

RESILIENT LEADERSHIP - OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR LIFE SKILLS

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Abstract:

Today, leaders are facing new challenges to the mental and emotional health of their teams. Though many physically or virtually show up to work, challenges may prevent them from fully engaging in their work responsibilities—an effect called presenteeism. This reinforces that outwardly someone can look fine, because we can't always see how someone feels.

Key words:

Resilience, Stress, response & Management of stress

Resilience is the human capacity to meet adversity, setbacks and trauma, and then recover from them in order to live life fully. Resilient leaders have the ability to sustain their energy level under pressure, to cope with disruptive changes and adapt. They bounce back from setbacks. They also overcome major difficulties without engaging in dysfunctional behavior or harming others.

Resilience is a crucial characteristic of high-performing leaders. Leaders must cultivate it in themselves in order to advance and thrive. They also carry the responsibility for helping to protect the energy of the people in their teams. Leadership is sustainable only if individuals and teams are able to consistently recover high energy levels. During the event, Professor Kohlrieser asked the audience: “How many of you have seen too much conflict in the workplace? How many of you have observed people getting sick or burning out?” A majority of audience members raised their hands, emphasizing the importance of fostering healthier human dynamics in the workplace.

It is often forgotten that one must learn to lead oneself before being able to lead others successfully. Before take-off, flight attendants instruct that, in the event of a drop in the cabin's air pressure, passengers should put on their own oxygen masks before helping children with theirs. In a similar way, self-leadership provides the backbone for the effective leadership of groups. A high-performing leader needs to be physically, mentally and emotionally functional—as well as resilient—in order to inspire and guide others to achieve ambitious goals over the long term. The journey to inspiring others starts with “How do I

inspire myself?” Resilience is about the whole person. As Professor Kohlrieser emphasized: “It is not enough to talk about the brain, we also need to talk about the heart. When people at work close their hearts and lose empathy, they lose an essential component of their leadership.” High engagement in teams requires passion. It also requires people to have an open heart, to express feelings and to be curious about others. Leadership does not occur in an emotional vacuum – thinking and feeling individuals are part of the equation. That being said, it is critical to value both bonding and emotional autonomy. Bonding is essential, but leaders should avoid becoming emotionally or mentally hostage to others. The importance of caring for others is frequently underestimated compared to other leadership traits. In truth, even top managers often fail because they are disconnected. They close their hearts, which leads to low trust in their working relationships and low engagement in the organizations they manage. Gallup studies show that employee disengagement is widespread in Europe and especially America. For individuals who do feel highly engaged at work, the same studies show that trust-based relationships play a central role. A high capacity to form attachments and bond with others is one of the pillars of resilience. Strong personal bonds give us the confidence to take risks and aim for stretch goals. They are also vital in supporting us as we recover from failure and disappointment. Relationships based on trust are our “secure bases.” They form a network of people we know we can count on, both in our personal lives and at work.

The concept of a secure base goes beyond people. A secure base can also be a goal, a place or even an object that allows us to go out in the world, explore and experiment with confidence. The core function of a secure base is to provide protection and comfort as well as energy. For example, Nelson Mandela credits his grandmother for enabling him to learn from his prison experience. The poem *Invictus* by William Ernest Henley also

constituted a secure base for Mandela—a powerful reminder that hardship and fear are no match for an “unconquerable soul.” Great managers draw strength from their secure bases, and they in turn become secure bases for others.

Coping with stress

How well leaders cope with stress helps to determine how resilient they are overall. Studies have shown that stress is not, in and of itself, physically harmful. Stress reactions such as a pounding heart and fast breathing prepare our bodies to meet a threat. They energize us to act. Infact, they are an integral part of the “fight or flight” response that has allowed humans to survive dangerous situations since the dawn of our species. Good leaders need to experience a sense of urgency when their projects are at stake. Momentary stress can help galvanize individuals and teams at a critical juncture. In contrast, people who never worry about anything cannot get their organizations to perform at optimal levels. What is the right balance between too much worry and not enough worry? The constructive approach is to return as quickly as possible to a positive state. Chronic worry is the most destructive – it saps the joy of living. As a first step, it is useful to become aware of our stress levels (see Figure 1). How long does it take us to move out of a bad mood? Are we feeling exhausted or simply tired? Have we noticed a lowered resistance to infection or recurring migraine headaches? It is important that we heed our bodies’ distress signals. Two participants shared experiences of reaching their breaking point at work. One spoke about burnout and the other about a debilitating stress-related health issue. They both felt they had ignored their personal “alarm bells” when working under sustained pressure. One of the main lessons they extracted from their experiences is that obtaining results is important, but getting stressed does not increase effectiveness or productivity. Another lesson learned: when returning from stress leave, keep a sense of humor.

