Negative Positive

Fiona Charles

Positive thinking and its cousin, an optimistic outlook, are highly regarded virtues in North America today. It's a truism in our culture that optimism and pessimism are deterministic. Most of us believe we can make good things happen with positive thinking and bad things happen with the opposite—that attitude we characterize as "negative" thinking. Author Barbara Ehrenreich says this belief has permeated our society so thoroughly that it is detrimental. In her book *Bright-sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America* [1], she makes a convincing case that unthinking optimism has become our societal norm. So powerful is our belief that we will get what we want so long as we think positively, that we ignore or actively reject contrary evidence or uncomfortable suspicions. People who try to raise and deal with risks or unpalatable truths are stigmatized as whiners. The inevitable outcomes, Ehrenreich argues, are events like the recent financial meltdown.

Sound familiar? If you're a software tester or project manager who cares about communicating and managing project risks, you've likely been on the receiving end of just that sort of blame. You've probably seen projects fail because management wouldn't listen to anyone who suggested failure was coming if they didn't act to prevent it.

Tom DeMarco and Timothy Lister talk extensively about this kind of entrenched willful ignorance in *Waltzing with Bears: Managing Risk on Software Projects* [2]. In particular, they point out the dangers for the risk-conscious project manager of working in a can-do organization. (Project managers are the book's intended audience, but it's also a must-read for testers and test managers.)

I experienced a can-do culture first-hand as the program manager responsible for all the testing on a large and very messy client project. Ostensibly, "can-do" is a positive, problem-solving outlook. That's how executives who implement a can-do culture promote it to their staff and managers. They take pride in its core principle: unqualified commitment. In a can-do culture, the only acceptable response to a task or a problem is "I will."

It's easy to see the attractions. Viewed in the abstract, can-do organizations ought to be happy, productive places where people are dedicated to getting the job done, heroically overcoming obstacles and growing their skills by exceeding challenging goals they didn't believe they could meet.

In reality, the can-do culture at my client's organization had a powerfully punitive side. This became fully evident in our troubled and failing project. The requirement for total commitment drove managers to castigate their staff for using phrases like, "I'll try" or "I'll do my best." People were compelled to sign up to anything asked of them, even if they believed it to be impossible. The unspoken rule seemed to be, "Never mind if it's a lie— just commit to solving the problem." Deceive yourself with positive thinking, the better to deceive others.

In this kind of culture, it isn't possible to have a meaningful discussion about risk, because you either have to pretend it isn't there or commit to making it go away ASAP. Significant project risks are often intractable, yet any risks our project manager disclosed to the mandatory weekly PMO meeting were met with the question, "What are you doing to manage this down to zero by next week?" Similarly, a project manager who reported a "yellow" or "red" status met implacable pressure to get to green by the next week. On our project, which ended up more than $10 million over budget on an original projection of $7 million, green status was never going to happen.

DeMarco and Lister talk about an organization's ability—or inability—to live with uncertainty. Their book helped me understand what was going on in that place. A can-do organization has zero tolerance for uncertainty. (That's inherent in the "total commitment" principle.) So, as Demarco and Lister point out, although a can-do organization may not blame someone for being wrong, it will always blame people for not knowing. And when a can-do organization eventually finds it can't do, it flies into a complete tizzy where the blame may really hit the fan.

On our project, the combination of escalating failure and the organization's demands to state the unknowable and commit to the undoable proved too much to bear for the managers above me. They cracked and began lying to the PMO. I got out when I understood what was happening, so I wasn't there for the inevitable blame storm that followed the project's end.

I've described an extreme example of an institutionalized can-do culture. But what happened on this software project happens to some extent on projects everywhere. According to DeMarco and Lister, "Our infatuation with positive thinking and a can-do attitude has fixated us on the best outcomes as we ignored the various realities that could make such outcomes impossible" [3]. And, from the same book: "We are all enjoined to adopt a can-do mentality in our work. And there's the rub. Saying the name of a risk is an exercise in can't-do. Risk discovery is profoundly at odds with this fundamental aspect of our organizations" [4].

In fact, if we agree with Ehrenreich, it's profoundly at odds with this fundamental aspect of our society, not just our organizations.

And yet, as testers (and project managers) we have no choice. However optimistic we may be in our personal lives, we must be pessimists in our work. We cannot allow our society's "relentless promotion of positive thinking" to sabotage our critical thinking skills and our realism about risks. Our job is to call attention to reality—whatever our managers may think, and however much we dislike and fear it.

Ehrenreich argues for an outlook she calls "post-positive thinking" [5], where we all exercise our intelligence skeptically and strive for realism. *Bright-sided* should be a standard reference work for testers.

References
[1] Ehrenreich, Barbara. *Bright-sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America.* Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2009.

[2] DeMarco, Tom and Lister, Timothy. *Waltzing with Bears: Managing Risk on Software Projects.* Dorset House, New York, 2003.

[3] DeMarco and Lister, page 16.

[4] DeMarco and Lister, page 114.

[5] Ehrenreich, page 195.