



Gestalt International Study Center Newsletter

Focus on: Optimism

Number 3, June 2007

We have all faced the struggle to maintain optimism in the face of discouragement and adversity. Can we learn to be more resilient? At GISC we focus on the positive, teaching a way both of seeing and articulating what people are doing well, which builds the trust and respect needed to support awareness and growth. In this issue, Cape Cod Training Program Co-chair **Joe Melnick** talks about optimism as a set of skills that can be practiced and learned. **Ben Alexander** and **Suanne Williams-Lindgren** write of how a positive, optimistic focus has impacted their work, and **Nancy Hardaway** writes about expecting the best as a leader.

We hope you find some food for thought, something useful, and something to pass along!

Learning the Skills of Optimism: Interview with Joe Melnick by Nancy Hardaway

Joe Melnick is co-chair of GISC's Cape Cod Training Program, and a long-time faculty member. Both a therapist and organizational consultant, Joe is also Editor of Gestalt Review and teaches worldwide. He co-authored "The Willing Suspension of Disbelief: Optimism" (Gestalt Review, Volume 9 (2005), Number 1). Joe was recently at the Center to teach in the Cape Cod Training Program, and we asked him to speak with us about optimism.

GISC: What is your definition of optimism?

JM: It's a form of competence that helps us deal with the unknown - with uncertainty. We never know what's going to happen. When we get up in the morning we don't know whether it will be a good day or a bad day, whether someone will die or we'll win the lottery. It's also a process. You are optimistic in relation to something, to yourself, another person, an event. It is also an attitude. It's a focus on what's positive and what's going well. It's an open stance supported by curiosity.



Joe Melnick

It's wide rather than a narrowing. What it is not is how it's talked about traditionally, as a fixed trait - as something unalterable within us.

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Unfreezing the Conflict by Ben Alexander

It was a tough situation. Carol, an African-American woman in her mid-fifties, was the leading candidate for promotion to the position of budget director when she was struck by a life threatening illness that required major surgery and a long period of recuperation. During her absence the organization selected Bob, a younger and less experienced white man from its Management Development Program for the position. A few months later Carol returned to her former position of deputy director reporting to Bob.

The relationship that the organization had hoped for did not materialize. Problems related to their numerous conflicts eventually led to Bob giving Carol a lowered performance rating and Carol responding with allegations that she had been discriminated against because of her race, sex and medical condition. My client asked me to intervene in the matter and bring about a resolution that would eliminate possibilities of a formal investigation or legal action.

Realizing that the issue was grounded more in relationship dynamics than the facts that framed the conflict, I by-passed the standard fact-finding, mediation path for an approach based upon the Cape Cod Model. I moved toward the Model as a tool for unfreezing the conflict and allowing it to flow to a place where resolution might be possible. I began by asking both of them to talk to me individually about what was most important to them in terms of meeting the needs of the organization. I then asked them to tell me about some of the successes which they had created while working together under stressful conditions.

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Leader's Log: Expecting the Best by Nancy Hardaway

Day 100 – 100 Days! Here's that point in my transition when I "should have" completed my incoming plan and be fully engaged in action. Or so some say. Instead, I'm past the point of newness and the freedom to just get to know what's going on, and not yet into the sense of easy accomplishment that comes with deep knowledge. I hold on to a longer time frame and a belief in a positive outcome.

Day 115 – I've stepped into the role of student, and feel so fortunate to be taking the program Executive Personality Dynamics for Coaches with an incredibly skilled and animated faculty focusing on Gender, Narcissism, Perfectionism, and Depression. In my break-out group on case work we are all struck by the learning that comes from the varied perspectives on each case.

The values of acceptance and love that are at the core of this Center continue to move me...I am changed myself for being a part of GISC.

Day 120 – As we focus on the leadership challenges for the non-profit sector, I'm thinking a lot about influential leadership versus hierarchical leadership. Also about measuring outputs when they are not clear-cut and data driven compared to bottom line profit.

Day 123 – Next Phase started today. I have a fondness for this class since it's the first I took at GISC. I met all these great faculty in this class – Katherine Greenleaf and Mary Anne Walk, and Ann Tarlton, and Mel Bucholtz. The model they've developed for approaching decisions as a process rather than a line in the sand or a point in time is empowering!

Day 127 – I'm thinking about how to articulate what we teach in a way that doesn't use jargon or creates a wall that shuts out the uninitiated. We explore and teach the skills of inner awareness and relating to others and how to use them to be more effective in the world and have more satisfying outcomes.



Nancy Hardaway

Day 133 – The Cape Cod Training Program begins and I find myself sharing that this program changed how I see the world, how much less judgmental I am. Seeing that people are doing the best they can makes me less critical and more open to myself and others, to differences of opinion.

