

# Resilience: How To Become A Resilient Leader

It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the most responsive to change.

- Charles Darwin



Where people meet potential 

# Introduction

The only constant in life is change. The continuous evolution of the workplace is a visceral demonstration of that fact. Fuelled by the exponential advancements in technology, business leaders are required to adapt and transform their organisations with ever increasing speed. Leaders are expected to enable their businesses to thrive amid a digital revolution.

The current changes in the workplace have led economists to claim that we are experiencing the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum, Klaus Schwab, described the speed of this change as having no previous historical model, boldly stating: "We stand on the brink of a technological revolution that will fundamentally alter the way we live, work and relate to one another."

To deliver on business objectives, it's vital that leaders can respond effectively to the constant demands and pressures of their roles, as well as the changing world around them. The way they handle pressure is likely to have a substantial impact on the performance and direction of their organisation. Therefore, resilience will be critical for leaders and managers not only to survive the challenges ahead, but more importantly thrive in response to these changes.

Workplace stress is also a significant issue facing leaders, with the World Health Organization describing stress as the "global health epidemic of the 21st century." This prevalence of workplace stress seems to be on the increase, in a survey of over 100,000 employees across Asia, Europe, Africa, North America, and South America (Workplace Options, 2015), employee stress and anxiety accounted for 82.6% of all emotional health cases in Employee Assistance Programs in 2014, up from 55.2% in 2012. Many suggest this increase is due to employees working in a constantly connected, "always-on", highly demanding work culture, where stress and the risk of burnout is becoming widespread.

In a global survey by PSI in 2019, 85% of HR professionals indicated that resilience is either extremely important or very important as a trait that leaders should have. On the topic of resilience, Accenture commented that "resilience may be the new criterion for professional advancement. In the current world of economic uncertainty and intense competitiveness, organizations that instil resilience in their up-and-coming leaders will have a clear advantage."

# What is Resilience?

Resilience has been around in psychological literature for many years and has been referred to as hardiness, mental toughness, positive psychological capital and a multitude of other labels. This has led to a range of definitions and conceptualisations. Consequently, like any psychological construct, the manner in which it is defined can have a significant impact on what it is and, more importantly, what value it provides to an individual and organisation.

**We define workplace resilience as:**

**“ An individual's capacity to adapt positively to pressure, setbacks, challenge and change in order to achieve peak performance. ”**

There are some key points to note about how we conceptualise resilience. Firstly, resilience is not a fixed characteristic. It is a 'capacity', which anyone can develop and enhance through learning activities and experiences. Harvard Business Review in 2016, advocated this perspective: "more than five decades of research point to the fact that resilience is built by attitudes, behaviours and social supports that can be adopted and cultivated by anyone".

Resilience is also concerned primarily with positive adaptation to events, rather than just being strong or stable. Often, a challenging situation will require the leader to adapt their approach. These events do not necessarily need to be crisis situations; resilience is just as relevant to the day-to-day problems and setbacks that a leader will face.

The final and most important point to note about our definition of resilience is that it is about 'peak performance' at work. Peak performance is about leaders being at their best, by operating to their maximum potential on a frequent basis. We see resilience as a critical ingredient for leadership success.



# How does Resilience impact on leadership

According to a survey by leadership development company LHH (2016), **over two-thirds (67%) business leaders are struggling with stress and managing their emotions in the workplace.** This is unsurprising as leadership positions in most organisations inevitably involve high levels of pressure.

“One of the most important qualities of a leader is resilience” (Forbes, 2017). The link between leadership stress and resilience has been extensively explored. In a landmark 12-year study, researchers Salvatore Maddi and Suzanne Kobasa monitored managers and executives at Illinois Bell Telephone, an organisation that underwent massive upheaval due to deregulation (Maddi and Kobasa, 1984). Around two thirds of the sample struggled to cope with the disruption and change, many of them experiencing stress-related illnesses and personal problems. However, one third of the group successfully survived and thrived despite the challenges. The differentiating factor that set them apart was their ‘hardiness’ – a set of adaptable attitudes and skills which combined to give them a resilient mindset.

