot'. Having an orientation to Seeing Obstacles allows us to have a measure of doubt, which anchors us to reality and prevents us from making mistakes. When we have a good ratio between Opportunities and Obstacles, we can be a powerful force at work.

But what is a good ratio and how does it relate to particular jobs and work situations? These are ongoing questions that have formed the basis of many years of research into this new and fascinating scale.

Some general results

Development of this scale was based on a sample of over a thousand people in a variety of jobs in Canada, the USA, the UK and Australia. Eighty percent were men and twenty percent women. They worked in a variety of jobs covering the human resources, finance, production and general management areas.

In brief, the data shows that the median value for QO₂TM score is around 2.2. This is simply the value where 50 percent of people (i.e. 500 in this sample) have a higher quotient and 50 percent have a lower quotient. 25 percent of people have a ratio above 3 and 25 percent of people have a ratio below 1.5. Half the sample had a ratio in the range 1.5 to 3.0. Using this norm data I have defined Pollyanna characteristics as existing in the upper 5 percent of the sample, which is a QO₂TM score of greater than 5, and Eeyore characteristics as existing in the lower 5 percent of the sample, which is a QO₂TM score of less than 1.

In the classic book, *Pollyanna*, by Eleanor Porter (1969), we can see how a positive attitude affects those with a negative view of life. Pollyanna helps Aunt Polly, Mrs. Snow and Mr. Pendleton see the world in a new light and the book is a tonic for anyone who feels at all depressed.

Pollyanna's behaviour is often described as a naïve form of optimism. She believes that things will always turn out for the best and that no matter what happens, there is always something to be glad about. There are never any obstacles, only opportunities!

Pollyanna would cope with any misfortune by playing the 'Glad' game. She teaches her game to several characters in the book who have a decided tendency towards seeing the obstacles. It lifts their spirits enormously and has a major effect on their lives.

Pollyanna's noble view of the world is not always an asset in managing a business. The reality of the business world is often summarised, tongue in cheek, by Murphy's Law, "If anything can go wrong, it will." Therefore it is important not to sit back and accept fate in a positive way, as Pollyanna does. It is essential for managers to identify all the obstacles that might occur and have an alternative plan of action to implement, should things go wrong. Looking for the problems and pitfalls and planning to avoid them can help prevent Murphy's Law from happening.

Managers who suffer from *Pollyanna-ism* can cause major problems at work. Their enthusiasm and belief in a positive outcome can sometimes lead to decisions that are regretted later.

The left-hand end of the scale defines someone who focuses excessively on the obstacles and is usually quite pessimistic. Pessimism is a mood state that affects all of us to varying degrees. However, too much pessimism can lead to apathy and inaction. The benchmark for the left-hand end of the Opportunities-Obstacles scale is the donkey Eeyore, from A.A. Milne's classic book, *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926).

Eeyore is universally recognised as being gloomy about life and anticipates the worst in most situations. He constantly expects things to go wrong. However, if we were all like Eeyore and saw difficulties in everything we did, then maybe we wouldn't get out of bed in the morning! A focus on Seeing Obstacles is very important in the business world as it can prevent serious mistakes from being made. But excessive negativity or Eeyoreism is something to be avoided at all costs.

The research results enable a norm standard to be drawn up, as follows:

QO ₂ TM Score	Characteristics
>5.0	A tendency towards Pollyannaism – high risk-acceptance
3.0 to 5.0	Mainly focused on Opportunities – risk-acceptance
1.6 to 3.0	Balance between Opportunities and Obstacles
1.0 to 1.6	Mainly focused on Obstacles – risk-aversion
<1.0	A tendency towards Eeyoreism – high risk-aversion

Derived Scales

Two useful subscales can be derived from the five QO₂TM scales – Resilience and Handling Change.

Resilience describes the ability to withstand, recover from, and adapt to adversity and stress. It is strongly correlated with persistence and determination, and the ability to look for ways around any obstacles that may arise. Personal and social competence also play a role along with the ability to bounce back from negative situations. Our Resilience Scale is derived from a combination of items from the MTG Energy, Multi-Pathways, Optimism and Time Focus scales. Resilient people have 'high hopes', having the *will* and the *way* that help them approach a goal with a positive emotional state, a sense of challenge, and a focus on success.

Handling Change is derived from a combination of the Multi-Pathways, Optimism, Fault-Finding and Time Focus Scales. It is a measure of how likely you are to adapt to change or even initiate it.

Conclusion

Obstacles are a fact of life. They crop up in every project, no matter how much forward planning is undertaken. What makes the difference in successful teams is how project leaders and their teams react when problems arise. Obstacles treated only as stumbling blocks impede progress. Obstacles treated as stepping stones keep a project moving.

Why is it that some people treat obstacles as an opportunity to take a new direction where others use them as an excuse to give up? In this e-book I have summarised my research into Risk-Orientation and briefly explained the five key characteristics that will determine whether someone is risk-averse or risk-accepting. This knowledge is critical in managing individuals and teams.

Teams composed only of Pollyannas will be entrepreneurial but have a higher probability of failure. Teams of Eeyores may never change because there are too many things that could go wrong. The nature of individuals has a strong influence on how well a team works. The middle part of the Workplace Behaviour Pyramid gives important information on what to expect from team members when opportunities and obstacles arise.

Answer to question in the Preface

*The left-hand graphic shows a glass half-empty;
the right-hand one shows a glass half-full.*



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About the author



With a background in science, engineering, finance and organisational behaviour, Dick McCann has consulted widely for organisations such as BP and Hewlett Packard. He is co-author of *Team Management: Practical New Approaches*, with Charles Margerison; author of *How to Influence Others at Work* and *The Workplace Wizard: The Definitive Guide to Working with Others*; and co-author with Jan Stewart of *Aesop's Management Fables*. Dick is co-author and developer of the Team Management Systems concepts and products and also author of the QO₂TM Profile, *Window on Work Values* and *Organisational Values Profiles* and the *Strategic Team Development Profile*. Dick has been involved in TMS worldwide for over 30 years.

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