



White paper

A leader's guide to overcoming obstacles

Four steps toward opportunity

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How can a motivated leader increase his or her ability to understand the obstacles in the path ahead? The answer lies in understanding how the human brain works when facing challenges and pondering opportunities.

Brains are wired to survive, not thrive

We have the brains of survivors. We have the brains of wily and resourceful people who were good at perceiving, escaping and learning from danger. The people who faced challenging circumstances and survived were able to reproduce and pass along their traits to further generations.

Our ancestors were so good at avoiding danger, the skill of looking for and reacting to threats literally became wired into our brains. This is called the negativity bias – our brain's tendency to notice, remember, value and act upon information about threats more than information about opportunities.

In our minds, neutral information is more often interpreted as a problem than a harbinger of possibility.

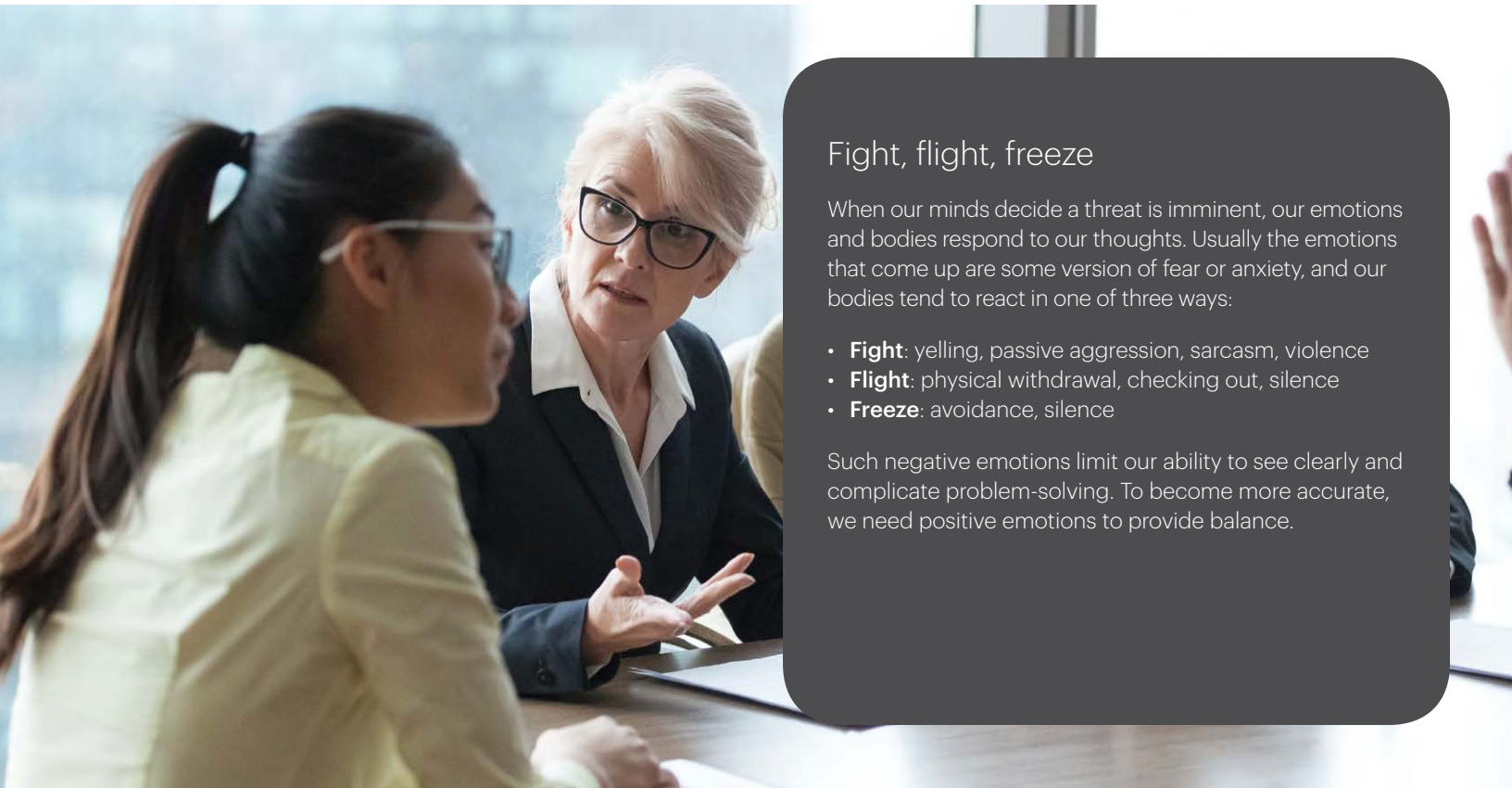
Negativity bias is just one in an ever-growing family of “cognitive biases” or ways our brains are wired to pay attention to some information and ignore other information. Cognitive biases are not opinions – they are better thought of as errors or mistakes in perception. They are unconscious and unintentional, but they still affect our problem-solving and decision-making in critical ways.

The power of positive emotions

Barbara Fredrickson, Ph.D., a positive psychology researcher at UNC-Chapel Hill, asked the question “what good are positive emotions?”

Her “broaden and build” theory suggests the value of positive emotions is two-fold.¹ First, positive emotions broaden the brain's perspective. When we have a broader perspective, we are more likely to identify opportunities as they present themselves. Second, positive emotions spur us to build physical, emotional and social resources for use in the future.

Additionally, positive emotions can “undo” the counterproductive physiological effects of negative emotions, like when someone tells a joke in a tense meeting. It's called the “undoing effect,” and it's a powerful tool if used consciously. It's the secret of turning a problem into a possibility.



Fight, flight, freeze

When our minds decide a threat is imminent, our emotions and bodies respond to our thoughts. Usually the emotions that come up are some version of fear or anxiety, and our bodies tend to react in one of three ways:

- **Fight:** yelling, passive aggression, sarcasm, violence
- **Flight:** physical withdrawal, checking out, silence
- **Freeze:** avoidance, silence

Such negative emotions limit our ability to see clearly and complicate problem-solving. To become more accurate, we need positive emotions to provide balance.



Four steps to turn obstacles into opportunities

Frequent and complex obstacles can make big demands on a leader's ability to slow down and make a careful analysis. Keep in mind while it may seem overly complicated at first glance, this is a skill like any other. The more you use it, the faster and more effective you will become.

- 1 Understand the obstacle.** A key aspect of understanding the obstacle you are facing is to comprehensively understand how you are thinking about that obstacle. What do you think are the causes, what emotions do those causes create for you, and what have you already done to address the problem?
- 2 Check for cognitive biases.** Cognitive biases are unintentional and unconscious, and they interfere with our ability to see situations, other people and ourselves accurately. To outsmart cognitive biases, ask questions and seek outside perspectives that will help you get the information you missed so you can proceed with all the facts.
- 3 Reframe the obstacle as an opportunity.** When we feel positive emotions, we see more opportunities and are more likely to build resources to capitalize on those opportunities. There are lots of ways to induce positive emotions, and the most effective method for accurate problem-solving is to consider your true purpose around the obstacle. How can you use this obstacle to grow? How could you solve this problem in a way that strengthens your relationships?
- 4 Act purposefully on what you can control.** Since it's irrational to act on what you cannot control, focus your energy and attention on what you can control or influence. That's how you will solve your problem and capitalize on opportunities.

1. Fredrickson, B.L. (1998). What good are positive emotions? *Review of General Psychology*, 2(3). Retrieved from <http://www.unc.edu/peplab/publications/Fredrickson%201998.pdf>

Truist Leadership Institute

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