

EXECUTIVETRAVEL

Advice and insight for—and by—today's executive

Your business needs hope

executive coach

by [Karlin Sloan](#)

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“Hope inspires a feeling of well-being and is a spur to action.”

—Jerome Frank, M.D.



Harry Hutson and Barbara Perry, authors of *Putting Hope to Work: Five Principles to Activate Your Organization's Most Powerful Resource* (Praeger Publishers, 2006), know something about what happens when there's hope, and when there isn't. They define hope as "an orientation to a positive future that engages our heads, hearts and hands." According to Hutson and Perry, the key to great business is the presence of the human spirit and of hope in the workplace. I recently had the opportunity to ask the authors about their work, and my hope is that you will test out some of these ideas in your own business. Enjoy!

Q. What's important about hope at work?

Harry: I've just come from seeing *An Inconvenient Truth*. Al Gore said in the film that too many people go from denial straight to despair. I really believe that's what we're looking at in *Putting Hope to Work*. How do you keep people in a tough business situation from either looking the other way or going right to despair?

Hope is that moment in which we acknowledge reality and get organized to do something about it. A client of ours, a divisional general manager, needed to reduce operating costs, and that meant "reorganizing." People knew something was about to happen. At a town hall meeting, he said the business was not competitive, we needed to change—and if we didn't do it ourselves, someone else would. This meant some layoffs, administered in a fair way. Here's an executive who is very hard-nosed, action-oriented, very direct, and yet he reported how people felt hope as a result of his communications. It was striking to see bad news delivered truthfully and with care, and to see the hope that ensued as a result.

Q. What happens when there is an absence of hope in an organization?

Barbara: I'm thinking about it on two levels: individually and organizationally. What I have noticed in terms of the leaders I've worked with is that they're optimists by nature. It takes a long time for them to arrive at the moment where they feel that there is no hope. Often, they step back and restore hope by reevaluating their expectations. If there is no hope, that is the moment that things end. People leave. They get sick. They get fired.

Harry: Just yesterday, I was with a financial services company that has a very strong party line—"Everything is great, we're the best place to work"—but people I'm coaching are at their wits' end, and they are at risk of leaving. The company believes [it] will continue to retain [the] best and brightest, but their values are only about execution and accountability—not about the people who work there! The result is little hope, and it's a waste. Why isn't humanity front and center?

Barbara: Here's an example. I was working in a retail organization in which a leader really deflated his team. He had put all the emphasis on numbers, and the numbers just went south. He left out the "why" of the numbers, the story, the human part. It was amazing how quickly it rolled down from him to the customers. It had the opposite effect of what he was driving for when he asked his team to focus solely on results (the "what") and left out attention to the behaviors (the "how"). They needed to understand the story behind the numbers and work on behaviors.

Q. Can you sum up the principles in your book?

Harry: *Putting Hope to Work* advances five principles. By addressing each of these, and then all of them together, your organization can stay more engaged, more alive and more hopeful about the future.

The principles are:

Possibility: Possibility is about stretching, but keeping things in the realm of reality. Knowing what to ask for, how much and by when is a very important skill that leaders can use. So, raise the bar high enough so that people can still get over it, but not without effort, teamwork and talent.

Agency: Employee engagement—being a part of the solution and having a stake and a voice in the outcome is central to hope. Agency means true ownership, that there is something each person can do with the available resources. People don't feel hope until they move from passive to active.

Worth: What we hope for needs to be something that somehow advances human betterment. We have to produce products and services that customers want in order to have meaning for us personally and collectively. A concrete, hopeful thing we can do is establish a direct line of sight to the customer. Then you can see if your contribution is worthwhile.

Openness: This is the principle of learning. We are always learning, living in uncertainty and challenging our assumptions. Hope thrives in a spirit of openness. Hope sometimes requires more openness than leaders are comfortable with, yet sometimes the unexpected can be good. At a very personal level, this is about people being able to take risks, ask for help and say they don't know.

Connection: We like to think that hope is born of possibility, energized by agency, inspired by worth, informed by openness and completed in connection. Being connected to reality and being in relationship is what really makes it possible to manifest hopeful action.

Q. What is a quick exercise our readers can use to instill hope in their teams?

Barbara: Instead of starting your staff meetings [by] asking for a status report, use this [introduction]: “Tell us about a short-term hope you have for your business and organization, and also a long-term hope.” The dialog will change dramatically—your team will be oriented toward desired future states at the outset of the meeting, and the positive forces inherent in hope can help you take it from there.

How do you motivate productivity through hope?
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