

8 October 2020

Thoughts from Staff College.....the eleventh in our series of Faculty blogs

On the Other Hand

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Who would you rather be led by: a pessimist or an optimist? It's actually quite a difficult question. By constantly focussing on the negatives, pessimists can sap your enthusiasm. How much more enjoyable to be led by someone who sees only the positives, who greets every day with a smile.

But on the other hand, optimists do have a worrying tendency to get themselves and their followers killed. General 'Uncle John' Sedgewick, a Union Army General in the American Civil War, is mostly remembered for his last words at the Battle of Spotsylvania in 1864 which were: *"Why are you dodging like this? They couldn't hit an elephant at this distance."* Sadly, for Uncle John, they could, and they did.

Napoleon famously said that *'a leader is a dealer in hope'*. Of course, you can take this to extremes, like Uncle John or French general Ferdinand Foch, who in 1914 said, *"My centre is giving way, my right is retreating, situation excellent! I am attacking."* To be fair to Foch, the comment was made as the French successfully counterattacked the invading Germans in what became known as "the Miracle of the Marne". However, quite how inspired his men felt by his analysis has not been recorded. More recently, it may have been blind optimism that encouraged Nasa to risk the launch of the Challenger Shuttle on an unusually cold January morning in 1986, or to hope that, in February 2003, the damage to the Columbia's wing caused by a piece of thermal tile was not as catastrophic as some feared.

You may recall that, when asked to name the greatest difficulty facing a Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan said: "The opposition of events", although it was later altered by someone to the more poetic "Events, dear boy, events."

So, what are leaders supposed to do?

Quite often in these blogs we pose questions for you to ponder. On this occasion, please allow me to offer my view.

I think a leader should be stoical in recognising that there are many factors over which he or she can have no control and so complaining or worrying about them is simply wasted effort. As the saying goes: 'life isn't fair'.

Therefore, leaders must keep their nerve, so that they are not unsettled by sudden or unforeseen reverses, taking the long view rather than twitching in response to every incident. At the same time, they also need to be poised to grab any fleeting opportunity with both hands and wring every last drop of advantage from it.

Leaders must always be a realist with themselves. There is no advantage in fooling yourself that things are better than they are. As [Admiral Jim Stockdale](#) observed: *'You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.'* How do you get a better view of reality? By remaining curious and by asking questions until you get a satisfactory answer.

I remember being told by an old General, many years ago, that leaders need to *'energise the circuits'* of their organisation. By this he meant that they need to inject a sense of vigour and purpose into those around them. This can often only be achieved by a personal visit – emails are notably poor for imparting energy, I find!

So, in summary: to their followers, leaders must present as positive, energetic role models, based on a realistic appraisal of the situation but with a heavy bias towards optimism. As Henry Ford observed: *'Whether you think you can, or you think you can't - you're right'*, and of course, one of the main functions of a leader is to convince people to think that they can.