

How to Become a More Resilient Leader

In times of change—and change is a constant in the fast-paced global economy of the new business environment-- leaders have to be able to adapt while continuing to move forward toward fulfilling their organization's mission and strategic goals. Leaders who can recover quickly from adversity can assure that their organizations will survive, adapt and flourish. Resilience training includes how to take a positive attitude toward challenge without overloading your capacity, how to build networks of connectedness to form a safety net for individual leaders as well as for the organization, how to take control, how to let go and how knowing the right timing for each, as well as how to find stability in core beliefs that give change meaning and value.

Resilience is the ability to adapt and to persevere. This apparent paradox is really the middle way between chaos and rigidity. If a leader is only adaptable, there is no clear course of action as everything will seem to be simply reactive to the current change in the environment. On the other hand, if a leader tries to persevere with the original plan, the rigidity of adhering to the old structure creates brittleness or inability to respond to changes, and that can break an organization. Becoming fit to handle multiple change and even adversity requires being able to find the middle path, nimbly adapting to change while remaining on course and guiding the organization toward fulfilling its mission, profitably.

In the Resilience Training offered by Metcalf & Associates, we build on three fundamental aspects of resilience. The first comes from what we learned decades ago about stress management, that now serves as the foundation for the highly successful Full Engagement program for executives, that “Energy, not time, is the fundamental currency of high performance.” In other words, you must know how to build and manage your energy in order to be resilient.

Often leaders complain that stress is draining their energy. What do we mean by stress? We use a three part definition. First are the stressors, the emotional and physical factors that create stressful situations. We have a built-in reaction, through our autonomic nervous system, to tense up in the face of anything new in the environment. It is an old adaptive mechanism, preparing us to fight or flee, or even freeze, whichever response will serve us best. Tension gives us strength, a rush of energy, and perhaps a more rigid body armor to meet an aggressor. Another natural mechanism in the nervous system then signals us to release the tension, to relax and feel soothed. But in the midst of adversity, large or small, we do not fully relax before another stressor triggers another round of tension. Chronic, un-discharged tension leads to symptoms: lower concentration and therefore lower productivity, increased anxiety and depression, and a lowering of the immune system functioning leading to increased susceptibility to infection, cardiovascular problems and other illnesses. Physicians have reported that 70 – 90 % of illness is stress related.

What contributes to releasing tension? Good supportive habits of physical self care like sleep, a healthy diet, sufficient exercise, all the things that medical research continue to report as factors that contribute to reducing the risk of cancer, heart disease, stroke and dozens of other illnesses. Without this foundation, resilience is not a long-term proposition. We have tools to help you discover the changes you can readily make as well as a method for making more difficult adjustments to daily habits.

Beyond these basic stress management tools for sustaining physical energy, we can consider the emotional and cognitive factors that promote stress hardiness, or the capacity to thrive in the face of multiple challenges. Thirty years ago, results were published from an eight-year study of AT&T executives that lost their jobs or were reassigned in the biggest downsizing event in U.S. history. In measuring the effects of these adverse conditions in terms of medical and psychological symptoms, the

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outcome showed two distinct groups. The first group showed evidence of predictable increases in symptoms, while the second group experienced either no changes or were even healthier and more robust than when the study began. Further research with the second group identified three factors that distinguished them from their colleagues. Surprisingly, all three factors were rooted in what is now termed “narrative,” or what we tell ourselves about what is going on.

The first factor was an attitude toward CHALLENGE that framed the experience as positive, in that new situations were perceived as an opportunity not threat. In fact, this group tended to underplay their own ability and to attribute positive factors to external sources such as assistant from unexpected sources. They were confident but not overly- competitive in their approach to the challenge.

The second factor that identified the “Stress Hardy” group was a COMMITMENT to a belief system that provided a sense of meaning and value to their experiences. With beliefs as anchor, they could be open to diversity and increase their curiosity about what was actually occurring around them. The only real obstacle is the reluctance to experience the reality of what is occurring. The courage to face the truth is founded on this commitment. On the other hand, if the need for meaning becomes need to do it right, that is, “my way,” beliefs become a ball and chain that make agility painfully difficult.

The third factor is an attitude of positive CONTROL, that these leaders’ believed they could set their own goals and objectives to maximize their effectiveness in the real conditions of constraint. They believed that their decisions made a difference in any context and they focused on self-regulation rather than trying to control others.

After the results of this study were reported, Herbert Benson and his colleagues added a fourth factor that, in their research, effectively reduced the risk of heart disease: the ability to receive support from others through close relationships or what we call CONNECTEDNESS. Through providing an opportunity to talk over their concerns and feel the positive regard of another who is listening in an attentive and non-judgmental way, a close interpersonal connection can foster releasing tension and gaining an objective perspective on any situation.

The final component to Resilience Training is learning the capacity to FOCUS. We teach three levels of focus. First a resilient leader must be able to be fully present and focused in any situation that presents itself. Simple exercises provide a foundation for learning this essential tool. The next level of focus is the ability to create and adhere to a general strategic plan in the face of adversity. The details may need to change depending on fluctuations in the environment, but the overall strategy should be sufficiently robust to function as the guiding principles which daily activity serves. Finally, with the optimal goal in mind, the resilient leader is able to guide daily activity so that the focus is on the immediate steps needed to fulfill the goal.

While the concepts are simple, the application requires discipline, accountability, and support. Often an internal or external coach can make the difference in building the skills and habits for becoming the resilient leader you and your organization want you to be.