Leaders also have a role to play in directly influencing the resilience of their employees. By providing positive support, motivation and guidance, leaders can help employees to adapt positively to challenging circumstances and develop coping strategies to overcome obstacles.

# The eight Resilience strategies for leaders

A leader's resilience is drawn from several different, but related, attitudes, thinking styles and behaviours. Used in combination, these resilience strategies will help ensure that the leader has the right mindset and psychological resources to rise to challenges and thrive under pressure.

**PSI have identified eight key strategies, which are important for resilience in leaders:**

## Reframing strategies

**Self-belief:** Whether you have confidence in your ability to address problems and obstacles that you encounter. This is a critical cornerstone to resilient leadership; if you have strong self-belief, you will be more willing to tackle problems head on and persist with them even when things get difficult. Demonstrating strong self-belief in the face of adversity will also help to reduce panic and increase confidence in employees.

**Optimism:** If you believe that you will experience good outcomes in life, and the way in which you explain setbacks that you experience. This is important for leadership, as being optimistic means you believe that things will get better, even in difficult situations, and therefore you will stay positive despite setbacks. An optimistic leader can clearly impact the mood and outlook of those around them.

## Behavioural strategies

**Purposeful Direction:** Whether you have clear short- and long-term goals that you are committed to achieving. It is critical for leaders to show a clear purpose and direction in challenging circumstances and keep themselves and their team focused on the end goal. This ensures that setbacks are kept in perspective and are recognised as just part of a journey to achieving desired outcomes and results.

**Adaptability:** Whether you are willing to adapt your behaviour and approach in response to changing circumstances. Leaders benefit from being able to adapt quickly to change, particularly external changes like the marketplace and competitors, but also to individuals around them. An effective leader must be able to flex their behaviour to changing situations and find different ways of achieving their objectives if obstacles get in their way.

**Ingenuity:** Whether you perceive you are capable of finding solutions to problems that you encounter. Ingenuity is important for leaders, as they need to be able to establish underlying causes clearly and generate solutions, driving their organisations to find ways out of challenging situations. They can also support employees by helping them to think about alternative strategies to overcome the problems they experience.

**Challenge Orientation:** If you enjoy experiences which challenge you and perceive stretching situations as opportunities to learn and develop. This can increase an individual's motivation and persistence in the face of obstacles. By adopting this attitude, leaders can also transfer this mindset to their employees and encourage them to view problems in a more positive way.

## Interpersonal strategies

**Emotion Regulation:** Whether you can remain calm and in control of your emotions in stressful situations. Leaders need to be able to regulate their emotions effectively in difficult situations to ensure they make rational decisions and continue performing at a high standard when under pressure. Projecting a sense of calm 'under fire' is also important as employees will be acutely aware of how their leader is reacting to challenging circumstances. If a leader shows signs of panic, employees will quickly pick up on this and it may increase their levels of stress.

**Support Seeking:** If you are willing to ask others for help and support when dealing with difficult situations. It can be lonely at the top, but it is often beneficial for leaders to refer to the various experts around them and gather different perspectives. Like anyone, leaders also need an appropriate release of negative emotions, as support seeking provides a buffer against challenges and stress at work. It can be very valuable for leaders to have a couple of discrete peers or an external advisor/coach with whom they can share specific challenges or problems.



# Developing Resilience in leaders

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Many managers and executives will already start from a solid base in terms of resilience; in fact, it is often one of the aspects of their performance which has enabled them to progress to a senior level. This is confirmed by our own research of 1,584 employees in 2014, which demonstrated that individuals in more senior positions reported having higher levels of resilience.

Despite this solid base, as the pressure grows at more senior levels, leaders need to be mindful of the need to maintain and enhance their resilience. There are four key skills and activities that leaders need to deploy and master to do this:

## 1. Take responsibility and build self-awareness

As a first step, leaders need to take responsibility for developing their own resilience. Without a personal commitment and a desire to change or build their resilience, they will be unable to take the next steps to improve. Leaders then need to ensure that they have an accurate understanding of the ways in which they are resilient and where they could develop further. It is important that they are honest about their own attitudes and behaviours in relation to this. Many leaders may not have directly reflected on their thinking style and behaviour when under pressure. Diagnostic questionnaires can be useful aids in this reflection process, and this can be given added weight through collecting 360 feedback from others.

