

Radical Optimism

Audree Fletcher

Hello.

My name is Audree and I help public service leaders with strategy, delivery and service design stuff.

And I'm here today to talk to you about optimism.

Now. When I pitched this talk, I wanted to come and inspire you all to be ambitious. To think big and bold - to aim for a radical reimagining of public service, not just digitisation and incremental improvement of services. The sort of thing you might expect from big thinkers like Rachel Coldicutt, or from Cassie Robinson, or Richard Pope.

And, I'd encourage you to try to reimagine your ways of working - starting with adopting some of the ideas in the Radical How paper that my colleagues Public Digital Tom and Andrew wrote.

Because I did - and still do - believe we have the opportunity for that level of ambition right now.

But I also know that ideas are often easy, and it's implementing them that's hard. And I can't help but keep coming back to the gap that's still there between ambition and action. I think it's an optimism gap. How do we get ourselves and our teams into the headspace ready to even contemplate some of this.

I think we need to do some inner work. Because we have to believe it's possible.



Why “radical” optimism?

If I’m gonna be honest, if your experience has been anything like mine, the last decade has felt like a bit of a dumpster fire. When everything sucks, optimism is the the brave choice - but also absolutely necessary. It’s an act of rebellion in a world that feels like it’s constantly feeding us reasons to feel hopeless.

I say “radical optimism” because I think it IS radical to be an optimist in the face of a barrage of criticism, in the face of heartbreaking political events, austerity, and pandemics.

Image: a green dumpster, on fire



Deeana Arts on Pexels

And we need to be optimistic because optimism is vital. The future is wide open. It is unknowable and unwritten, and there are versions of it that are brighter and better than the one we've been living recently.

Image: a sketchbook open to two blank pages - with paintbrushes and a flower visible

When pessimism is this prevalent, optimism matters more than ever

But we can only get there if we believe it's possible: that's why optimism counts in an era where pessimism is prevalent.

So I'm going to talk to you for a little while about optimism.

And then I'm going to talk to you about nurturing optimism - for yourself, for your teams, for your service because it IS a practice you can develop.

Optimism has a brand problem

It's sometimes hard to have conversations like these though.
Because optimism has a brand problem.



When I say optimism, most people think of this. Sunshine and rainbows.

This is “dispositional optimism”. I’m sure you’ll recognise this type of person. I have a few of them in my life and being around them feels like being injected with liquid sunshine. I am NOT that person.

The last time I was in roomful of dispositional optimists, they asked me to stop being such a downer.

I was bringing attention to issues I thought we couldn’t afford to ignore - they complained I was bringing down the vibe.

In contrast, if you put me in a roomful of pessimists, I’ll talk about the reasons for hope, what we’ve learned, the strengths we can build on. And they’ll tell me I’m being overambitious, naive, or ignorant about just how HARD change will be.

Image from [The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt - Netflix Series](#)



That's because I'm what psychologist Martin Seligman calls an "explanatory optimist".

I'm critical - but that doesn't mean negative.

I'm not wearing rose-tinted spectacles, or dark glasses - instead I look clearly at the situation and recognise how hard things are whilst firmly believing that we CAN and WILL find a way to something better.

I call myself a "realistic optimist" and recently I've heard other leaders describe themselves similarly - for example as a sceptical optimist, or pragmatic optimist. But they always do so with a caveat.