Day 134 – Talking with Joe Melnick about happiness and optimism made me ask myself the same questions. I realize that just like a good golf swing or a tennis serve, I have to practice the skills of optimism, continue to work with the experts to develop them. Expecting the best, from someone, something, myself. Accepting that the uphill and downhill in every mountain climb still make for a great view and the smallest step gives me a new perspective.

Day 140 – There are days of craziness when I don't know which task to take up first, and then I look out the window at the bold sculpture in our garden and watch the birds at the feeder and know that things will all work out.

Day 148 – I just realized that though I'd intended to move slowly into this position, I'm still really pushing myself to move fast.

Day 150 – The values of acceptance and love that are at the core of this Center continue to move me. I see it and feel it in the theory, the practice, and the experiences people have here. These gentle values infuse everything and have a powerful impact for change and I am changed myself for being a part of GISC.

Nancy Hardaway is President and CEO of GISC. She invites your comments and feedback. Contact her at nhardaway@gisc.org



Mastering the Art of Optimism: Positive Psychology in Practice October 12 - 14, 2007

This program will investigate what Positive Psychology has to offer in the way of concepts, practices and techniques for cultivating contentment with the past, satisfaction and happiness in the present, and courage for the future. Our goal is to transform the concept of "optimism" into something you can use. In presentations, exercises and small group discussions we will examine the positive practices embedded in GISC's Cape Cod Model, the current interest in happiness at work and in life in general, and present a panel of experienced leaders of the Appreciative Inquiry used in organization development interventions worldwide.

For a complete brochure, or to register, visit www.gisc.org

Visit our website: www.gisc.org

Unfreezing the Conflict

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Recognizing what they had achieved together even while in a difficult situation provided a foundation for having both Bob and Carol talk to each other about the organizational goals most important to them and what they could both do to ensure that those goals were met. With this as a backdrop I was able to put them into a discussion of what they each needed from each other to have the relationship needed for success. Out of this emerged a new vision of working together.

As they both expressed ideas for creating a better relationship I was able to suggest a manner in which Carol's performance rating could be modified to more accurately reflect her contributions along with areas where improvements were needed. After a period of deliberation she decided to accept the modification and subsequently withdrew her complaint. In a follow-up inquiry that I conducted a few weeks later, they both agreed that things were better and that they were working through their problems.

Ben Alexander is a principal in the firm Alexander Consulting and Training, providing consulting and training in the area of human resources management. You can reach him at benact1@aol.com



Send Us Your Success Stories!

We would like to hear from GISC trainees how you have used what you have learned from us. How have the skills, new perspectives and awareness, or theoretical models benefitted you and/or your clients? The success of GISC is the success of our students as they take the work out into the world. Let us know how we are doing!

Send your stories to Cynthia Cook at cynthia@gisc.org

Coming Up at GISC:

- **Achieving a Richer Life through Integration of Eastern & Western Ways of Being**
with Sonia March Nevis & Mel Bucholtz
July 22 - 25, 2007
- **Advanced Supervision**
with Sonia March Nevis & Joseph Zinker
July 31 - August 3, 2007
- **Finding Your Developmental Edge**
with Sean Gaffney, Edwin Nevis & Penny Backman
September 16 - 19, 2007
- **Leadership in the 21st Century**
Next Program begins October 21 - 26, 2007

Focusing on the Positive

by Suanne Williams-Lindgren

Imagine – you're asked to coach a manager who for years has excelled at tasks but had a reputation for being highly critical and a bit mean, resulting in a demotivated, scared team. In the past I'd interview all involved inquiring about strengths but especially honing in on the weaknesses- what are they doing wrong, what isn't working well? (Admittedly I was the kid who given the job of finding 8 things wrong with the picture could quickly come up with 10.) By the time the feedback session was completed, you practically needed the Jaws of Life to reenergize folks, ugh.

Today, influenced by my experiences at GISC and the work being done with Appreciative Inquiry and in the field of Social Constructionism, I work to increase the manager and team's awareness of their positive experience. Interview questions are designed to get at the health and vitality that's present and/or in the group's ground.

For instance:

1. Thinking about your work here and being part of this team, tell me about a time in which you felt the most alive, fulfilled or excited about your involvement with this group. What was it about that time, yourself, and/or the others who were involved, that made it so memorable?
2. What have you accomplished/done as a team that makes you proud?
3. Tell me about a time you worked for a manager you thought was an excellent "people manager". What did he/she do that made them so effective?
4. Tell me about a time you thought Manager A. was at her personal best as a people manager. What was the situation? What happened, what was it about what she did that was memorable for you?
5. What do you value the most about Manager A. as a manager? Why?
6. What 3 wishes do you have for Manager A. that will enhance her effectiveness as a manager?

