



Book Seeing Red Cars

Driving Yourself, Your Team, and Your Organization to a Positive Future

Laura Goodrich
Berrett-Koehler, 2011
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Recommendation

By default, most people’s brains dwell on the negative – what they do not want to have happen – as opposed to the good things that could happen. Psychologists claim that people make their own reality. Those who think negatively will experience negative outcomes. Conversely, if you think positively, good things will happen. That’s the hopeful theory that trainer and consultant Laura Goodrich presents. She details how you can reorganize your thinking to be more positive and benefit greatly from the results. If you can follow her advice – somewhat dimmed by the book’s awkward phrasing and lack of organization – and utilize her numerous exercises and tools, you are almost certain to improve your mental state and to think more optimistically in the future. *BooksInShort* recommends the author’s sensible intent to help you and your team become more positive.

Take-Aways

- People naturally focus not on the best possible consequences, but on the worst.
- This habit springs from genetics, social conditioning and past experiences.
- On average, 70% of a person’s thinking is negative.
- A negative orientation often results in negative outcomes.
- Thinking about positive outcomes can help make them happen.
- With practice, dedication and effort, you can train your brain to think positively.
- These efforts create new neural pathways to replace the ruts of negative thinking.
- Rewiring your brain requires an organized system that involves carefully thinking about yourself, outlining your “wants” and taking specific action to achieve them.
- Redoing your thinking is a radical change that takes time, patience and focus.
- Organizations reap the benefits when their employees think positively.

Summary

Do You Think About Good Things, Not Bad Ones?

People naturally think about negative outcomes, not positive ones. And bad outcomes often afflict negative thinkers. On the other hand, great things frequently take place when people think positively. It’s as if you buy a red car and then see red cars all around you. That perception makes sense. You are so excited and proud about your beautiful new car that you think about it a lot. With your red car as your primary focal point, red cars start to appear everywhere. The message is, “You get more of whatever you focus on.” Imagine good things, and they’ll occur, but the same is true of bad things. The golfer who worries about hitting a ball into the lake will slam it

into the water every time. If your attitude sets your direction, it makes sense to orient your thoughts toward a positive path. Take three steps:

1. **“Think it”** – Promise yourself that you will actively think only positive thoughts and ponder only positive consequences. Be absolutely serious about this plan and regard it as a contract with yourself. Your goal: to actively control your thinking process.
2. **“See it”** – Visualize the outcomes you want. See them clearly and in detail.
3. **“Do it”** – Take positive action to achieve the outcomes you want. Persist. Work hard to affect the things that you can. Celebrate when outcomes go well. Plan your actions on a daily, weekly and monthly basis.

Get Out of Those Mental Ruts

Stay constantly aware of your thinking processes and mental habits. Do not slip back into the rut of negative thinking. People think 12,000 to 50,000 separate thoughts daily. Of these, 70% concern future outcomes they don’t want. Why? Dr. Ellen Weber, CEO of the Multiple Intelligence Teaching Approach (MITA) Brain Institute, explains that negative “social conditioning and life experiences” shape pessimistic thinking. Such common parental admonitions as “Don’t get hurt!” condition kids to think about negative consequences, not positive ones.

“Focusing on what we don’t want...is our natural tendency, and it’s been going on a long time.”

Additionally, many people think of themselves as undeserving of success or unable to achieve it. You must overcome that hurdle to begin to think positively.

How’s Your Amygdala Working?

The brain’s amygdala is in charge of “fear and concern” responses. It goes into fear mode in the presence of physical danger or emotional distress. Fear mode sparks the release of cortisol, a chemical that causes harmful physiological consequences. Humans can use positive thinking to bypass the amygdala’s fear mode. Thinking positively avoids the release of cortisol and, instead, conditions the brain to release serotonin, which correlates with “creativity, innovation and focus.” These are the opposites of fear and worry.

“Many people are simply unaware that their thinking is negative.”

The brain possesses the remarkable capability to create new neural pathways. Through positive thinking, you can prompt your brain to rebuild itself. The process of neural change is dynamic, not step-by-step, so think optimistically at all times. By so doing, you can “rewire your brain” and experience more positive outcomes.

Start Out Small

Do not try to make dramatic changes in your thinking overnight. That would trigger the amygdala and the release of cortisol, with all its negative consequences. Instead, stretch yourself mentally, but in a small way. Involve yourself in new activities, including the development of new skills. Face your fears and work hard to overcome them. Be specific about what you hope to accomplish in the various areas of your life.

“More important than the words you say to others are the words you say to yourself.”

Picturing positive outcomes for upcoming events can help them turn out that way. To illustrate how this visualization technique works, brain scientist Alvaro Pascual-Leone had two research groups play the piano. The scientist taught one group which fingers to use to create certain notes and had them practice for “two hours a day for five days.” The other group also learned which fingers to use to create the notes. For two hours a day for five days, they imagined playing while listening to those notes being played. Later, both groups performed the notes on the piano, and both learned to play the piano equally well.

“One thing leads to another, whether it is positive or negative.”

Visualization is not complicated. Picture yourself successfully doing what you hope to accomplish, for example, giving a great speech. Visualize this with detail and clarity.

Avoid negative people. Seek positive companions, and associate with them. Four states cause mental unrest: “volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity.” To counter them, maintain a clear vision of what you want to accomplish. Help yourself with visual cues – memory triggers that remind you about your new mental journey. The “red cars” parallel can come in handy. Some people put on red clothing to remind themselves to think positively. Others arrange red objects in their workplaces as mnemonics.

