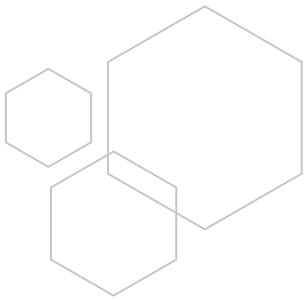
Julie v Tree: A prologue to Intentional Optimism

Julie Williamson, PhD | Chief Growth Enabler and Partner at Karrikins Group®

The crash was not awesome. It hurt, my gear was totaled, and I had to hike off the mountain – the ultimate walk of shame for a snowboarder. I was lucky to be able to get myself down given the velocity of the collision between me and the immovable object in the middle of the slope known as a Ponderosa pine. This one in particular had survived decades of forest fires, beetle infestations, and slope clearing – it wasn't about to move for me.



I had committed the cardinal sin on the slopes – I fixated on the tree and not the space around it where I really wanted to go. In fact, this is a cardinal sin for any activity where you are moving your body from one place to another – in a car, on a bike, on skis, or even in shoes. That's because the connection between our brain and our body is ancient – we physically make millions of small adjustments that we don't even notice to take us to whatever has the attention of our brains.

Later that night I was commiserating with my friend Sarah about it. She turned to me and asked, "Julie, why were you looking at the tree, anyway?" The answer was simple. I was afraid of it, and so it had my attention – even more so than the yards and yards of ungroomed powder that surrounded it. Ironically, our deep seated need to protect ourselves from harm can often lead us straight to it by making us focus almost exclusively on it. Turns out our brains aren't always that good at pointing us in the right direction.

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In the case of Julie v Tree, I had the capability to fly right by it, but in an instant my confidence wavered, and I ended up with a worse case outcome by doing exactly what my hyper-focused brain was expecting. If I had concentrated on the beautiful snow in the space around the tree, and kept my faith in my abilities, I wouldn't even remember that there was a tree on that run – it would have been a blip on my radar instead of a story that still gets told many years later.

In the workplace today, I see examples of this everywhere I go. People are so focused on the potentially negative ramifications of change and disruption that they collide with the outcomes they most fear. Their products become irrelevant in the market, their legacy skills are inappropriate for the workplace, and their beliefs are relics of times gone by. The logic is simple. As humans, we tend to move literally and figuratively towards what we aim for – even if we are heading for disaster.

As children, we are incredibly optimistic. We ask lots of 'what if' and 'why' questions because we are in a hyper-learning mode, and it doesn't occur to us to question our ability to grow and change – it is what we are designed to do. Our brains are pliable and our bodies resilient.

Over time, as we experience loss, struggles, and pain, our optimism can dim and even shift to learned patterns of pessimism or cynicism. We hear narratives from our families – the luck of the Irish, or the family curse come into our psyches and start to affect the way we see the world. If people let us down, we may grow cynical, suspecting the worst of others while trying to outmaneuver them on the playground or in the office.

We accumulate things worth protecting – relationships, a home, car, family, business, product, career, a fancy title, or a big office to name a few. Suddenly, the stakes seem higher, and it becomes harder to be optimistic about anything that feels different, challenging, or disruptive. Maintaining homeostasis becomes more important than exploring, growing, and taking risks because we have more to lose, and life has taught us some tough lessons along the way about what might happen.

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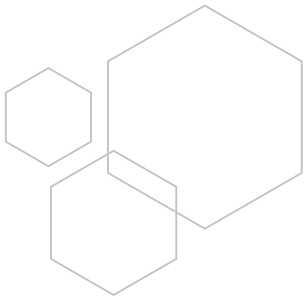
In business and in life, disruptions happen, and if you are playing to not lose, or to protect what you have right now, you are heading right for the Ponderosa pine. Luckily, optimism can be learned or strengthened. Just like a golfer learns to ask 'where's the green?' instead of 'where's the sand trap?', we can learn to ask optimistic questions.

We can learn to notice what we are focusing on and adjust to see the space instead of fixating on the tree. And we can be intentional about how we orient our thinking to spend time and energy on what's possible, not on the reasons why we can't or shouldn't try.



In a world where things change fast, and complexity is increasing, developing the confidence and capability to change and grow is critical. I believe that we can see optimism as a tool for leaders to use to ask questions, motivate, set direction, and make critical business decisions. By developing an optimistic approach, leaders can more confidently take risks, grow, change, and re-invent in ways that keep their business relevant and healthy.

About the author

KARRIKINS GROUP

JULIE WILLIAMSON, PhD

Chief Growth Enabler and Partner

Julie is a growth-minded leader who believes executives set the standard for others through the example they provide. She is a strategist, technologist, and a social scientist who puts her energy toward working with leaders around the world as they tackle some of the biggest challenges in their industries and organizations.

In today's increasingly complex and interconnected world, Julie knows the power of aligned leaders to deliver on strategy and create value. That's why she focuses her time and energy on helping senior leaders come together to deliver the work that matters most.

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Visit us at **karrikinsgroup.com** to learn more about our game changing alignment solutions for executive teams, delivery teams, and individuals who are ready to lean into the power of alignment to deliver on their most ambitious goals. Through our Alignment Institute we offer catalytic workshops, individual programs, and smaller group experiences.

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KARRIKIN (n): *a group of compounds found in the smoke of burning plants that stimulates seed germination and catalyzes growth.*