

Executive Digest

From the Executive Coaching Centre

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Determined Optimism

Photo Credit: Inge Maria

NIWA, the National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research, reported that in March this year huge rainfall totals were experienced across the upper North Island, with over 300% of normally recorded in some places.

Bear a thought for the construction industry! It has been a terrible start to 2017 with these huge downpours causing disruption and mayhem. If you lead such a project you would no doubt be feeling concerned about delays to the construction programme and possible cost overruns.

When teams get under these types of pressure they typically start to display signs of distress:

1. Behaviour which is often unusual or inappropriate, for example, aggression, avoidance, withdrawal or 'odd' behaviour
2. Thinking which often includes poor concentration, memory lapses, confusion, poor decision making
3. Emotions such as negativity, over-reactions, irritability and outbursts
4. Physical signs such as headaches, hangovers, fatigue or significant weight changes.

How should leaders deal with adverse situations and subsequent team distress? Years of excellent researchⁱ tells us that there are three proven ways to face adversity.

1. Optimistic leaders need to keep telling their teams that these bad events are temporary, that they have confidence in their team's ability to bounce back quickly from disappointment, even disaster. "The next construction season is very unlikely to be this wet!" The setbacks need to be faced squarely and innovative improvements made to construction programmes. Optimistic leaders never display foolish naivety and are typically determined to adjust programmes and budgets to reflect the temporary reality of today.
2. Optimistic leaders help their teams to compartmentalise their frustration and helplessness. Just because a serious setback has occurred in one area does not mean failure in all areas. Optimistic leaders use sound achievements in one area to brighten every area of the project.
3. Optimistic leaders stop their teams blaming themselves for events outside their control. They clamp down on counterproductive blame, focus on celebrating successes and on building the confidence of the team. They encourage their teams to internalise success and build upon it.

It has been an extremely difficult start to the year for many in the construction sector, however with determined optimistic leaders and receptive teams, we can make the most of these troubling times.

ⁱ Seligman, Martin. *Learned Optimism*. New York, NY: Pocket Books. 1998. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Learned_optimism