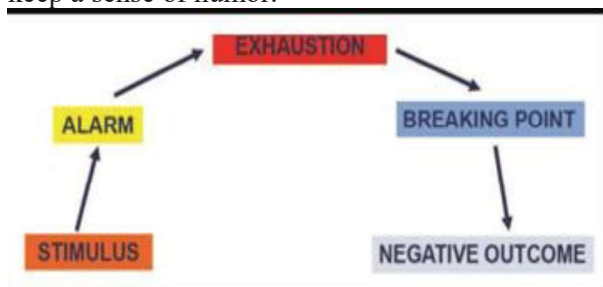


Figure 1: Stress response

Physical symptoms are one of the four areas in which stress manifests itself. Intellectual stress

reactions include diminished creativity, cynicism and negative thinking. People who experience social stress reactions tend to stop seeing friends and returning phone calls. They progressively isolate themselves. Lastly, people who endure spiritual stress reactions lose a sense of meaning and purpose.

To enhance their resilience, leaders need to identify the coping mechanisms that allow them to relieve tension and regain their positive energy. These stress management options include “talking out” worries and concerns, doing something for others and healthful eating.

Stress management options

- Awareness of stress responses
- Take responsibility for stress responses
- Create clear and specific goals
- Modify destructive personality patterns
- Physical exercise
- Talk out worries, anxieties and concerns
- Learn to let go – grieving what is gone
- Avoid self-medication
- Get enough rest
- Balance work and recreation
- Do something for others
- Take one thing at a time – prioritize
- Give in once in a while – flexibility
- Learn relaxation – meditation, imagery, music, massage
- Nutrition
- Positive bonding – manage or stop negative relationships
- Deal with emotions by awareness, expression and/or redirection
- Learn to laugh
- Make stress management part of a life-style and not just a technique
- Find, use and understand the meaning and purpose of what you are doing.

Resilient Teams

Leaders also have a social and moral responsibility to consider the resilience of others. They must become attuned to the people around them and learn to recognize when a colleague is under a lot of stress. Does the person communicate a lack of meaning in their work? Does he or she exhibit negativity, over-victimization or continual anger? Social behaviors such as lateness and failing to come to meetings are also clues. Managers who notice these signs need to reach out to the stressed person and engage in an honest discussion. Sometimes the best way to initiate the conversation is to ask a question: “Is everything all right? It appears you may be under a lot of stress. Is there anything I can do to help you?” The

questions should be gentle and respectful. Managers have a clear interest in working with vibrant and energetic employees. To avoid stress becoming a performance issue, leaders should take an active role in promoting resilience and boosting energy in their teams.

Resilience Strategies for Coping and Bouncing Back Stronger

- Exercise.
- Make time for solitude.
- Engage in positive self-talk.
- Get out more and experience life.
- Learn from failure.
- Cultivate both humor and curiosity.
- Have realistic expectations for yourself and your client.

As leaders, we want to bring out the best in ourselves and those around us. Right now, however, we might feel like that's impossible. If you're operating in crisis mode without a sense of direction, you may feel completely out of your element in knowing how to lead during a crisis. But there are things you can do to lead nonetheless. For instance, consider how you might incorporate the Five Elements of Resilience into The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership:

1. Model the Way

Consider your resilience strengths. Once you know what you are good at, make sure you deliberately use your resilience skills and set a clear example of the behaviors you want others to follow. For instance, if in the past, you have been good at helping others and nurturing their well-being with encouragement and support, ask yourself whether you're finding time to do that now. If not, you might feel like something is missing in your effectiveness as a leader. To get back on track, take time to create an action plan that outlines how to capitalize on your key resilience strengths.

2. Inspire a Shared Vision

Help people recognize that they are not alone in their struggles and that, despite all the changes disrupting their lives and plans, there are still things they can plan for and accomplish right now—together. After all, this situation *will not* last forever. Also, now is the time to help people clarify their values, visions, and plans so they can avoid being pulled in directions that clash with

their long-term intentions. Your support as a leader will also help them make better decisions in the present moment.

3. Challenge the Process

Talk to people about how they are getting through some of the challenges they face. How are they managing to find a quiet spot to work despite the kids being home? How are they keeping in touch with family and friends and remaining connected? What are they doing to fill their free time? Share what you learned from your experience and from talking to others. There are some brilliant ideas for improving the ways we work and lead that are coming out of the COVID-19 crisis.

1. Enable Others to Act

Open up conversations with those around you. Check in on the mental health of others. You don't need to have answers to their problems; just be a good listener. Reflect on what you hear and help others focus on finding the resources they need. Ask them this question, "In the past, what helped you get through tough times?" The answer to this question provides a glimpse into their resilience skills. Ask if they've been using those skills. If not, ask them about how you might work together to put their resilience skills into practice.

5. Encourage the Heart

Find as many ways as you can to let everyone know how well they're doing. Check in with those who are isolated. Celebrate the resilience around you. Let people know that they are lifting you up. Tell them how much they mean to you. This will energize both you and those you encourage. We all need this now more than ever.

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