Photo of Audree and Zoe Fletcher

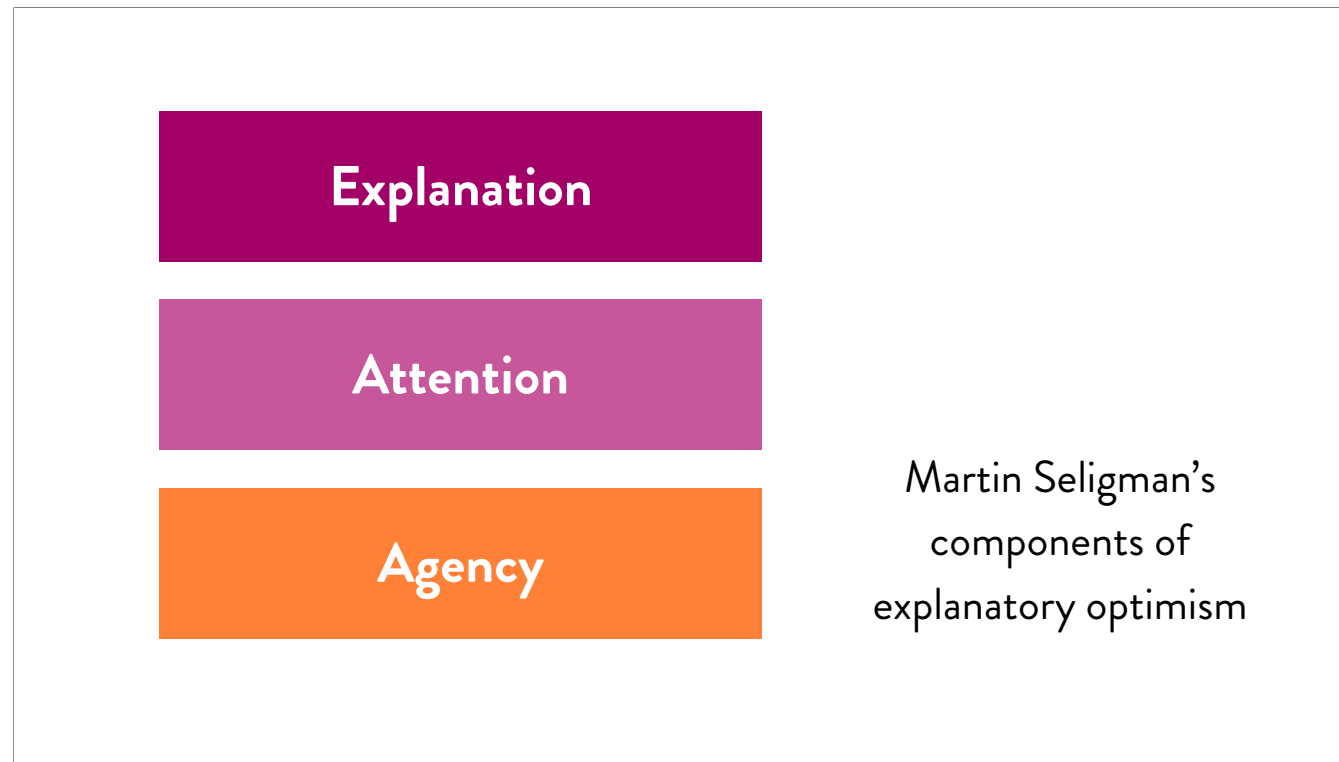
Where optimism is seen as naive, ignorant or delusional, pessimism might make you look smart.

But it also keeps you stuck.

Because out there optimism is seen as naive, ignorant or delusional. And often the safest way for someone to appear intelligent is to be cynical by default.

But it's not the smart choice. Because pessimism all but guarantees failure.

The mess we've been in - it's not because we don't understand the challenge we're facing. It's not because we're lacking ideas. I think it's because we've struggled to find the optimism. Unless we escape the unhelpful thought patterns that keep us stuck, and unable to imagine better, we'll never get there.



So - what can we do about it?

I think we can try to nurture realistic optimism and use its power to achieve change in and through our work.

And I'm going to break down how we can do that by using the distinct elements of explanatory optimism that Martin Seligman identifies in his research - explanation, attention and agency.

Let's get started.

Explanation



Over recent years civil servants have been dehumanised, and criticism of the civil service actively weaponised, in service of a populist agenda. In my 20 years in public service I’ve never seen morale so low. I have friends and colleagues who started to internalise the public narrative (on the left of the screen) that civil servants are lazy, incompetent, obstructive, and incapable of reform.

This public narrative seeps into a harmful civil service inner monologue - the things on right of the screen. Most of us know in ourselves that the things on the left aren’t true - we don’t think these are innate characteristics of civil servants. But there are still plenty of civil servants with an internal soundtrack telling them things like “the status quo is simply too powerful for change to stick”, and “leaders are too risk averse to try new things”.

Few ideas have as much power to shape the world as our view of ourselves and our view of other people.

Ultimately we usually get what we expect.

This is a problem because, truly, few ideas have as much power to shape the world as our view of ourselves and our view of other people. Because ultimately you get what you expect. The stories we tell ourselves fuel our pessimism by making people believe problems are permanent and pervasive - and ultimately that perpetuates a self-fulfilling prophecy.

**How you explain what happened in the past,
what is happening now, and what you think
that means for the future - it all opens up or
closes down what will be possible for you.**

This is why “explanation” is a core component of realistic optimism. How you explain what happened in the past, what is happening now, and project that onto what it means for the future - it opens up or closes down what will be possible for you. So what can you do?

**Hear and challenge your
unhelpful internal
narratives.**

**Believing an organisation's
bureaucratic immunity
response is too powerful for
things to change
*gives it that power.***

**Collect, curate and share
realistically optimistic stories
to get out of your own way.**

My first recommendation is that you hear and challenge your unhelpful internal narratives.