Development Centres can also be used to put leaders into pressurised, realistic simulations of work situations, so that their behaviour can be observed by trained assessors. Their behaviours can then be fed back to them after the event and used to produce a development plan.

## 2. Reflect and learn from experiences

A key skill for the development of personal resilience is the ability to reflect and learn from challenging experiences. Most individuals have effectively dealt with challenges and have demonstrated the ability to thrive in challenging times.

A useful model to help leaders do this is the experiential learning cycle (eg Kolb, 1984). The diagram below outlines the process individuals can follow to understand and reflect on their experiences, and consequently modify their behaviour.

-  **Have the Experience** Put yourself into challenging situations which will give you the opportunity to develop and broaden your skill set. Draw on different resilience tools and techniques according to what suits the situation.
-  **Review the Experience** After the event, try to explore all the details of your experience. Think about the context, what you were thinking, what you did, what the impact was and the outcome. If you drew on specific tools or techniques, how well did they work?
-  **Conclude from Experience** Try to summarise what you have learnt from the experience and how you have dealt with the situation. What approaches did/didn't work?
-  **Plan Action for Improvement** Based on your conclusions, plan the next actions so that you can do a better job next time. Are there other tools or techniques that you could try?

### 3. Understand Different Resilience Tools and Techniques

There are a number of tools and approaches that can be used to enhance the different aspects of resilience. These techniques are not 'one size fits all' - every leader will have their own resilience profile, with differing strengths and areas for improvement. It's a case of matching the right tools, techniques and strategies to a leader's specific resilience profile.

Three examples of common approaches that leaders can draw on to improve their resilient thinking and behaviour are:



**Identifying and Challenging Negative 'Self-talk'** We all have an internal dialogue or 'self-talk' - the way we think about things to ourselves. This can have a huge impact on the way we feel and respond to situations. A well-established method of addressing this is to learn to recognise and dispute your own negative thoughts and beliefs. These thinking patterns will often pass by unnoticed even though they may be potentially limiting or false. By identifying and understanding these 'limiting beliefs', you can learn to challenge them and change how you react to challenging situations.



**Learning to be Optimistic** Optimism is not a fixed trait that cannot be changed; there is a wealth of evidence now that demonstrates that everyone can improve their level of optimism (Seligman, 2002). One method is about reframing your thinking about successes and failures. When things go wrong, optimists will tend to see the problem as being only temporary, they compartmentalise the problem rather than letting it affect other aspects of their work and they will recognise that external factors may have played a part, rather than it being their fault. This optimistic 'explanatory style' can be learned and developed.



**Stepping Outside Your Comfort Zone** Taking on stretching challenges outside of your comfort zone is often the best way to learn and develop your leadership skills. This requires a leader who is willing to push their boundaries, take risks and accept the possibility of making mistakes - we can learn as much, if not more, from our mistakes as we do from our successes. Even when leaders arrive at a senior level, they need to stay focused on continuous learning. By expanding their repertoire, leaders can ensure that they have a range of skills which can help them overcome difficult obstacles and setbacks. Coaches can support leaders in this process, as they are skilled at helping individuals to set and monitor stretching goals.

## 4. Deploy concerted effort

Talent alone does not create success and neither does change happen without concerted effort. In recent years there has been a shift in perspective regarding our brain's development specifically, the concepts of neuroplasticity and neurogenesis providing evidence that it is never too late for someone to change or develop.

Neuroplasticity is the ability of the brain to form new connections and pathways and change how its circuits are wired. Neurogenesis is the even more amazing ability for the brain to grow new neurons (Adalf et al. 2017), both of which can still happen at any age. The relationship between neuroplasticity and learning is an easy one to surmise—when we learn, we form new pathways in the brain.

Each new lesson has the potential to connect new neurons and change our brain's default mode of operation. Therefore, to enhance resilience, concerted effort can enhance the way we process and carve out these neural pathways. The process of facilitating neurogenesis and neuroplasticity to enhance resilience is not clearly understood, but there is a wealth of evidence demonstrating that the adult brain is capable of extraordinary change.

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