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How to Build Your Resilience MO as a Leader

Resilience matters. No-one needs a pandemic to hammer home the value of having high levels of personal resilience. Whether you are in a boardroom, hospital bed or sports game, high resilience edges up the odds that you will find a way to pull through.

BY KATE LYE

For leaders, personal resilience is not only a requirement, but also a duty. When we experience low resilience, it affects both confidence and capability. This insidious double whammy can leave us feeling uncertain, hypersensitive, unable to think clearly and struggling to take balanced decisions. Leaders must put their own oxygen masks on first before they can lead a business through a crisis.

So how do you do this? Well start by ignoring 90% of advice that is out there. All the articles on meditation, yoga, diet, breathing exercises or mindfulness come with the inbuilt assumption that one size fits all. When it comes to something as nuanced and multi-faceted as resilience, we know that is just not true. You only have to observe what stresses your colleagues and how they react, to know that resilience varies widely from person to person. Therefore, the idea of a resilience-building blueprint is a lazy myth that is long past its sell by date.



What do we mean by resilience in business?

First, let us be clear about what resilience means in business, because context matters. Psychologists define resilience as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, threat or significant stress (American Psychological Association). So, when we talk about resilient leaders, what does this look like in practice?

Endurance and perseverance are certainly behaviours you would expect. But resourcefulness should not be overlooked either. Being adaptive and clear sighted enough to create what Sheryl Sandberg calls an 'Option B' when the original game fails, is a key component of business resiliency.



Image by Gino Crescoli from Pixabay

The third element is the ability to bounce back. This is both a question of ‘speed of recovery’ and the ‘manner’ in which you come back after adversity. Psychologists talk about patients who are **steeled** or **scarred** by traumatic events. One individual, for example, may become more determined when they are passed over for a significant promotion. Another will have their confidence permanently damaged and still be talking about it for years to come. Both bounced back, but at different speeds and one was fortified by the experience, the other diminished.

Leaders who are serious about ramping up their resilience need a personalized approach to developing strategies that work for them and that reinforce all three elements. I call this building your Resilience Modus Operandi (RMO) and there are five steps to get yourself started.

Five steps to developing your Resilience MO

Step one – Work on your why

The first step is to take stock of what you value and believe in. What grounds us in life often acts as ballast in a crisis. Having a sense of purpose or meaning is foundational for humans. This does not have to be a lofty calling, but simply being able to see how we make a positive difference to the people or causes that are important to us. A 2014 study of 6000 participants conducted by Patrick Hill and Nicholas

Five Steps...at a glance

1. **Work on your 'why'** – resilience needs to be grounded in what matters most to us
2. **Ramp up your reserves** – learn from past experience
3. **Call out your demons and defenders** – start managing the odds in your favour
4. **Determine your stress signature** – understand how you typically respond to pressure
5. **Hardwire personal coping strategies** – pinpoint those individual responses that work for you

Turiano and published in Psychological Science, showed that if we feel just one standard deviation more of a sense of purpose than the average person, then we reduce our risk of dying by 15% over the next 14 years. What is more, having a sense of purpose increases your sense of hope, bravery and the likelihood that you will take difficult action.

Step two – Ramp up your reserves

Another source of ballast comes from banking the hard-won wisdom of past adversity. When we have a bad experience,

it is tempting to draw a line underneath it and move right along. Yet by drawing a line we can be blinded to our proven capacity to manage under pressure. Therefore, we fail to register what we did that worked, what bombed and other people's tactics that we should definitely borrow.

I encourage leaders to rerun two or three major events in their life. The point is both bear witness to what you have managed to come through and to capture the lessons for next time. If we take the time to learn from our setbacks, then we meet future problems from a stronger base.

Step three – Call out your demons and defenders

The third step is to rank those day-to-day external factors that affect (positively or negatively) your day-to-day functioning and ability to cope. These may be your quality of sleep, your diet, travel demands, working hours, level of contact with loved ones, adherence to a meditative practice or time spent online. In my experience of working with hundreds of executives, there are always a couple of demon factors that have a disproportionate effect on an individual's performance, for better or worse. One of my clients recognises that he is 'cranky', his

Leaders who are serious about ramping up their resilience.... I call this building your Resilience Modus Operandi (RMO)



word not mine, until he has worked-out and eaten first thing. Thankfully, he has learned to start his day with a run and a good breakfast. Equally, I have a colleague who seriously struggles with working away from home and is in awe of road warriors who can take months on the road without ill effects. In short, we are all different. Your Resilience MO needs to pinpoint those demon issues that take you out of the game and those defenders that keep you in play for longer.