You get to choose the narrative you use to make sense of the world - so examine yours and your organisation's. There is no objective truth.

If we tell ourselves most people can't be trusted, we'll treat each other that way, to everyone's detriment. If we believe an bureaucratic immunity response is too powerful for anything to change, then it will be. We'll have given it that power.

Identify and dispute the harmful negative stories. And collect, curate and share better, more optimistic and realistic stories. To help you and your teams can get out of your own way.

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**Collect, curate and share
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- One example of a time I found our stories were getting in our way was in a civil service role I had a while back. My department tended to get maybe 100 letters a year from members of the public, and suddenly we started receiving thousands every month. We were quickly overwhelmed and to get it back under control I had recruit an army of letter-drafters from among my colleagues. This was a top-heavy organisation filled with people who believed responding to public correspondence was an admin task too junior for them - so the unhelpful mindset here was one of hierarchy and "this isn't my job". I chose to challenge this thinking by getting our two Permanent Secretaries to join in.
- They sent out a message emphasising that as civil servants it was everyone's job - including theirs - to answer letters from the public. Then they sat in an open space for everyone to see, for 45 minutes every morning for a week, just drafting. It was great.
- *Because* I'd changed the story from "everyone is being asked to do gruntwork" to "this is important, meaningful work that no-one is too senior to do", we got rid of the backlog and were able to sustain those higher volumes of correspondence without falling behind again.

Choose how you frame failure

**Acknowledge the reality
of challenging
situations.**

**Look for what good can
be taken from it.**

My second recommendation is that pay attention to how you talk about failure - and remember that you get to choose how you frame it.

If you deny the reality of a challenging situation, you risk not learning from it. Accept the situation, look for what good can be taken from it, learn lessons for the future, and find the silver linings.



“I wouldn’t be learning anything if I got it right all the time”

When my daughter Zoe fails at something, she likes to tell me that she just hasn’t succeeded yet. Psychologist Carol Dweck would say Zoe has a growth mindset - a belief that she isn’t limited by her ability, that she can grow and achieve if she puts in the effort and learns from her mistakes. She frames her failures in a way that leave her determined and better equipped to improve - not in a way that leaves her dejected.

We should all be more Zoe.

Photo: Zoe Fletcher

Avoidable failure	Basic mistakes, blips and slips that are usually preventable and so should be prevented
Unavoidable failure	Complex, multicast failures that couldn't have been predicted or prevented
Intelligent failure	"Good failures" that deliver meaningful insights without big losses

- from "The Science of Failing Well" by Amy Edmondson

For something more sophisticated than primary school - Amy Edmondson sets out three types of failure: 1. avoidable failure 2. unavoidable failure. and 3. intelligent failure.

I think this is a useful framework for people and teams considering how to frame their failure.

Avoidable failures are things you could have predicted - and so frame these failures as cautionary tales you can learn from and prevent in future.

Unavoidable failures couldn't have been predicted - so focus on your narrative on improving how you respond to unavoidable failure in the future.

And intelligent failure is intentional - it's a deliberate approach consisting of low stakes, high learning experiments that teams run in order to learn through doing.

Because, where the risks aren't high, you often learn quicker if you just stop debating your assumptions and test out the design.

You can use this to change how your team are thinking and feeling about things that haven't worked out. You might not have achieved what you wanted YET, but look at everything you've learned. Look at the foundations you've put in place. Look at what you've tested and ruled out. That's all progress.

Show up optimistically.

**Priming is powerful - for
you and for others - so
plan how you want to
show up.**

And finally, I recommend that you consider how you show up, and choose to show up optimistically. You do get to choose how you show up. You're not a passive observer of any situation - if you go into a meeting thinking someone is going to be a dick, then your behaviour will make it more likely; if you go into the meeting determined to come out the other side with a better relationship with that person, you make it more likely. If you prepare for a meeting thinking, "how do I need to show up to get the best outcome for everyone in the room?", you're more likely to achieve that. Don't underestimate how powerful that priming can be. For yourself and for others.

“Regardless of what we discover, we must understand and truly believe that everyone did the best job they could given what they knew at the time, their skills and abilities, the resources available, and the situation at hand”...and the stories they told themselves.

The Retrospective Prime Directive - by Norm Kerth - with my addition

And that's why I love using the Retrospective Prime Directive (though you'll see I've added a bit). For those who haven't come across this before, it's a statement often reaffirmed at the start of meetings where a group plans to reflect on how things have been going, and how they might be improved. It creates psychological safety for giving and receiving feedback - because it primes people to be kind, to give the benefit of the doubt. As a result, reflections and feedback are more likely to be shared, more likely to be objective and constructive, and so are more likely to lead to improvement.

