

Where There's a Will, There's a Way

By Anna Harrington

Recognizing the importance of good mental health at work is growing, not just because of the rise in mental illness as the main cause of workplace absence (Absence management: Annual Survey Report, 2011), but due to growing recognition that performance and engagement can be affected by a worker's state of mind. According to the CIPD's absence report in 2011, one employee in five admits to absence that has not been caused by "genuine" ill health.

The current economic climate can have an adverse effect on an individual's mental state, affect performance and engagement at work, and increase "presenteeism" (the situation where individuals come to work when unwell or not fully productive). For businesses to survive during difficult economic conditions, creativity and adaptability are needed (Davies, 2009). Fear and anxiety limit these capabilities and are potentially catastrophic to the individual and to the business.

History of resilience

Understanding resilience and recognition of its importance have developed through psychological studies of individuals and groups in adverse circumstances, such as after disasters (Bonanno et al, 2006) and children with mentally ill mothers (Garmery, 1974) or children exposed to other risks.

Resilience research analyzes why some people go on to experience more problems, while others develop into adults who can contribute positively to society (Werner, 2004). Researchers question why some can survive difficult situations and become stronger and more able, while others suffer from depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. The quote from philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, "What does not kill me makes me stronger" (Nietzsche, 1888) suggest that it is the event or challenge that strengthens the individual, but research points more to the role of individual responses. As the Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist Victor Frankel said: "The last of human freedoms ... is the ability to choose one's attitude in a given set of circumstances."

Defining resilience

Resilience has been defined as an attitude that enables the individual to examine, enhance and utilize the strengths, characteristics and other resources available to him or her. Definitions of resilience include:

- An individual's response and methods used to allow them to successfully navigate through or past an event perceived to be stressful.
- "The flexibility in response to changing situational demands, and the ability to bounce back from negative emotional experiences" (Tugade, et al, 2004) or "a set of flexible cognitive, behavioral and emotional responses to acute or chronic adversities which can be unusual or commonplace" (Neenan, 2010).

- “The capacity to mobilize personal features that enable individuals, groups and communities (including controlled communities, such as a workforce) to prevent, tolerate, overcome and be enhanced by adverse events and experiences” (Mowbray, 2010).

The term “bouncing back” is used to describe resilience, but this belies the struggles and adaptations that an individual has to make in order to emerge stronger from a stressful situation and the growth that is part of resilience.

The definitions mentioned above state that it is the individual’s appraisal of the event and their actions – physical, cognitive and emotional – in response that are important. Therefore, the individual needs to be at the heart of any intervention and needs to analyze themselves, their capabilities, and the resources available to them.

Resilience is not about struggling alone; it is about the use and mobilization of ordinary human processes.

While the development of individual resilience requires the person to focus on their thoughts and feelings and examine their actions and responses, it can be either assisted or disturbed by the context in which the individual finds himself (Neenan, 2010).

A program of resilience training within a workplace will need to pay attention to the organizational culture and the effects that has on the creation of resilient individuals or how it impinges on an individual’s ability to be psychologically strong. Coping is part of resilience, but if the environment restricts the mechanisms that allow for coping, then the individual will become increasingly frustrated. Resilience is about the internal cognitive factors and the actions that the individual performs.

Key elements

It is agreed through the literature on resilience that it is a multi-modal construct. In particular, this involves the creation of positive emotions and thought processes. The literature contains similar views on the key elements of resilience, such as the “seven-elements” approach by Professor Derek Mowbray. Another model has been used by Professor M.E.P. Seligman with the U.S. Army, which includes physical, emotional, social, family and spiritual elements.

- **Emotional:** “Approaching life’s challenges in a positive, optimistic way by demonstrating self-control, stamina and good character with your choices and actions.”

Organization is important to emotional control, as it allows the mind time and space to direct effort toward maintaining emotional calm and balance, rather than being distracted about managing the external needs and requirements. Problem-solving and emotions have a symbiotic relationship. As mentioned earlier, when faced with an event, we will appraise the situation, reflecting on our own skills, and make an assessment of whether or not they are sufficient to navigate the event successfully. If we feel there is a deficiency, this can lead to reduced optimism and positivity. Having prior experience of successful problem-solving provides confidence and can assist in the development of a positive attitude. People with high levels of determination are strong self-believers; they believe that they will be able to tackle most things, which gives them positive feelings.

- **Spiritual:** “Strengthening a set of beliefs, principles or values that sustain a person beyond their family, institution and societal resources of strength.”

Having a vision gives a sense of purpose and direction to one’s life. Without a life vision, activities and actions have a reduced value and therefore affect the effort and determination that will be applied to overcoming the obstacles that get in the way of achieving the goals associated with the vision.

It also means that when competing demands arrive, it is easier to allocate time and energy when appraising them according to goals/vision, which will direct what takes precedence. Having a vision can contribute to self-confidence, hope and excitement about the future. Having goals has been stated as being essential to our survival. It is the movement towards the goals, rather than the achievement of them, that plays a significant part in the creation of positive emotions (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011).

- **Social:** “Developing and maintaining trusted, valued relationships and friendships that are personally fulfilling and foster good communication, including a comfortable exchange of ideas, views and experiences.”

We need others to survive, and our methods of interacting will affect the degree to which we obtain our needs. Mowbray advocates strengthening our ability to create reciprocity, the ability to respond, understand and assist in the needs of others, and in return, the “other” will respond to your needs. Many different types of positive relationships provide many positive emotions, which then affect our sense of self and self-confidence.

Positive relationships assist in the acceptance of ourselves – “if they like me, I must be okay.” Acceptance of our self is about acceptance of the whole self – including better and worse aspects. Self-acceptance is not based upon performance or result. It is about acknowledging failures and recognizing that efforts need to be made towards improvement.

- **Family:** “Being part of a unit that is safe, supportive, loving and provides all the resources needed for all members to live in a healthy and secure environment.”

Everyone needs a relationship where they feel safe enough to “just be themselves,” without any fear of belittlement, ostracizing or other forms of behavior that make the individual feel that they need to adapt and modify their behavior. Usually this comes from within the family structure and it is these relationships that can be the most punitive and damaging – in which case, the individual will need to develop considerable resilience.

- **Physical:** “Performing and excelling in physical activities that require aerobic fitness, endurance, strength, healthy body composition and flexibility derived through exercise, nutrition and training.”

This dimension implies that a healthy body composition is an essential requirement of the physical aspect of resilience. However, the literature on physical exercise suggests that resilience derives from the degree of effort required in each session, and the commitment to an exercise program over a sustained period of time, usually a minimum of 20 to 30 minutes of significant effort three times per week over three or four months (Leith, 2010).

Conclusion

Resilience is the development of psychological strength to assist the individual to overcome and grow from challenges. It requires a close review of the environment in which the person exists and an honest examination of oneself. It is not a “one-hit wonder,” but requires a long-term, consistent commitment to working towards a stronger self. It requires some underlying traits, such as courage, appropriate even appraisal, honestly, tolerance of frustration with positivity, an ability to connect with others, self-acceptance and adaptability (Needan, 2010).

Resilience has the potential to help an individual to live a happy and fulfilled life, and can transform organizations toward being flexible, able to accept change with minimal disruption, and being seen as a good place to work. This, in turn can add value to the employer brand, and make it easier for the firm to recruit high-caliber employees.

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