

BROWNELL LANDRUM

The
Art
and
Science
of
Wishing

APPENDIX F THE SKEPTIC'S GIFT: HARNESSING DISSENT IN COLLECTIVE WISHING

It is the tension between creativity and skepticism that has produced the stunning and unexpected findings of science.

—Carl Sagan

I would rather have a mind opened by wonder than one closed by belief.

—Gerry Spence

When you bring collective wishing into organizations—whether a startup team, a corporate division, or a multinational conglomerate—you'll inevitably encounter skeptics. And here's the counterintuitive insight from organizational psychology: authentic skeptics make your Wish Circle more effective, more rigorous, and more scientifically grounded.ⁱ

This isn't about tolerating naysayers who drain energy (we covered that in the personal wishing chapter). This is about strategically leveraging genuine skeptics, the ones who elevate your collective practice from “woo-woo” to evidence-based collaboration.ⁱⁱ

Why Skeptics Strengthen Scientific Rigor

Here's what many people miss about skepticism: it's the foundation of good science. As Richard Feynman said, “I would rather have questions that can't be answered than answers that can't be questioned.”

For decades, organizational psychologists have studied how dissent affects group decision-making. The findings are unambiguous: authentic skeptics improve outcomes, stimulate divergent and creative thinking, and help groups avoid the trap of groupthink. Dr. Charlan Nemeth's research is pivotal here. She found that genuine dissenters:^{iii iv}

- Stimulate creativity and divergent thinking
- Broaden the group's consideration of information and options
- Lead to higher-quality decisions
- Uncover solutions that would otherwise go unrecognized
- Improve group thinking, even when their initial perspective is incorrect^v

The key word is authentic. Assigning someone the “devil's advocate” role—asking a group member to play at skepticism—often backfires. Research consistently finds that when people know dissent is just role-play, they dig in and defend their pre-existing views even more (“cognitive bolstering”), group satisfaction drops, and creative thinking isn't stimulated. But real skeptics who genuinely question assumptions? They make everyone smarter.^{vi}

Four Powerful Roles for Skeptics in Organizational Wish Circles

Rather than trying to convert skeptics or exclude them, leverage their strengths with roles that keep the practice grounded in measurable reality.

1. The Research Liaison

Your skeptic investigates the science behind wishing practices—reading studies, evaluating methodology, and reporting findings. This satisfies their need for evidence and deepens everyone’s understanding of why these practices might work. In this way, the skeptic becomes the group’s bridge between metaphysical experience and scientific validation.^{vii}

2. The Measurement Keeper

Empower your skeptic to track results with scientific rigor. They document:

- Baseline metrics before collective wishing begins
- Specific, objective success criteria
- Synchronicities and unexpected opportunities (noted with dates and detail)
- Progress milestones
- Final results versus starting goals

Since they’re naturally motivated to find proof (or disproof), skeptics bring accountability that makes group results tangible. Their records either validate the practice or reveal what needs to change.^{viii}

3. The Reality Tester

Before the group commits, the Reality Tester asks:

- “How will we know this worked?”
- “What outcomes will show success?”
- “What could prevent us from achieving this?”
- “Are we confusing correlation with causation?”
- “What alternative explanations should we consider?”

These questions align directly with sound goal-setting and the kind of scientific skepticism that improves outcomes.^{ix}

4. The Divergent Thinker

Nemeth’s research shows that dissenters stimulate what’s called divergent thinking—the ability to see multiple solutions and possibilities. Your skeptic:

- Offers alternative interpretations
- Proposes novel approaches
- Challenges assumptions (not to undermine, but to expand the group's thinking)
- Broadens the circle's perspective, protecting against groupthink

Authentic skepticism doesn't narrow options—it expands them.

What Science Shows About Contrived vs. Authentic Dissent

Companies like IBM and Anheuser-Busch have tried assigning “devil’s advocate” roles to stimulate better group decisions. The science is clear: it doesn’t achieve the desired result.

- Fake dissent (devil’s advocate) is perceived as play-acting, so others don’t engage meaningfully.^x
- Cognitive bolstering happens, with members defending their pre-held positions even more.
- Group satisfaction decreases.
- Little or no increase in creative thinking or solution searching.