Because the implicit story here is that **everybody in the session is in this together.**

Attention

The second element of realistic optimism is attention.

I referred a few minutes ago to some of the harmful public narratives we hear.

Well unfortunately the impact of that can be heightened by pessimistic attention and information processing styles.

How many times do
the players in white
pass the ball?



There's quite a famous video of an experiment run by a guy called Dan Simons.

Video: Youtube link - the invisible gorilla.

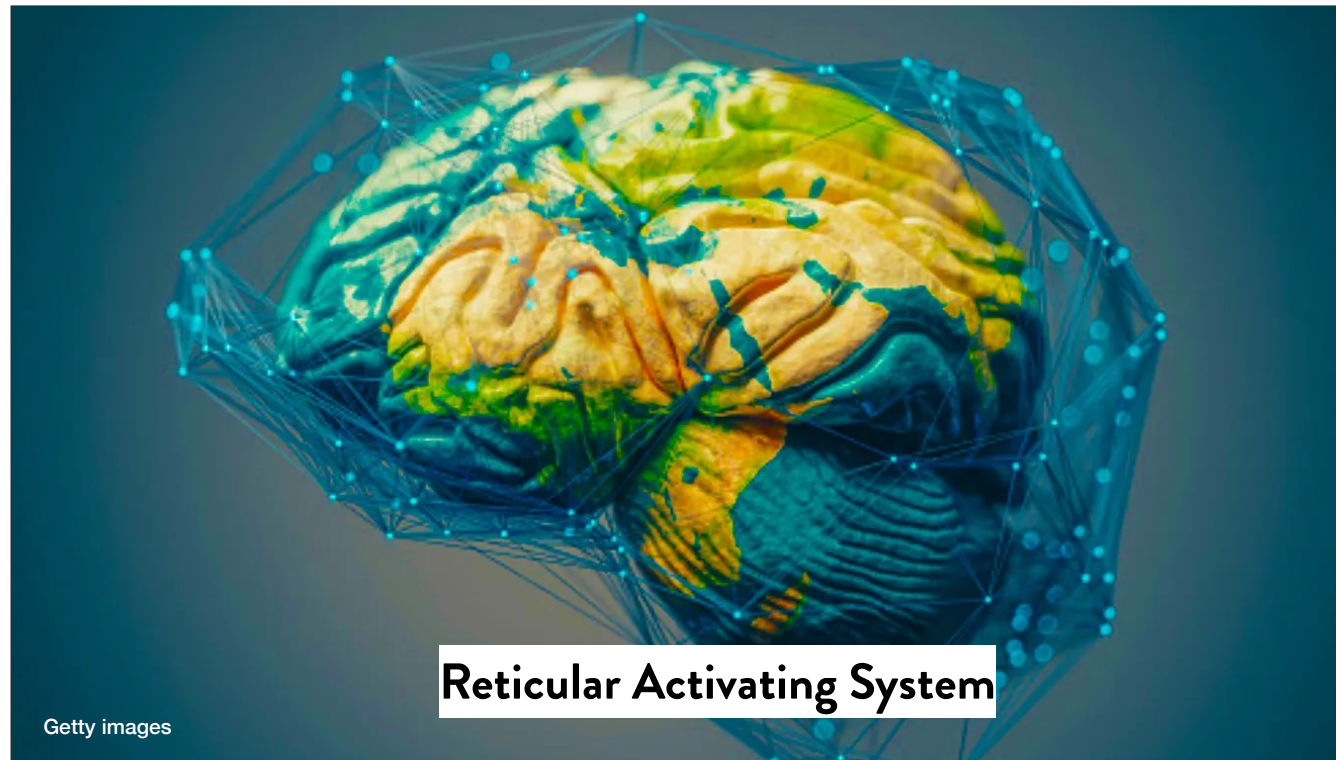
On average, 50% of people seeing this for the first time don't notice the gorilla



This experiment highlights something called inattention blindness.

Essentially, we fail to notice seemingly obvious things when we've focused our attention elsewhere.

Image: still from the invisible gorilla video



We notice the things we're looking for, and don't notice the things we're not. A part of our brain - called the reticular activating system - scans the vast array of information bombarding your senses, filtering out what's you think is irrelevant and highlighting what matters.

A dispositional optimist selects the positive cues from their environment and filters out information that doesn't match their brighter outlook; pessimists do the opposite, paying more attention to negative cues, not noticing the positive aspects of the situation.

Realistic optimists see most clearly because they're actively looking for both.

They invite in other perspectives, search for opportunities and risks, and look for evidence that their instincts and assumptions might be wrong. Realistic optimists recognise that you get to choose what you pay attention to.