Some Practical Exercises

To be a positive thinker, you first must understand yourself. Create these lists and worksheets to fulfill the six steps of the “Red Car Toolsheet”:

1. “Passions/Interests and Strengths”

Begin by writing down your passions, interests and strengths. Research indicates that only 20% of people actively use their personal strengths on a daily basis. To identify your strengths, consider which categories you might fit into, for example: “Achiever” – You always want to put points on the board. “Command” – You like to run things. “Deliberative” – You are a methodical thinker. “Includer” – You enjoy bringing people together. Your passions and interests bring excitement to your life.

2. “Passions/Interests, Strengths and Values”

Add your values to your list. Select meaningful principles that have a direct impact on your next task, listing your important goals. Common values include courage,

determination and integrity. Include five values on your worksheet.

3. “Bucket List”

Brainstorm the things you want to do or accomplish. Then create a list of your goals.

4. “Well-Rounded Wheel”

Create a diagram with a small oval in the center and spokes emanating outward. On each spoke draw a circle depicting a broad category of your life, such as relationships, health and fitness, career, spirituality, education, and so on. Draw a black dot on each spoke to mark how well you are doing in that category. The nearer the black dot is to each circle, the better you’re doing in that area.

5. “Well-Rounded ‘I Want’ Statements”

After thinking carefully about all the above topics and exercises, and writing your responses, create a series of “I want” statements for each major life category. Examples: Money category – “I want to invest the maximum percentage allowed into my 401(k) plan.” Career category – “Within the next year, I want a career that I enjoy, where I feel challenged and valued.”

“Feedback is...the most powerful tool to move you along...toward what you want.”

Be crystal clear about what you write down. Make your “I want” statements “positive and affirming.” They need to be “specific, measurable” and based on a “timeline.” Thus, “I want to read more” is not effective. Instead, write: “I want to read 20 pages a day.”

Base your “I want” statements on your “passion, strengths and values”; your professional competence and skills; and on outside factors that affect your goals, such as technological advances and marketplace considerations. Do not think short term.

6. “Bridge Worksheet”

For your next self-discovery exercise, create a Bridge Worksheet. This depicts four categories that form a “bridge to a well-rounded you.” List your current situation (for example, “I work out sporadically and am in pathetic shape”); what you wish to achieve (“I want to make X amount within the next 18 months”); what you “must have” (“I want to plan one special family/friend activity a month”); and what would be “nice, but not necessary” (“I want to invest at least 10% of my income in the stock market or real estate market each month”).

“Changing deeply ingrained habits and achieving our ‘I wants’ requires time, effort, discipline, and physically planning, tracking and checking off action steps daily, weekly and monthly.”

Relate your “want” statements, your current situation assessment, your must-haves and your nice-but-not-necessary listings to the categories from your wheel diagram, and create timelines for each item. Writing everything down will focus your thinking and planning.

Spell Things Out

Be completely clear with yourself regarding your “I want” statements. Otherwise, your subconscious mind may undermine your efforts to become a more positive thinker, and “I don’t want” might sneak back into your thinking. Personal awareness is all-important. Being aware of your thoughts and motivations helps you control your life. When you are not alert, your subconscious takes over and keeps you in a negative mode. How you think about your work affects how you think about your life and how you interact with others. The “I wants” that relate to your profession function as a compass, orienting you and helping you deal with situations that arise and personalities you must handle.

“Awareness is key. Without awareness, past experiences and subconscious social conditioning win.”

Listing your “I wants” on a piece of paper is not enough. You also need a formal plan of action to achieve them. Attempting to rewire your brain to think more positively is a bold undertaking. Developing your current way of thinking took years, so don’t expect your mental patterns to change overnight. You will need an action plan that you can monitor on a “daily, weekly and monthly basis,” checking off your various steps as you complete them. Expect to take at least “six months to a year or more” to change your thinking.

“Action Traction” Worksheet

To fulfill your “I want” lists, create an Action Traction worksheet. List your “personal must haves” and your “professional must haves,” along with the action steps necessary to make them happen. This worksheet helps you close the gap between planning and action. When you act and achieve, you create “new pathways” in your brain. Moving ahead, however, requires additional action steps. Break your primary goals down into discrete action steps in an organized way. If you are not organized, you will accomplish little or nothing. Plan your activities along whatever timeframe makes the most sense: daily, weekly or monthly. For example, if you put “read 20 pages a day” as an “I want” item, place it on your daily to-do list. Then, on your Action Traction worksheet, note, “Read one or two books a month.” Post actions that relate to all your “I wants.” To implement your program, follow these helpful tips:

- Never end your day, your week or your month until you have determined what you want to achieve the following day, week or month.
- Never “plan a meeting or conversation” until you first define your goal for that activity and visualize achieving that goal.

Constructive Feedback Is Helpful

Ask your friends, family members or work colleagues to provide feedback on your progress toward becoming more positive. Many people find it difficult to ask. Don't be afraid. Tell people you hope to improve yourself and need their help. If you can't find others to help, be prepared to ask yourself important questions on a periodic basis: "What lessons have I learned?" "What has worked?" "What hasn't?" Only attempt to make a few changes during a set period of time. The best way to speed your own change is to help others accomplish their goals.

These Mental Techniques Also Are Useful for Teams

The exercises described above work for individuals and for teams. Teams who follow the self-assessment process and list the "wants" that come up can secure valuable clarity on who they are as a group and what they want to achieve. Team members can proactively work through these exercises or use them to help members who get offtrack.

"People have to want to change."

Your organization will benefit when everyone adopts the "Red Car" thinking approach. To reshape your culture positively, teach everyone to "focus on wants," not on worries or fears. Such a transformation can be hugely energizing.

About the Author

Laura Goodrich co-owns Impact Productions and is a radio, film and television host.