By contrast:

- Authentic dissent stimulates real divergent thought.
- It increases active information search.
- Decisions measurably improve.
- Group creativity and problem-solving rise^{xi xii}

The Critical Distinction: Skepticism vs. Cynicism

Not every doubter is a skeptic—this distinction is crucial: ^{xiii}

Skeptics:

- Question and investigate
- Seek evidence before concluding
- Remain open to evidence
- Foster critical thinking
- Strengthen collective wishing

Cynics:

- Dismiss and undermine
- Assume bad motives
- Are closed to persuasion by evidence
- Breed distrust
- May not be suited for collaborative wishing

If someone is purely cynical, they may undermine group energy. But a thoughtful skeptic questioning in good faith? That's an asset.

Bridge to Practice: The Inclusion Protocol

When forming organizational Wish Circles:

1. Engage at least one thoughtful skeptic intentionally—frame it as ensuring scientific honesty and accountability.
 2. Clarify that their value isn't belief but perspective and rigor.
 3. Assign roles explicitly (Research Liaison, Measurement Keeper, etc.).
 4. Celebrate questions and improvements skeptics bring.
 5. Act on their data. If the Measurement Keeper shows the practice isn't working, adjust strategy.
- This marries openness and rigor in practice.

The research is unambiguous: authentic dissent is a strategic advantage. Your skeptic isn't a problem—they're the bridge between radical openness and rigorous scrutiny.

Everything above applies to organizational Wish Circles. But what if YOU'RE the skeptic someone invited to join?

A Note to Skeptics: If You're Reading This with Doubt

If someone handed you this book or invited you to a Wish Circle and you're thinking "This is complete nonsense," welcome. This section is for you.

You're Not Wrong to Be Skeptical

Healthy skepticism is the foundation of good science. Carl Sagan, one of the greatest scientific minds of the 20th century, wrote: "At the heart of science is an essential balance between two seemingly contradictory attitudes—an openness to new ideas, no matter how bizarre or counterintuitive they may be, and the most ruthless skeptical scrutiny of all ideas, old and new."^{xiv}

Your skepticism isn't a character flaw. It's a cognitive strength. You question claims. You demand evidence. You resist magical thinking. These are valuable traits, especially in a world full of pseudoscience and get-rich-quick schemes.^{xv}

What This Book Actually Claims (And Doesn't)

Before you dismiss everything here, let's be clear about what's actually being proposed:

This book does NOT claim:

- Thoughts alone create reality
- You can manifest anything just by believing hard enough
- Positive thinking prevents bad things from happening
- The universe is a cosmic vending machine

This book DOES claim:

- Neuroscience shows that focused intention changes brain pathways and attention patterns (measurable)
- Psychology demonstrates that aligned motivation increases persistence and creative problem-solving (replicable)
- Psychophysiology proves that coherent emotional states affect decision-making and opportunity recognition (documented)^{xvi}
- Social psychology confirms that collective intention creates measurable group effects (evidence-based)

Everything in this book cites peer-reviewed research from mainstream science. You can look up every study. Challenge every claim. That's not just allowed—it's encouraged.

The Experiment You Can Actually Run

Here's what we're actually asking: **Test it.**
Not "believe it." Not "have faith." **Test it.**^{xvii}

That's the whole reason it's called the Cosmic Wish EXPERIMENT. We know the science, and we used it to craft the program. Now we need to **prove** it – and need **your** help.

If you're invited to join a Wish Circle, here's how to participate while maintaining your intellectual integrity:

1. Volunteer as the Measurement Keeper

Tell the group: "I'm skeptical, but I'm willing to track results objectively. I'll document what we're trying to achieve, measure outcomes, and report findings honestly—whether they support the hypothesis or not."

This gives you a meaningful role that leverages your natural strengths while keeping you intellectually honest.

2. Establish Clear Success Criteria Upfront

Before the group makes their collective wish, insist on specificity:

- What exactly are we trying to achieve?
- How will we measure success?
- What's our timeline?
- What would constitute evidence of failure?
- What alternative explanations should we rule out?

These aren't cynical questions—they're scientific protocol.

3. Keep Rigorous Records

Document:

- The exact wish (date, wording, participants)
- Baseline conditions
- Actions taken by group members
- Unexpected opportunities or synchronicities (with dates and details)
- Outcomes (successful or not)
- Alternative explanations for any positive results

The GOOD NEWS is that much of this data is already being collected through the Trackers in the Experiment. Be the person who makes this practice evidence-based rather than faith-based.

4. Research the Science Behind the Claims

This book cites hundreds of studies. Pick the claims you find most dubious and investigate them yourself:

- Look up the original research papers
- Check the methodology
- See if findings have been replicated
- Read critical analyses
- Form your own conclusions

And let Brownell know so she can add them to future revisions of this book.

You might discover (as many skeptics have) that the neuroscience of goal-setting, the psychology of motivation, and the physiology of coherent states are far more interesting than you expected.

