

leadership

Staying the
course:
*Building personal
resilience
for successful
organisational
change*



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ABSTRACT: Personal resilience at work is the ability to remain task-focused and productive while experiencing tough times. Resilience at work has many beneficial consequences and, together with change readiness activities, is central to successful implementation of large-scale change initiatives. Resilience is defined as the life force to overcome adversity, heal and strive towards self-actualisation and flourishing. A study is described which was designed to elicit the building blocks of personal resilience, in order that it can be developed and enhanced in the workplace. Training implications are briefly considered.

Christopher Reeve had lots of it. Lance Armstrong is the epitome of it. Jacob Zuma demonstrates it. Even the JSE is showing classic signs of it. They all are resilient – able to deal with tough times and bounce back. This may prove to be the single most critical personal skill for South Africans as we reconcile with our past, cope with the present and prepare for the future.

What is resilience? It is certainly demonstrated by those who battle the storm's fury to rescue sailors in stormy seas, or who tunnel deep underground to free trapped miners. Luckily, it is not just confined to a select few heroes. It is a widely distributed ability that we all possess.

Resilience enables us to “bounce back” after experiencing stressful life events such as significant change, stress, adversity and hardship³. Most importantly, it incorporates the concept of emerging from adversity stronger and more resourceful.^{3,7}

At work, resilience is the ability to remain task-focused and productive while experiencing tough times. Imagine your organisation staffed with

people who have abundant inner strength and resourcefulness, which enables them to cope with mergers, new priorities, major change initiatives, new technologies, and downsizing. Wouldn't that make a difference?

Interest in resilience in the workplace has been increasing. Solid research has mirrored this interest and over the last few years has shown there are dramatically beneficial outcomes for organisations:

- Resilient people experience overall more optimism and positivity and are better able to cope with job demands².
- Resilient people are best able to deal with tough times such as job loss and economic hardship¹.
- Resilient people are better able to learn new skills and knowledge when their existing set becomes outdated⁸.
- Resilient people are less likely to become mentally or physically ill during adversity⁸.
- When competing for a job or promotion, the more resilient person has a better chance of succeeding⁸.
- Resilient people are best able to turn adversity into a growth experience and leverage it into new experiences and ways of working and living³.

The good news is that resilience can be developed to achieve dramatic benefits for the individual and the workplace. Staff can learn to be more resilient and thus make the transition^{4,8}.

Gary Hamel, the well-known strategist, observed: "The world is becoming turbulent faster than organisations are becoming resilient." People undergoing organisational change often experience a disruption of the *status quo* as uncomfortable and even threatening. It is now well accepted that to be successful, organisational change initiatives must be supported by people change support initiatives – to align people intellectually to the reasons and business case for the change; to engage them emotionally to deal with their past experiences of change; to identify fears they may have about the implications of the change, and to train and reinforce new behaviours and processes to roll out the change.

We have found that over and above well-crafted change support initiatives, individual personal resilience is needed to ensure the success of the change.

Resilience involves dealing with those things that cause stress and is needed to cope with the "normal traumas" everyone experiences in life and at work. Moderate stress

enables energetic actions and excitement; too much stress is debilitating. The process of a resilient reaction to adversity still involves the person feeling hurt and pain, but what characterises them is that they move forward, deal with the issues, learn from them and emerge strengthened and even more resourceful. The different reactions to a change are shown in Figure 1.

Coping successfully with adversity has the great benefit of enhancing resilience which, in turn, enables better coping with future adversity. Thus the experience and application of

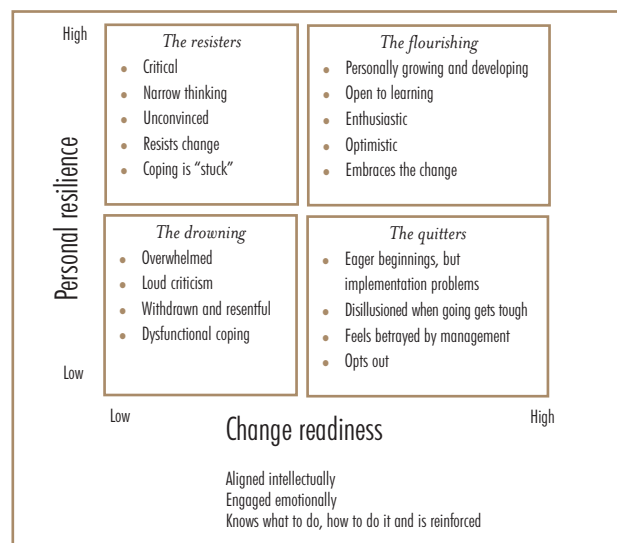


Figure 1: Personal resilience and change readiness

resilience leads to further positive upward spirals of healing, recovery, growth and thriving, as shown in Figure 2⁶.