So what does that mean we should be doing?

Image: a yellow, blue and green brain, with a network of blue string all around it, with shiny spots at the intersection of bits of string

**Draw attention to the reasons
for optimism**

**Don't assume people have
spotted the small wins
(the gorilla).**

**It's hard to maintain a
narrative of "nothing ever
changes" when people
keep pointing out change.**

If you're working in a pessimistic context, seek out and draw attention to the reasons for optimism that are invisible to those around you. Pessimists are often too focused on the negatives to see beyond them - so don't assume they've spotted the gorilla.

One nice way I've seen change being spotlighted is through "you said, we did" comms. Have any of you noticed those?

That's where an organisation makes a habit of telling people how it responded to their feedback, and what they changed as a result. It's quite hard to maintain an internal narrative that "no one ever listens" or "nothing ever changes" when you are being shown proof to the contrary regularly.

However you choose to do it, make a habit of pointing out and celebrating your small wins. By drawing their attention to these reasons for optimism, you'll reap the benefits - of increased morale, motivation and resilience when things get tough.

Where did you start and how far have you come?

What is going well?

What has changed - however small?

What strengths and assets do you have and can grow?

What alliances can you build and nurture?

What opportunities are there?

Where is there energy and momentum you can tap?

If you're feeling pessimistic, or are around people who are, set aside time regularly to ask yourselves questions like:

Shift your time horizons

**“Change mostly happens
step by step with maybe
some backsliding, muddling
and stalling, not via one
great leap”.**

- Rebecca Solnit

If you're struggling to do this, perhaps you need to look at how you're thinking about change. Examine the time horizons you're expecting to see significant change over. Rebecca Solnit says that “we are impatient creatures, impatient for the future to arrive and prone to forgetting the past in our urgency”. She also reminds us that change “mostly happens step by step with maybe some backsliding, muddle and stalling, not via one great leap” - that one step forward, two steps back thing is normal for change. Because most radical change is usually much slower and harder work than we remember looking back.



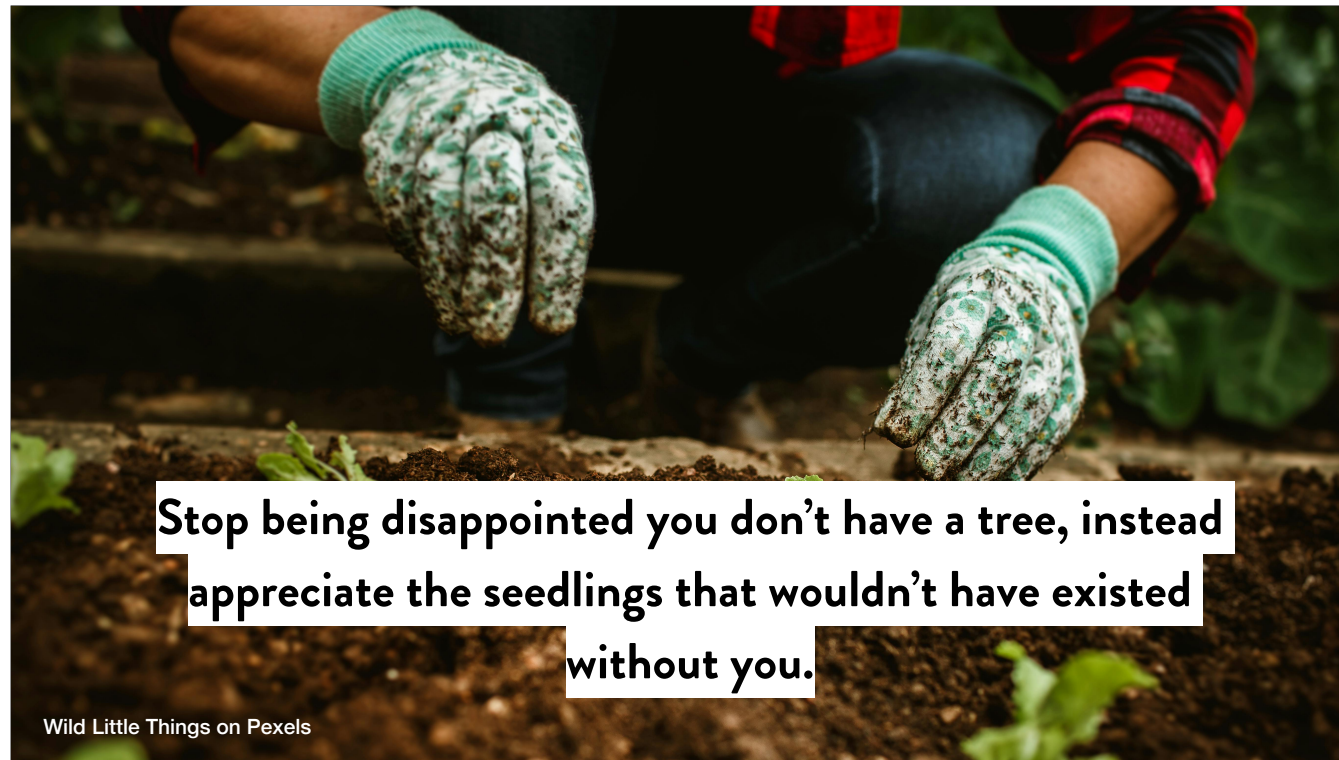
Robert Louis Stevenson once said “Don’t judge each day by the harvest you reap but by the seeds that you plant” - so look for your seedlings. And not just from the seeds that you planted in the soil, but also the ones that were carried in the wind and established themselves elsewhere. Whenever you’re working in the open, whenever you’re sharing, whenever you’re collaborating, you are creating impact far beyond your immediate focus. Give yourself that credit.