What Skeptics Often Discover

Many people who approach wishing practices skeptically report something unexpected: the results don't depend on belief.

When you:

- Get clear about what you want (goal clarity)
- Align your emotional state (coherence)
- Take consistent action (implementation)
- Notice opportunities (selective attention)
- Measure outcomes (feedback loops)

...these are simply effective practices, regardless of what you call them or what metaphysical framework you use to explain them.

You might never believe in "cosmic collaboration." That's fine. You might attribute every positive outcome to neuroscience, psychology, and confirmation bias. Also fine. If the practices produce measurable improvements in outcomes, does it matter whether you call it "wishing" or "evidence-based goal achievement"?

The Difference Between Skepticism and Cynicism

Here's the critical distinction:

Skeptics say: "I doubt this works, but I'm willing to test it and see what the evidence shows."

Cynics say: "This is stupid, it won't work, and I'm not even going to try."

If you're genuinely skeptical, you're open to evidence. If you're cynical, you've already decided and nothing will change your mind. Only you know which one you are.

Your Value to the Group

If you do participate, know this: your skepticism makes the group stronger.

Research by Dr. Charlan Nemeth at UC Berkeley shows that authentic dissenters:

- Improve decision quality
- Stimulate creative problem-solving
- Help groups consider more information
- Find solutions that would otherwise be missed
- Enhance outcomes even when they're wrong

Your role is to keep everyone honest, grounded, and rigorous. The Wish Circle that includes a thoughtful skeptic will be more effective than one filled with only true believers who never question assumptions.

However...

"Just don't become purely cynical—the person who shoots down every idea without offering constructive alternatives." It's one thing to be skeptical, it's another to be a party-pooper. Wishing by its very nature is meant to be FUN, even if you might think it's fanciful. If there's only one thing you remember from reading this book is that there is SCIENCE behind FUN.

Make Skepticism Fun

Throughout this book, we've emphasized a principle backed by neuroscience research: **fun isn't frivolous—it's fundamental to sustainable motivation and success.** When you're genuinely enjoying yourself—when the process feels playful, creative, and fun—your brain releases a cocktail of neurochemicals (dopamine, endorphins, oxytocin) that create what researchers call "intrinsic flow motivation"—energy that feels effortless and joyful rather than forced and depleting.^{xviii}

This is why hobbies feel energizing while obligations feel draining, even if the hobby requires more effort. It's not about easy versus hard—it's about joy versus joylessness. Studies show that activities we genuinely enjoy release dopamine and create self-sustaining motivation loops.^{xix} When wishes incorporate elements of play, creativity, and genuine enjoyment, they maintain momentum naturally—your Inner Self keeps giving you energy because the process itself feels rewarding.

Here's what makes wishing special: it's inherently playful. Birthday candles, shooting stars, dandelion seeds, fountain coins—these rituals weren't designed to be grim exercises in discipline. They were (and are) meant to be delightful.

And skeptics? You get the same neurological benefit. When you approach your role with playfulness and curiosity rather than heavy seriousness, you activate these same reward systems. Your skepticism becomes sustainable, energizing, and—dare we say it—joyful.

Here's the secret skeptics don't always realize: your questioning nature is already playful—you just need permission to unleash it with style instead of snark. When skeptics approach their role with humor and curiosity rather than dismissiveness, they become what leadership experts call 'spark plugs'—energizing the team rather than draining it.^{xx} The key is reframing your doubt as creative exploration.

Turn Your Questions into Creative Challenges

Instead of asking "Why won't this work?" try these playful alternatives:^{xxi}

- "What's the most outrageous way this could succeed?"
- "If this were a movie plot, what genre would it be—and how does it end?"
- "What assumptions are we making that could be hilariously wrong?"
- "What would need to be true for this to work spectacularly?"

This shifts the energy from critique to co-creation. You're still being skeptical, but you're inviting others to play in the space of possibility with you.

Gamify Your Skepticism

Give yourself fun roles and challenges:^{xxii}

- **Skeptic's Bingo:** Create a card with common wishful-thinking patterns (confirmation bias, post-hoc rationalization, correlation-causation confusion). Mark them off as you spot them—but do it with humor, not judgment.
- **The Mythbusters Protocol:** Lead mini-experiments where you test assumptions. Frame it like the TV show: "Today we're testing whether visualizing success actually improves performance. Let's see what the data shows!"
- **Coincidence vs. Causation Scorecard:** Track unexpected events and rate them on a scale of "Pure Random Chance" to "Okay, That's Weird." Keep it lighthearted—even you might be surprised by patterns that emerge.
- **The "I Was Wrong" Trophy:** Celebrate when evidence contradicts your predictions. Research shows that people who can admit they were wrong with good humor are more trusted and more effective team members

Embrace Fun Titles That Honor Your Role

Claim a playful identity: Claim a playful identity: Chief Reality Officer, Director of Doubt, Head of Healthy Skepticism, The Group's BS Detector (said with love!), Captain of Critical Thinking, or Minister of "But Wait..."

