

# Coping with resilience in tough times

By Rod Warner

*We define resilience in an organisational setting as the ability to remain task focused and productive whilst experiencing tough times. Resilience enables people to 'bounce back' after experiencing stressful life events such as significant change, stress, adversity and hardship – at work and at home. Importantly, it incorporates the concept of emerging from the adversity stronger and more resourceful.*

A large and successful South African company was recently experiencing tough times: consumers more discerning, competition fiercer, new entrants into the marketplace, stakeholders more demanding, skills shortage in critical areas, and legalisation compliance more onerous. The effect was that margins were under pressure, and, in response, top leadership launched several new initiatives to meet the challenges.

The impact on the organisation was to make an already difficult and complex business environment even more pressured. Many people struggled to cope, team members' close knit relationships fragmented, cliques formed and productivity suffered. On the home front, loving relationships were strained as they spent more time at work, and even struggled to be "present" when at home. On the positive side however, there were a group of people who coped with the challenges and some even seemed to relish meeting and overcoming the challenges.

This range of reactions was typified by members of a team managing regional sales and administration. Stella was frequently overwhelmed, and reacted in a passive-aggressive manner towards leadership, customers and the organisation. She complained that her job had become too much for her and her life, in general, had lost meaning. She seemed defeated by the demands of her job and home. She was known at work as the "whiner", and negatively impacted on her team's outputs. She drifted at work, was disengaged and uncommitted, only rousing to deal with the urgent. Her minimal level of work output only just prevented her from losing her job. We label this type of coping as **Succumb** or dysfunctional.

Dennis coped somewhat sporadically better. He was characterised by enthusiastic beginnings, but typically soon ran out of steam when the going got tough. He typically blamed others for his problems, and he came to be regarded as an unreliable performer. His typical refrain was: "They just don't understand!" and was known to sit in the coffee area and bemoan his lot and how management does not care about the staff. His team

was frequently overtly irritated by his negative comments, and this led to friction amongst him and them. We refer to this type of coping as **Disabled** or stuck.

Nona coped better with a more balanced approach and avoided the emotional flooding that overwhelmed the previous two (Stella and Dennis). She was able to curb her anxieties and focus on her job. She commented: "I can't influence the decisions the executives make and what will happen. I do my best and don't worry about the things I can't control. This approach has worked for me in the past, and I am sure it will work for me now". She effectively managed her complex work-life balance, and was generally able to sustain her normal predictable usual level of performance throughout the challenges and changes in the company. Her coping method of tackling the challenges, dealing with issues and moving forward we refer to as **Navigating**.

Thabo's coping was in an enviously different league. He was more than able to navigate the turbulent waters of change - he thrived with inner strength and resourcefulness. This was reflected by his openness to learning and consequent growth and development. Despite the pressures, he was able to maintain a sense of enthusiasm and realistic optimism. He had grit and mental toughness. His energy levels at both work and home were mostly unaffected. His "can-do" contribution to his team was always valued, the team's output improved, and he became a top performer. Personal advancement inevitably followed. We call this type of coping **Thriving**.

These different coping levels are shown in "Table 1: The different reactions to adversity". These four stereotypical reactions to tough times or adversity are commonly encountered in organisations, and therefore the intriguing questions are: why do some people struggle so much with what they experience as deep adversity, whilst others facing similar circumstances survive and even thrive? How do some people maintain consistently high levels of productivity, whilst others wilt under the same circumstances?

The different reactions to adversity	
<b>Succumb: dysfunctional functioning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Frequently overwhelmed</li> <li>•Passive aggressive</li> <li>•Little purpose in life and work</li> <li>•Does minimum to keep job</li> </ul>
<b>Disabled: survival coping; "stuck"</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Copes sporadically under pressure</li> <li>•Eager beginnings but not sustained</li> <li>•Quick to blame others</li> <li>• Unreliable performance</li> </ul>
<b>Navigating: moving forward; dealing with issues</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Copes under pressure</li> <li>•Balanced outlook at work</li> <li>•Reconciles work-home balance</li> <li>•Predictable performance</li> </ul>
<b>Thriving: enhanced resourcefulness and strength</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Growing and developing</li> <li>•Realistically optimistic and enthusiastic</li> <li>•High energy at work and home</li> <li>•Superior performance</li> </ul>

Table 1: The different reactions to adversity

We recently undertook research in South African companies to answer these questions, using extensive critical incident and focus groups interviewing. What emerged was the ingredient that separated the levels of coping and productivity is best described as **resilience**. We define resilience in an organisational setting as *the ability to remain task focused and productive whilst experiencing tough times*. Resilience enables people to “bounce back” after experiencing stressful life events such as significant change, stress, adversity and hardship – at work and at home. Importantly, it incorporates the concept of emerging from the adversity stronger and more resourceful.