NEW PERSPECTIVE ON RESILIENCE. There is an inherent irony in all of this. No-one wants to experience tough times and adversity, but for personal growth and development to occur, it is necessary for one's *status quo* to be disrupted – adversity achieves this and initiates change. Horace is reputed to have said: "Adversity has the effect of eliciting talents which in prosperous circumstances would have lain dormant." After a life-disrupting change, one cannot go back to how things were – you will become stronger or weaker; better or bitter⁵.

This personal impact of the adversity on you is determined by you. You use resilience to deal with the adversity and its personal impact, which encompasses more than just recovery elements and processes⁷.

With this understanding of the role of personal resilience, we define it as the life force to overcome adversity, heal and strive towards self-actualisation and flourishing^{5,7}.

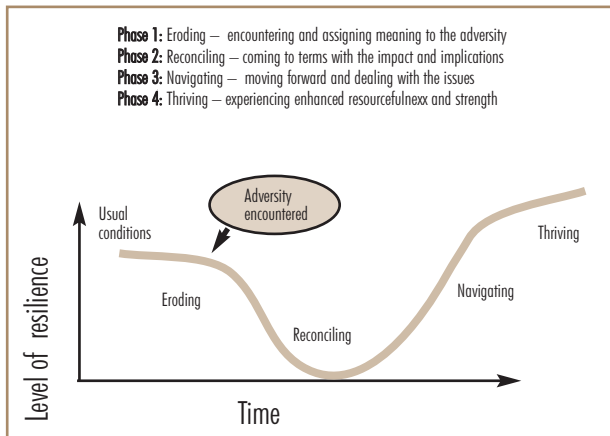


Figure 2: Experiencing adversity with resilience

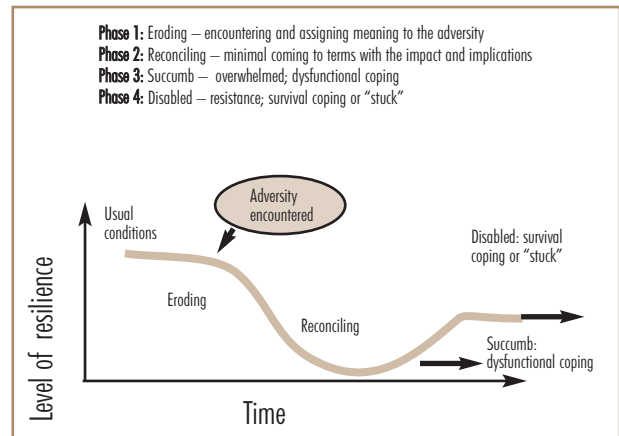


Figure 3: Experiencing adversity with limited resilience

The implication for organisations is that there is as much personal benefit for staff in enhancing their resilience, as there is for organisations in the further development of resilience at work. Good news for all!

But what differentiates people who seem to thrive under pressure and difficult times from those who, in the same circumstances, seem to wither and weaken? And what causes some resilient people to remain strong for lengthy periods, but then find themselves “battle-weary” or “burnt out” so that their coping, dedication and productivity are limited? This negative coping, with the consequent potential for negative downward spiralling^{2,9} is shown in Figure 3⁶.

RESILIENCE STUDY. A study of resilience was recently undertaken in South Africa. The aim was to examine how people cope with adversity and stress at work, with a view to finding out how to enhance personal resilience to enable better coping with organisational change. The outcome was a clear understanding of how people manage their thoughts, feelings and attitude, what they do in order to cope with tough times, and, in particular, how some emerge stronger and more resourceful.

The research included a literature review, focus groups and critical incident interviews. Three domains of personal resilience were identified. The first is the core domain and consists of life purpose and meaning, as well as understanding and accepting one’s self. The second is the internal world of choosing thoughts, feelings and attitude, and the third is the external world of taking actions, and giving and accepting support. Figure 4 shows a model of the building blocks to develop personal resilience. Each of these domains is briefly outlined below:

GROUNDING AND CONNECTING. The core domain consists of two constructs: grounding and connecting, and understanding and accepting self.