Step four – Determine your stress signature

Next, you need to look internally and understand your typical responses to challenging levels of pressure. Let us start with your physical response. We all tend to have a number of physical tells. Like a flashing light on a car dashboard, they alert us that we are running on empty. For me, its tension in my shoulders. If I ignore this first signal and allow it to build up, then it can affect my voice, at which point I have allowed myself to be taken out of the game. For you it may be headaches, insomnia or an old sports injury that starts playing up. Naming your ‘tell’ is another part of your resilience armoury. It stops you mindlessly grabbing another aspirin or sleeping pill but instead acknowledging ‘I need to pay attention because I may be reaching overload’.

Once you understand your physical stress signature, then you can turn to emotional response patterns. One easy delineation is to ask whether you step forward or step back when things get tough? For example, some people retreat into the detail and become obsessive micro-managers.

Others may withdraw to lick their wounds and do not say what they think, but seethe in private. We all know people who move into ‘victim mode’ or blaming others. At the other end of the spectrum, other people respond by stepping into the fray and seeking to get more involved. They may become volatile, domineering and energized by the situation.

Hogan is an insightful psychometric tool for looking at behaviour under pressure as it pinpoints and ranks 12 patterns of derailment.

However, by talking to friends and thinking back to a couple of situations where you have been under real pressure, you can start to map the pattern for yourself. Your work response to stress may be different to your home reaction to pressure, context matters. Either way, you will have predictable stress patterns that are unique to you.



Finally, what are your cognitive responses to adversity? When challenged I tend to dwell on problems and rerun them in my head. I have colleagues who catastrophize about what else could go wrong. Some people tend to blame themselves and demonstrate an over-extended sense of responsibility. Under adversity, we may adopt mental patterns that have us operating from a place of fear or denial. Aaron Beck's original research identified ten types of 'faulty thinking' that can stop us seeing a problem clearly. Under pressure we can lose our sense of perspective and therefore business judgement. Therefore, the exam question, as before, is to pinpoint the default patterns you gravitate to.

Step five – Hardwire personal coping strategies

Finally, supercharging your resilience is about developing and fine-tuning coping mechanisms that help you keep your default stress patterns in check. Common responses to stress such as drinking, smoking, zoning-out with video games or non-stop use of social media can help distract us and dull the pain. These are car-crash coping mechanisms. They numb us to positive emotions and often reduce performance even further.

You are on a mission in creating your Resilience MO to come up with a shortlist of constructive coping mechanisms that really support and work for you. Connection, for example, always comes high on any list of resilience tools; spending time with people you trust and can talk to about a problem. We need to have an established, and ideally diverse, support network. Critically, we need to be willing to reach out and ask for help. The pattern and nature of the connection will be highly individual and needs to be figured out in advance.

Managing your mental and emotional health, means pinpointing the practices that counterbalance unhealthy default patterns. These may be simple practices that help you pause and gain more perspective on a problem so you can dampen down catastrophic thinking. Some people use exercises to retrain their brain away from fear to help tolerate uncertainty better. Others find it useful to name the emotions they are feeling to avoid being hijacked by their intensity. There is clear evidence that the more we can unhook ourselves from the emotional overload of a situation, the more we expand our choice of response. Being able to acknowledge intense emotions and also able to resist their downward spiral is the gold standard in psychological fitness.

Physical wellness is an obvious priority when we are under stress. Exercise, meditation, spending time outside in nature and getting some vitamin D are all widely recommended ideas. In the many options out there, there will be some combination of practices you need to unearth that will work wonderfully to recharge your particular batteries.

Resilient leaders will help businesses pull through

So, five steps to map out your personal Resilience MO. All leaders can better predict, manage, and bolster resiliency. There are legions of tools and techniques out there to improve mental, emotional and physical resilience. But it is only through mapping out your Resilience MO that you can pinpoint the practices that will reinforce you.

Leaders are no use to anyone in a crisis if they do not fit their own oxygen masks first. Inner strategies to supercharge personal resilience will provide leaders with a bulletproof vest to weather the days ahead.



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Developing Leaders looks at the critical confluence between the provision of executive education and the real everyday needs of organizations to strengthen their management teams, their corporate performance, and their leadership.

The publication presents the latest thinking and most recent developments in executive education provision and leadership development, worldwide, what it is achieving and which are the best models for success, sharing the experience and expertise of top leaders and world class educators.

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