By focusing in on their experiences, their stories about what is and/or has worked well, optimism begins to grow and fuel the positive energy needed to address the work that lies ahead. As

a result, I find the results of this approach far exceed, and are much more sustainable, than what most people ever imagined at the onset, and for me personally, I'm reminded again and again there's more life in the light than the darkness.



Suanne Williams-Lindgren (left)

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Suanne Williams-Lindgren is an OD/HR consultant presently working with Martin's Point Healthcare as a Senior Human Resources Business Partner. You

"The seemingly simple process of becoming aware of our habitual (unaware) thoughts, actions, beliefs, and feelings produces change. This is the core of our optimism. Change happens just by paying attention to what is." (Nevis & Melnick, "The Willing Suspension of Disbelief: Optimism" in *Gestalt Review*, Vol 9 [2005], Volume 1)

Learning the Skills of Optimism: Interview with Joe Melnick *continued from Page 1*

GISC: Who or what research has contributed to your thinking around optimism?

JM: There's a whole bunch of research. John Gottman's work on families that a main predictor of couples' satisfaction and longevity is a 5:1 ration of positive to negative utterances or comments. That work has been supported in organizational research. Good work teams, good organizations have a minimum of 3:1 positive to negative interactions. Probably the most well known researcher is Martin Seligman. He assessed people applying to sell life insurance and found that optimism was the primary predictor of success –more important than personality characteristics such as extroversion, and even intelligence. It has also been found that people with an optimistic approach to life are healthier, live longer, have more compelling relationships. Appreciative Inquiry is a popular approach to intervening in organizations that utilizes a positive perspective. And of course there is all the research on resiliency and placebo effects.

GISC: What is the difference or relationship between optimism and happiness?

JM: There is a lot of overlap between words like optimism, happiness, hope, joy and flow. Having said this, I'd say that optimism as a perspective leads to more contentment and fulfillment. It is present-centered, so it diminishes worrying. Most of what we worry about isn't worth worrying about. And that's what gets in the way of happiness. Happiness is joy in the moment. It's a sensation.

GISC: How does optimism make a difference in how you work with clients?

Most clients, whether therapeutic or organizational, seek our services because something is wrong. We have an assumption imbedded in Western psychology that if you tell people what's wrong they get better. This belief is so basic it's not often challenged. In my experience most people know all too well what they do wrong. They might ask, "what are our problems?" but nine times out of ten they already know. What they don't know is that their energy is stuck on a negative focus, on what they are doing wrong.

We also have a second assumption that people know what they do well. This is also often untrue. Being optimistic, we focus on the competency of the system or individual. By really learning about their competence they change.

Our optimism is also imbedded in our core theory of awareness and our theory of change. We believe that awareness just by itself leads to change. This awareness frees up energy and

change naturally happens. When we work with clients we appreciate that, no matter how much trouble they are in, they are doing the best they can – that their current stuckness was originally an attempt to solve a dilemma. So our first task is to be curious, open, interested. We look for competency. We then find a way to help them become aware of their competence. This isn't easy. Many of us learn to brush the positive aside and focus on what's wrong. But when people can accept their competence not only do they develop, but they are also more able to look at problems with more hope and confidence.

GISC: Can you give a specific example?

JM: Awhile ago I was brought in to consult to a group that was spending their time being conflictual, resulting in unfinished tasks and bad feelings. I helped them to see the positive of their interactional style, the tremendous energy the group has, how everyone is involved, able to speak with passion, etc. Aware that how they interacted was positive but also had some significant costs allowed them to develop other ways of interacting around energy, pace and completion.

GISC: Can optimism be learned?

JM: Absolutely. I believe that it is embedded in every individual and every system. It is what allows us to get out of bed

each morning. It is both a personal orientation and a relational co-creation. We can all learn to be more resilient, more buoyant. We can all learn to focus on competency, on what we do well, on living in the present. These are the ingredients. But the optimistic core is in us all. It is what moves us forward, what helps us develop. Basically, we teach people to be aware of it.

GISC: What are the skills of working with optimism?

JM: Appreciate that there is always more than one person involved in any situation and that there are no bad guys and good guys.

Realize that much of life is absurd. When we teach in our programs we really laugh at ourselves. Life is too serious to be taken seriously all the time.

Learn to see in a different way. We teach a very defined way of seeing and hearing – we use the phrase "soft eyes, soft ears." Build trust so people will listen, so people understand we aren't looking for pathology, for what's wrong.

Learn to embrace uncertainty as the norm. Give feedback without judgment. And did I say above all learn to have fun?

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Gestalt International Study Center was founded in 1979. Using our practical and positive Gestalt approach, we teach the skills that energize and transform relationships and systems. We offer personal growth programs and skill development for executives, consultants, coaches, and clinicians, throughout the year and throughout the world. Learn more about us as www.gisc.org