Grounding and connecting is expressed as regarding one’s life as having purpose, meaning and direction. There is a connection to something substantially significant, such as people, causes or faith. There is a feeling that life has personal meaning and this is expressed in life goals with incremental steps being taken to achieving these goals. In this context, adversity is seen as having a higher purpose and meaning.

UNDERSTANDING AND ACCEPTING SELF. Understanding and accepting self is defined as understanding and being realistically optimistic about personal strengths and vulnerabilities. This incorporates being self-aware, having insight into one’s own strengths and vulnerabilities, and – most importantly – being realistically optimistic about one’s own capabilities and limits. This knowledge is reinforced by drawing strength from having overcome previous adversities. It incorporates an acceptance of one’s self for

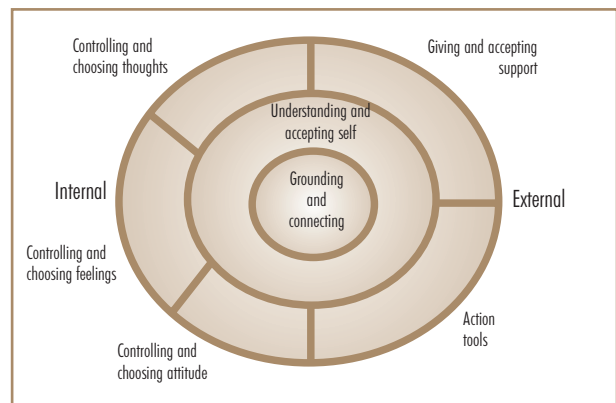


Figure 4: Personal resilience building block model

who and what one is, as well as what one is capable of, and being at peace with that realistic picture.

CONTROLLING AND CHOOSING THOUGHTS. The internal domain of resilience consists of three constructs to do with controlling and choosing thoughts, feelings and attitude. The first construct is controlling and choosing thoughts, which concerns controlling negative thinking and choosing positive thoughts. To do this, one needs to be aware when persistent and strong negative thoughts occur, and be able to stop and reframe them. A central component is recognising and avoiding the thinking which triggers persistent negative thoughts with the outcome of thinking more positive than negative thoughts.

CONTROLLING AND CHOOSING FEELINGS. Controlling and choosing feelings concerns controlling emotional impulsivity and choosing a considered response. It involves quickly becoming aware of strong emotional feelings when they occur and being able to control them. While strong emotional feelings are indeed felt and expressed by resilient people, it is done in ways that do not make others uncomfortable and that are typically goal-directed.

CONTROLLING AND CHOOSING ATTITUDE. The third internal construct is that of controlling and choosing attitude. This is defined as deliberately choosing a positive outlook and taking steps to live it out. The foundation of this attitude is the belief that the person can, to a large extent, influence their life's direction and that the problems they experience can be solved. They choose to be positive rather than negative.

An important element of maintaining this positive attitude is that they engage in enjoyable, relaxing and recharging activities.

ACTION FOCUS. The domain of the external world is made up of two constructs, the first of which is action focus – being persistently action-directed using open and flexible approaches. Here resilience is being persistent in seeking solutions, using flexible approaches to problem-solving and being prepared to try out new approaches to problem-solving. This openness is reflected in being open to listening to people with different views while problem-solving, and being prepared to take considered risks.

GIVING AND ACCEPTING SUPPORT. The other construct is easily giving and accepting support. Typically, resilience is

enhanced by giving and accepting assistance and support, as well as sharing one's own emotional state with trusted others. This incorporates being sensitive to the feelings, needs and motivations of others, and involves responding appropriately to their feelings.

In conclusion, the research study demonstrated that resilience is more than just recovery elements and processes, since it incorporates the concept that successful coping with adversity results in enhanced resilience, which in turn enables better coping with future adversity. The research showed that resilience involves insights, thoughts, feelings and actions – indeed, a way of positive living and even thriving which can be learnt and enhanced.

Preparing staff for any large-scale change such as new ways of working, or dealing with adversity in the form of mergers and retrenchments by assisting them to develop their personal resilience, will result in them being more receptive to the change and better able to cope with the inevitable disruptions. This can be achieved by training using the framework of the resilience building blocks. From this perspective, resilience is needed as much in the senior levels of the organisation as in the lower levels.

Our experience is that personal resilience training is usually well received and can be effectively applied in the work situation.

The benefit to the organisation is enhanced project take-up assurance, less resistance and quicker benefit realisation. The benefit to the staff is a life skill which enables them to cope better at work and at home.

Isn't that a double benefit worth creating? ■

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