



IoH Broadsheet

The Institute of Hospitality Broadsheet is a thought-leadership article written by a Member or Fellow of the Institute. Celebrating the wealth of professionalism, knowledge and expertise within our diverse, worldwide hospitality family, the IoH Broadsheet is published exclusively for members.

The Commercial Case for Constructive Optimism

Why optimism might be one of hospitality's most overlooked leadership skills

Phil Street FIH is a hospitality professional, podcaster, interviewer and event host, a recipient of the Institute of Hospitality's Fellows' Outstanding Contribution Award, and widely recognised for his ability to bring together the industry's leading voices to tackle the topics that matter most.

As the host of the Institute of Hospitality's official I'm In podcast, alongside his acclaimed Hospitality Meets series, Phil considers: **'The Commercial Case for Constructive Optimism'** and why optimism might be one of hospitality's most overlooked leadership skills.



Introduction

Hospitality might be one of the most optimistic industries in the world.

Every morning, somewhere across the globe, someone unlocks the front door of a hotel, restaurant, pub, café or venue. They don't know how many guests will arrive, whether a key member of the team will call in sick, whether the boiler will fail, or whether the day will bring glowing reviews or difficult complaints. Yet they unlock the door anyway.

When you stop to think about it, hospitality is built on uncertainty.

And perhaps that means it is also built on optimism. Not blind optimism. Not pretending everything will be fine. And certainly not the kind of positivity that ignores reality. I'm talking about something different: what I call constructive optimism.

Constructive optimism isn't believing that everything will work out exactly as we'd hoped. It's believing that, whatever happens, we will find a way forward. I believe that's more than a personality trait. I believe it's a leadership skill.

The certainty trap

For years I thought optimism came from confidence.
Today, I think it comes from humility.

One of the biggest shifts in my own thinking happened when I stopped feeling the need to be right all the time. The older I get, the more I realise how little any of us truly know. Even the world's leading experts spend decades studying a subject and still describe themselves as students of their given subject.

We are all working with incomplete information. Research evolves. Markets change. Consumer behaviour shifts. Technology surprises us. The future has an extraordinary habit of ignoring our predictions.

Yet we often speak about tomorrow with remarkable certainty:

"Business will never recover"
"That idea won't work"
"People don't want that"

But how do we know?
The future hasn't happened yet.

Groundbreaking, I know. But ironically, accepting that uncertainty has made me more optimistic, not less. If none of us knows exactly what tomorrow holds, pessimistic predictions deserve no more authority than optimistic possibilities.

The most optimistic leaders I've met are rarely the most certain.

They're simply the most comfortable making decisions without certainty.



Can optimism be learned?

It's important to acknowledge that optimism isn't equally easy for everyone.

Our upbringing, health, finances, opportunities and life experiences all shape how we see the world. Recognising that isn't weakness; it's reality.

Optimism is, in many ways, a privilege.

However, reality doesn't mean we're powerless.

Modern neuroscience has demonstrated that our brains remain adaptable throughout life. Through a process known as neuroplasticity, repeated thoughts and behaviours strengthen neural pathways over time. In simple terms, the brain gets better at what it repeatedly practises.

That doesn't mean optimism can erase hardship.

It does suggest that constructive ways of thinking can be strengthened through conscious practice, just as leadership, communication and emotional intelligence can.

Constructive optimism, then, becomes less about personality and more about habit.

Five practices for constructive optimism

Over time, I've found myself returning to five simple principles.

Own reality. Optimism starts with honesty. Face the challenge, acknowledge the facts and resist the temptation to sugar coat difficult situations. Equally, resist the urge to catastrophise the situation. You can have your moment with it for sure, but don't let it take up permanent residence.

Focus on influence. I once heard a philosopher explain worry like this: if you can influence the situation, spend your energy acting rather than worrying. If you can't influence it, worrying won't change the outcome. Either way, action is usually a better investment than anxiety.

Stay curious. Curiosity creates possibility. Instead of asking, "Why is this happening to us?" ask, "What haven't we considered?" or "What else might be true?" Questions open doors that certainty often closes.

Invest in people. Hospitality has always been a people business. So is optimism. A conversation with the right colleague, mentor or friend can completely change how we see a challenge. Few things create hope more quickly than genuine human connection.

Collect evidence. Notice progress, however small. Celebrate improvements. Recognise effort. The brain needs evidence that better is possible. Small wins become the foundation of bigger ones.



Why this matters commercially

Leadership creates emotional weather.

When leaders communicate only pressure, teams absorb pressure. When leaders ignore reality, trust disappears. But when leaders acknowledge the challenge while communicating belief that progress is still possible, something remarkable happens.

People begin looking for solutions instead of simply describing problems.

That shift influences culture, innovation, collaboration, guest experience, retention and ultimately commercial performance.

Constructive optimism doesn't replace strategy.

It enables it.

Unlocking tomorrow

Hospitality has never promised certainty.

Every reservation is an act of hope.

Every menu launch is a belief that guests will love it.

Every refurbishment is confidence in a better future.

Every interview is an investment in potential.

Every shift begins with someone choosing to believe that today can create memorable experiences for complete strangers.

None of us knows what tomorrow holds.
We never have.

Perhaps optimism isn't believing tomorrow will be perfect.

Perhaps it's simply having the courage to unlock the door and welcome it in anyway.



About the Author

Phil Street FIH is an award-winning hospitality professional, podcaster, interviewer and event host, with more than three decades of experience across the hospitality industry.

Having begun his career in operational hospitality, Phil has developed a reputation as one of the industry's most engaging communicators, combining practical experience with a genuine passion for people, leadership and professional development. His ability to ask insightful questions and create meaningful conversations has made him a respected voice across the hospitality industry.

As the host of the Institute of Hospitality's official I'm In podcast and the popular Hospitality Meets podcast, Phil has interviewed hundreds of hospitality leaders, exploring the challenges, opportunities and innovations shaping the profession today. His conversations regularly tackle topics including leadership, wellbeing, diversity, technology, sustainability and the future of hospitality, helping to inform, inspire and connect professionals across the industry.

Alongside his podcasting, Phil is a sought-after conference moderator, awards host and event MC, recognised for his engaging style and ability to bring audiences and speakers together. He is also an active mentor and passionate advocate for developing future talent, believing that hospitality's greatest strength has always been its people.

As a proud Fellow of the Institute of Hospitality, Phil continues to champion professionalism, lifelong learning and meaningful conversations that encourage collaboration, challenge conventional thinking and support the continued evolution of the hospitality industry.



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