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# Ad Astra

*with Michael Shonrock*



## *Practicing Optimism*

I'm a natural optimist. Or, perhaps I should say I'm a practicing optimist, because optimism is a talent that must be nurtured. Some people are born with a gift for playing the piano, inventing new gadgets, or throwing a baseball. But talent alone doesn't get you to Carnegie Hall, bring you the success of Steve Jobs, or take you to the World Series. It takes practice.

It also takes commitment to a goal. Not everyone who is good at making the pivot on a double play will make it the World Series, even with practice and commitment—there is such a thing as just plain bad luck. Take the Cubs—they haven't won a World Series in 104 years. I grew up in Chicago, so I'm a Cubs fan, and you have to be an optimistic to love the Cubs. When I was a kid, I always thought I'd play second base for them. My strategy for getting on base was to lean-in, which works out great in Little League, but the balls start coming faster and harder in high school.

My talent, I discovered, wasn't on the playing field. But, as an educator, I still try to lean-in.

Optimism is the art of recognizing your own strengths—and, more importantly, recognizing and encouraging the special strengths in others. Come to think of it, baseball is a pretty good analogy. A great team represents a combination of unique strengths and talents.

That's the philosophy I embrace as a university president. Not only is it how I choose members of my administrative team, but it's also a good approach for an institution of higher education in general. We're in the business of helping students find their special strengths for this larger team we all belong to called the human race.

One of the things I've learned, largely from the work of Dan Clifton, is the importance of emphasizing and developing strengths.

Clifton was a World War II vet from Nebraska who got a degree in educational psychology on the GI Bill. At the time, it was in vogue for psychologists to study what was wrong with people and attach a label. But Clifton asked the question,

“What if we studied what is right about people?” and became a pioneer in the field of positive psychology.

If you're interested in this approach, you might take a look at a book called “Strengths Based Leadership.” It's by Tom Rath and Barry Conchie. Rath is a New York Times bestselling author and Conchie is a leadership consultant at Gallup, the organization best known for its public opinion polls. But Gallup is primarily a research-based management consulting company, and for more than 30 years, under the direction of the late Don Clifton, it studied more than one million work teams and conducted 30,000 interviews with leaders and followers to discover the keys to leadership.

What Gallup found confirms what natural optimists know by instinct. The most important leadership traits are knowing your own strengths, investing in others' strengths, and getting the people with the right strengths on your team. There's another crucial trait, however, and you might find it a bit surprising. You have to meet the four basic needs of those who look to you for leadership. The basic needs are trust, compassion, stability and hope.

Hope, perhaps, is the most important of all.

We tend to default to the negative in our culture. For example, if we look at the grade card our kid brings home and there are four As, two Bs, and an F, which grade are we likely to focus on?

I'm not talking about the power of positive thinking or something similar. Instead, I'm talking about ownership and action. Wishing alone is powerless. You build hope by encouraging people to find their strengths, by empowering them to use their talents wisely, and by giving them the opportunity to do what they do best every day.

I only wish it would work for the Cubs.

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