When you name your role with humor, it signals to everyone (including yourself) that skepticism doesn't have to be heavy or negative.

Use Self-Deprecating Humor

Research on workplace communication shows that self-deprecating humor softens critique and makes feedback more receivable.^{xxiii} Try phrases like:

- "I'm probably overthinking this—it's kind of my superpower..."
- "My brain immediately goes to worst-case scenario, so humor me while I play it out..."
- "Full disclosure: I'm the person who reads the terms and conditions, so..."

This creates psychological safety. People hear your concerns without feeling attacked.

Host "What If?" Sessions

Lead the group in exploring both disaster AND delight scenarios:

- "What if everything goes RIGHT? What would that look like?"
- "What if this fails spectacularly? How would we know, and what would we learn?"
- "What if the synchronicities we're seeing are real? What alternative explanations should we consider?"

This kind of divergent thinking is exactly what organizational psychologist Charlan Nemeth found makes skeptics so valuable—you expand the group's thinking in multiple directions.

Create "Positive Gossip" About Your Wins

When your skeptical questioning prevents a mistake or leads to a breakthrough, celebrate it! Leadership research shows that highlighting positive contributions (even your own!) creates a ripple effect of appreciation.

Don't be modest about saying: "Remember when I asked about X and we discovered Y? That skeptical question saved us three weeks of work!"

Volunteer for the Fun Stuff

Offer to design creative tracking systems:^{xxiv}

- Visual dashboards that make data beautiful
- Weekly "Synchronicity Spotting" reports with ratings for weirdness level
- Before-and-after comparison charts that show measurable change
- A "Skeptic's Journey" log documenting your evolving perspective
- Make measurement itself entertaining.

The "Yes, And..." Approach

Borrow from improv comedy: instead of "Yes, BUT..." try "Yes, AND..."

Instead of: "That's a great idea, BUT have you considered all the ways it could fail?"

Try: "That's interesting! AND here are three risks we should test for before we commit."
Same skepticism. Different energy. Much more fun.

Remember: You're the Spark, Not the Snark

The research is clear: skeptics who approach their role as a mix of detective, comedian, and strategist elevate team morale and outcomes. You don't need to abandon your critical thinking—you just need to wield it with playfulness and genuine curiosity.

When you make skepticism fun, you model intellectual courage without intellectual arrogance. You show that questioning can be generous, not cynical. And you prove that the person asking "Are you sure about that?" can be the most valuable—and most enjoyable—person in the room.

So go ahead: be skeptical. Be rigorous. Be questioning.

Just do it with a smile and a sense of adventure. The Wish Circle needs you—and your particular brand of playful doubt might be exactly what makes the magic measurably real.

The Bottom Line

You don't have to believe in cosmic wishing to benefit from the practices in this book. You don't have to accept any metaphysical claims to test whether focused intention, emotional alignment, and collective effort produce results.

All we're asking is: Run the experiment.

Document it rigorously. Measure outcomes honestly. Let the data speak.

If it works, you'll have interesting questions to explore about why. If it doesn't, you'll have helped the group learn something valuable.

Either way, your skepticism serves science—which is exactly what it's supposed to do.

Meet The Scientists

The researchers exploring consciousness and reality frontiers:

Charlan Nemeth — Dissent, creativity, and group decision-making

Robert K. Merton — Organized skepticism as scientific norm

Carl Sagan — Balance of openness and skeptical scrutiny

Arie W. Kruglanski — Cognitive closure and motivated reasoning

(Full biographies in Appendix B)

Now, armed with your playful skepticism and scientific rigor, turn back to Chapter 15 and join the Cosmic Wish Experiment. The world needs your particular brand of questioning brilliance.

ⁱⁱ <https://academic.oup.com/book/61541/chapter/536856816>

ⁱⁱ <https://academic.oup.com/book/27143/chapter-abstract/196534880?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1pz676t7>

^{iv} <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2001.tb02481.x>

^v <https://jack-lancaster.com/podcast/charlannemeth>

^{vi} <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0749597802000018>

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