Over recent years it has become clear to me that a great deal of the impact I’ve had in my career wasn’t apparent to me at the time. A few years down the line I’ve then often seen my work re-used by teams elsewhere; and seen business cases I’ve written turn into actual products that make a difference long after my departure. Even things I thought had completely failed have sprung back to life, when their time eventually came and the conditions were right for them.

It’s not just me. The other veterans in the room will have experienced this too. The same will be true for you.

By Helena Lopes on Pexels

Image: a person’s hands - wearing gardening gloves, adjusting the soil in front of them, in which there are some plants peeking out.



They say that “most people overestimate what they can achieve in a year and underestimate what they can achieve in ten years.” - Gates’ Law. Stop doing that. Stop being disappointed you don’t have a tree, and start noticing and appreciating the seedlings that wouldn’t have existed without you.

By Helena Lopes on Pexels

Image: a person’s hands - wearing gardening gloves, adjusting the soil in front of them, in which there are some plants peeking out.



Bring the real talk

Avoid problems like wishful thinking and toxic positivity by inviting in *and hearing* your pessimists, cynics and critics.

And finally, for those of you working in highly optimistic workplaces or under highly optimistic leadership, bring balance by injecting some reality. This is essential for avoiding problems like toxic positivity and wishful thinking. You can do this by inviting in other perspectives, especially your cynics and critics. It takes humility and confidence to hear what they have to say sometimes, but it's more than worth it because they will help you spot underlying tensions, weaknesses, constraints so you can strengthen your plan and get better results. It's self-defeating to suppress or ignore those voices - they're giving you critical information about things you might not otherwise see or anticipate.

I have an example of this from my time at Test and Trace. The comms messaging for COVID testing as a service was consistently fiercely positive - which you'd expect from defensive comms in a time of crisis. It made me worry though that we weren't seeing enough of the reality of how our service was being experienced. We invited representatives in from excluded and disproportionately impacted communities, for regular "listening sessions" so we could hear how their experience of our service was evolving over time. It was really hard to hear the many ways in which we were letting people down but what we learned in those sessions was vital. Because it equipped us with the information we needed to do our best work. This is the sort of thing people mean when they encourage us to sit with our discomfort - it's worth it for the growth in the end.

Hopes and fears exercise

Forcefield analysis

Sabotage workshops

Pre-mortems

Fail-fests and cautionary tales

That's quite a high stakes information gathering strategy, of course - you don't have to go that far.

There are plenty of tools you can use to structure sessions that help ground the unrealistically optimistic - here are just five. I'm going to give you a link at the end so you can go and find out more if you want.

There are "hopes and fears" exercises that help flush out concerns; forcefield analysis for working through driving forces and restraining forces (or "anchors and engines"); "sabotage workshops" for helping people call out their own sabotaging habits so they can work on them. You can use pre-mortems to help groups consider in advance what might go wrong; and the sharing of cautionary tales is a great way to remind people how things have failed in the past - to reduce the stigma of failure, normalise intelligent failure, and most importantly so helps us do better next time round.

Agency

The final component within realistic optimism is agency.

By agency, I mean people's belief in their ability to control and influence what's going on around them. People who see events as determined by others see themselves as passive agents, and tend to explain success and achievement as down to luck, or chance, or powerful people. This, of course, becomes self-fulfilling - if they don't believe they have the power to influence things, they won't try, and so they can't succeed. In contrast, optimists view themselves as active agents - they trust their ability to influence the environment and people around them.