Thus, coping with adversity and, in particular, significant experiences of adversity, should be a process of reconciling and healing over time as the person moves towards thriving. However, should the person have limited resilience, the person will inevitably show dysfunctional or disabled coping, as shown in “Figure 1: Experiencing adversity with limited resilience”.

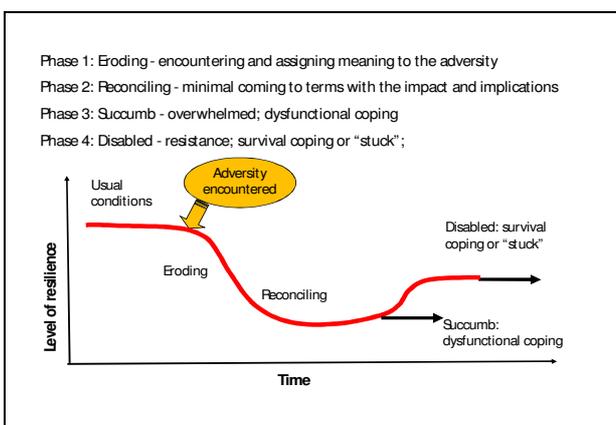


Figure 1: Experiencing adversity with limited resilience

The graph shows that there is an inevitable eroding of resilience after the experience of a significant adversity, followed by a stage of reconciling. Due to limited resilience, the coping of the individual is restricted to Succumb or Disabled type of coping reaction.

With a greater degree of resilience, on the other hand, a person who undergoes a similar adverse set of circumstances is better able to cope and ultimately flourish. This is represented in “Figure 2: Experiencing adversity with resilience”.

Navigating and Thriving are shown as enhanced levels of coping associated with increased levels of resilience. This represents a much more encouraging process, with an upward spiral of coping; feeling good about oneself; developing inner strength and resourcefulness, which enables further positive coping. This virtuous cycle enables engagement and thriving at a higher level than before the adversity.

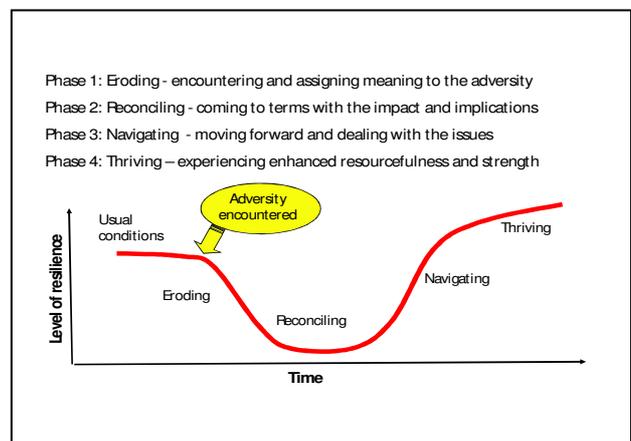


Figure 2: Experiencing adversity with resilience

The benefit to organisations of having resilient staff is that they have the buffering resources to cope with inevitable organisation challenges. Solid research on resilience in the workplace conducted overseas has shown the benefit of resilience in organisations:

- Resilient people experience overall more hope, optimism and positivity, and so are better able to cope with job demands;
- Resilient people are best able to get through tough times, such as job loss and economic hardship;
- Resilient people are better able to learn new skills and knowledge when their existing skill sets become outdated;
- Resilient people are less likely to become mentally or physically ill during adversity;
- When competing for a job or promotion, the more resilient person has a better chance of succeeding;
- Resilient people are best able to turn adversity into a growth experience, and to leverage it

into new experiences and ways of working and living.

The personal benefit for staff in being resilient is that they have inner strength and resourcefulness to absorb “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”, flourish and thrive. Our research re-affirmed that whilst no-one wants to experience tough times and adversity, for personal growth and development to occur, it is necessary for one’s status quo to be disrupted. Personal growth and development never occur in good times – they generally only occur when one is in unfamiliar territory, when comfort levels are breached, and when one is out of one’s depth and struggling. Adversity achieves this and initiates potentially life-enhancing change. In this context, resilience is the life-force to overcome adversity, heal and strive towards self actualisation and flourishing.

But is resilience teachable?

The good news is that it is indeed able to be enhanced. Our research showed that there are specific resilience-building tools which can be applied and developed amongst individuals and teams, to produce statistically significant sustained enhancement in resilience over time.

Imagine your organisation staffed with resilient people like Thabo who have abundant inner strength and resourcefulness, which enables them to cope with mergers and acquisitions, new priorities, new strategies, major change initiatives, new technologies, retrenchments and downsizing. Wouldn’t that make a discernable difference in your own organisation!

(Names have been changed in this article)

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