So - how can you grow a sense of agency?

The big challenge of workplace pessimism is that it creates a default of passivity. If people don't believe they are capable of influencing things, they'll actively avoid taking action - because who wants to fail? If the default in your workplace is passivity (passiveness), then you need to be actively convincing people of their individual and collective ability to make a difference, before they'll start to put in the effort.

So how can you grow people's sense of agency in the workplace if they can't see past the challenges they're facing?

**Take a banded mastery
approach to growing agency**

**There is nothing like
seeing yourself actually
changing things for
fuelling your self-belief.**

Psychologist Albert Bandura described how to grow our belief in our own agency.

(1) He lists encouraging people (which frankly is a bit vague). (2) He says to share vicarious experiences - so showing them that people just like them have done whatever it is, to make it feel within their reach. But he says the most powerful way by far of growing someone's sense of agency is through mastery experiences. This is quite straightforward - mastery experiences simply involve taking on a new challenge and succeeding at it. Start off with easily achievable objectives and then, just as video game designers do, slowly increase the difficulty level as their capability and confidence grows. Can you imagine how quickly people would abandon a video game if the first level was wicked hard? Take note - and take a banded mastery approach to growing agency - because there is nothing quite like seeing yourself actually changing things to fuel your self-belief.

**“Do what you can, with what
you’ve got, from where you are”**

- Franklin D. Roosevelt

So what might this look like in the workplace?

Well, you don’t want to start off with something that is going to fail and drain your energy and optimism as a result. So focus first on changing things you’re certain you can influence. As Roosevelt said: “do what you can, with what you’ve got, from where you are”. So what can you and your team change? Your tasks? How you work? How you prioritise? How you collaborate? How you tell the story of your work? Pick something small but relevant and impactful. You can steadily grow your ambition from there.

Just get started

**The best think you can
do if you're feeling stuck
is get started.**

**Little is as precious,
when it comes to change,
as the optimism that
comes from momentum.**

If people don't know where to start? Getting that right doesn't matter as much as starting somewhere - you need to build up your momentum - so don't agonise over what the right first thing to do is, as there's never a single path. Something I've been using with clients is a no regrets list - a list of totally doable things we're sure they need to do and can be getting on with even while they're still figuring other things out. It helps them escape analysis paralysis. And the simple act of getting started is usually massively clarifying and often opens up new opportunities. There's just so much you can't see until you actually get stuck in.

Feeling overwhelmed? What is the smallest meaningful experiment you can run or change you can make?



If folks are feeling overwhelmed? Narrow your focus more - are they trying to do too much at once? Are they starting too big? Ask yourself, what's the smallest meaningful change you can make? Prioritise taking action over doing something big - so deliver the first useful thing: test an assumption, create and share a prototype, make a small improvement. You might be familiar with the concept of a Trojan Horse in transformation projects - well consider these Trojan mice. Trojan mice are an idea from a guy called Peter Fryer - they're small, well-focused easily understood changes that don't need loads of coordination, don't need loads of approvals, you can just crack on. Work at a pace you can sustain and you'll soon see that steady and consistent delivery of Trojan mice adds up to very significant change over time. And - a healthy sense of agency in the teams delivering them.

Image: beige background, and two hand-crafted wooden mice, with little leather tails. In front of a cracked open walnut, and a brazil nut.

**Play with distance and
constraints to open up the
possibility space**

**When people suspend
judgment, even if just a
little, they start to think
much more creatively.**

Finally, if people simply aren't able to see past the challenges and constraints they're currently facing - you should try using design approaches to broaden their thinking.

Sabotage workshops

Futurecasting to 2030

Change cards

Hard and soft constraints

There are some great activities for helping people start exploring and expanding the possibility space, and chip away at some of the things that get in the way. Most of them introduce distance.

For instance, they might be encouraged to think about how someone else might do it, or you might ask them to play a different role (both of these exercises distancing people from their own baggage). Or distance might be in time - how would you do this if it were 2030, with today's constraints having faded into the background.

I run a sabotage workshop that asks people to imagine they were counter-saboteurs, and their mission is to find ways of overcoming the usual organisational self-sabotage that gets in the way of change. Asking people to take on a different persona or role provides just enough distance for people to genuinely push themselves to think differently about what gets in the way and tactics for addressing those things.

There are some really fun speculative design activities you can use - one of my favourites is a futurecasting activity involving getting people to write a newspaper article dated 2030, celebrating what they've achieved and describing what they did differently to make it happen and overcome the obstacles they faced.

The UkPolicyLab's change cards play more directly with constraints - asking people what they'd do if money was no object; or if they had to do it with a 10th of the budget. Or if they had to do it at 10 times the scale, or by the end of the month. Very quickly people realise that there are always more options than they think.

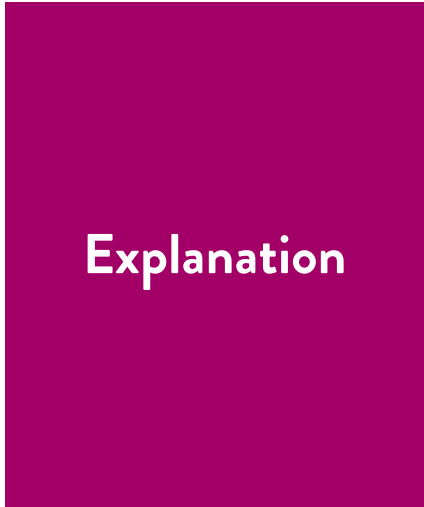
And where I find people are letting existing policy get in the way of results, I'll often run an exercise James Reeve showed me, that involves people identifying which ones are soft constraints that they can adjust or bend; and which ones are hard constraints. I've found hard policy constraints are rarely as hard as people think they are - after all, even legislation can be rewritten if the appetite is there.

These exercises and more invite participants to play around with alternative ways of being in the world. They invite them to draw or script potential futures. To imagine the best that could happen at a time they've been focused on the worst. And they're fun to take part in.

Conclusion

So we're coming to the end now.

I've given you a whistle-stop tour through the major components of realistic optimism - and hopefully given you some ideas for how to nurture it for yourself and in your teams.



Explanation

- 1. Hear and challenge your
unhelpful internal narratives**
- 2. Choose how you frame
failure**
- 3. Show up optimistically**

For explanation I've suggested you



Attention

- 1. Draw attention to the reasons for optimism**
- 2. Shift your time horizons**
- 3. Bring the real talk - invite the cynics in**

For attention I recommend



Agency

1. Take a banded mastery approach to growing agency

2. Just get started

3. Play with distance and constraints to open minds

For agency, if people are struggling to believe they can have an impact then

Design is an inherently optimistic practice

I chose to share all of this with you today because I think designers are particularly well equipped to establish radical, realistic optimism in their workplaces.

We can help people become more hopeful, more brave, and trust more.

We have ways of expanding comfort zones enough to learn through good failure. We have methods for creating spaces in which people can explore, experiment and learn.

Curiosity, humility, collaboration, reframing, making things tangible, being action-oriented. This is a designers' bread and butter.

In my mind that's because design is an inherently optimistic practice.



And we need this realistic optimism because change is hard and slow.
And people - though they make change happen - they're easily discouraged.

It's like those slot machines at amusement arcades - where a dozen people put coins in and see only slight coin nudges here and there - and only the last person gets to see the dramatic results of the contributions that came before them.

You need to remember that public services have improved because of the coins we've all put in the past - even when we don't see the payoff.

And they'll continue to improve as long as people keep believing that their contributions matter. That you can make a difference, that you are making a difference.
Because you are.

Over the next few days you're going to see plenty of examples of people making change happen. You're going to collect lots of ideas and inspiration. And chances are almost all of you will leave feeling more optimistic about your ability to make change happen.

Image: an amusement arcade slot machine



So if you're not a glass half full person, don't worry. You don't need to be.

Realistic optimism means knowing that even if your glass is half empty right now, you know where the tap is and you can refill it.

Stop thinking of optimism as a personality trait - and start thinking of it as a muscle you can strengthen.

Because that's how we resist cynicism and spread hope. To implement some of those bold and radical ideas. To build better public services. And to write story for the decade ahead that is much brighter than the one we've just lived through.

Image by Boom on Pexels

Image: the top of a glass being held, under a tap spout with water coming out

**Links, references, tools
and more for you to
explore at your own pace**



I might have some time for questions.

But either way - if you go here, you can find links to my references, tools and other interesting things.

Thank you for listening.

Image: a QR code

P.S. - a final thought

At SDinGov 2024 I have this talk about optimism and how essential it is to believe we can make change happen (in this case, design better public services) if we want to do so.

I spoke of a realistic optimism - I cautioned against wishful thinking, gaslighting and toxic positivity, and pointed to the need to draw in critical voices, acknowledge the problems and challenges you face, so that you may plan your route to a brighter future with your eyes wide open.

I want to emphasise today, though, that you still must put yourself and your wellbeing ahead of the work. Your feelings are valid. If your context is such that you find yourself unable to summon the belief that you can change things - or if you believe you would have to sacrifice too much of yourself (and your health) to do so - then please do what you need to do.

Honour yourself. You don't owe anyone anything.