



# The Resilient Leader

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*In the following article, Lisbon-based leadership trainer and coach Ulrich Geuther investigates resilience – people's ability to be successful even in the most adverse circumstances. He shows how the main 'resilience factors' help managers strengthen their own resilience and that of their companies.*

There is almost nothing we admire as much as people's ability to struggle on and achieve their goals in the face of adversity. The more difficulties they face along the way and the bigger the obstacles, the more we value their success. The tougher the fight and the greater the perseverance and ingenuity required to survive it, the greater our admiration for the person involved.

We call the ability to be successful in difficult situations and to use setbacks to one's own advantage 'resilience'. Resilience plays a key role for leaders.

### Origins

The term 'resilience' comes from the field of material science, where it refers to the ability of a material to return to its original state following elastic deformation.<sup>2</sup>



Everyday example of material resilience: a stress ball

<sup>1</sup> Winston Churchill is reported to have said: 'Never let a good crisis go to waste' (<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/717228-never-let-a-good-crisis-go-to-waste>).

<sup>2</sup> In **material science**, **resilience** is the ability of a material to absorb energy when it is **deformed elastically**, and release that energy upon unloading ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resilience\\_materials\\_science](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resilience_materials_science)).

Nowadays, 'resilience' has become a key term in a wide range of disciplines and describes the ability of a system to continue functioning despite serious interference.<sup>3</sup>

When applied to individuals, resilience acquires a **psychological definition**, which provides the clearest description of the essence of resilience in relation to management:

**Resilience is 'the ability to withstand, adapt to, or rebound from, extreme challenges or adversity'.**<sup>4</sup>

The studies conducted by US researchers Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith<sup>5</sup> are key to the psychological understanding of resilience. They tracked nearly 700 children from difficult backgrounds over a period of 40 years. Around a third of the children grew up to be capable adults despite considerable adversity. These were the resilient ones. The longitudinal study by Werner and Smith also showed that people's resilience capability varied considerably over time and that most people took some time to develop it.

**As a result, it is assumed that resilience can be learned.**

The significance of this concept for leaders is obvious. After all, being able to act in a crisis and help others keep sight of team goals and stay on track is a genuine leadership task.

This means that managers face **two challenges**:

1. They need to ensure that they themselves can continue to function, especially at times when many other people in the company are at risk of breaking down under the increasing pressure.

<sup>3</sup> For example: '**Resiliency** is the ability to provide and maintain an acceptable level of **service** in the face of **faults** and challenges to **normal operation**.' ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resilience\\_\(network\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resilience_(network))).

<sup>4</sup> Resiliency Science Institutes, International (RSI)

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. E. E. Werner and R. S. Smith, *Journeys from Childhood to Midlife: Risk, Resilience, and Recovery*, New York, NY, Cornell University Press, 2001.

2. They need to make the organisation as a whole more resilient so that it stays on track even in extremely difficult circumstances.

**Therefore, managers have to look after their own resilience and that of the company.**

How can they do this? What specific steps can managers take to develop greater resilience in themselves and in their organisation?

To find answers to these questions, let us take a look at the abilities that have been identified as **resilience factors** in research and in practice.

## General resilience factors

The general resilience factors were initially identified in studies with children (see above) and later confirmed for adults from a wide range of cultures and different areas of life.

The list below contains a selection of these factors – the ones that have also proved particularly effective in my own practice as a coach, trainer and consultant.

Resilient people differ from less resilient people in that they:

- have greater control over their impulses,
- are more attuned to their environment and the outside world and less inward-looking,
- are more likely to reach out to others and are less aggressive,
- are more empathetic and are more likely to talk about their feelings,
- are more likely to ask for help and are able to admit their weaknesses,
- respond very positively to attention, and
- are very focused on and motivated by performance.

The overlap between the top resilience factors and the five emotional intelligence

factors first described by Daniel Goleman<sup>6</sup> is striking.

According to Goleman, emotionally intelligent people have a realistic view of themselves, successfully control inappropriate emotional reactions, possess sufficient energy and stamina – as a result of their strong performance focus – to cope with periods of motivational drought, and can easily put themselves in another's shoes and communicate effectively.

These people therefore meet a large number of the requirements for being resilient.

### The five factors of emotional intelligence

1. Self-awareness
  - being acutely aware of one's own impulses, strengths and weaknesses and the impact of one's behaviour on others -
2. Self-regulation
  - being capable of controlling and managing one's own impulses and emotional reactions, particularly in difficult situations -
3. Motivation
  - very high levels of energy and motivation to achieve; able to survive drought periods -
4. Empathy
  - capable of putting oneself in the position of others -
5. Social competences
  - able to communicate effectively with others and form and cultivate relationships with others effortlessly -

However, there is more to resilience than emotional intelligence.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Daniel Goleman, 'What makes a leader?', *Harvard Business Review*, 1998.

### Primary factor: Positive relationships

Chief among the defining characteristics of resilience is one that the American Psychological Association (APA) calls ‘**the primary factor in resilience**’:

#### Positive relationships inside or outside the family -

#### For managers: positive relationships inside and outside the organisation

These positive relationships are characterised above all by **mutual support and assistance** – people who look after each other. In other words: if you have people you care for and who care for you, you have greater chances of finding the stability you need that will make you resilient in a crisis.

It is clear that the picture of the resilient manager that is emerging here is far removed from the aggressive lone fighters we still see heading many large organisations today. These leaders may possess a number of impressive qualities, but they are less likely to be resilient. As we have seen, for this you need a high level of the emotional intelligence that makes social connections possible. And it is these relationships that enable people to survive real crises and come out of them stronger than before. Ultimately, all human strengths come from interacting constructively with others.

Before we come back to the question of what managers can do to strengthen their own resilience and that of their organisations, we need to consider two other factors that have proved key to understanding resilience: **optimism and self-efficacy**.

### Optimism

Optimism is the ability to see a glass as half full when others are complaining that it is already half empty. Optimism means choosing from all the possible aspects of a reality to focus on those that are positive, constructive and helpful. Optimists identify these positive aspects and perceive them as options. Pessimists focus their attention on problematic aspects, frequently on

whatever is annoying them or not going the way they would like.

However, people with an optimistic outlook do not only focus their attention on different, positive aspects – they give what they perceive a different, positive meaning.

**Resilient people have the ability to reframe.** This means they can place a threatening, annoying or frustrating issue in a new context that makes new interpretations and new courses of action possible.

Now, some people will object that optimism is something that one either does or does not possess. People are either optimistic or they are not – it is part of their personality. The counter-argument is that the room for development available to each and every one of us is vast and can be accessed and exploited through appropriate techniques, such as reframing. We will come back to this later.

### Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy focuses on a concept whose importance for people in companies (managers and staff) should not be underestimated. The key research in this area dates back to studies conducted by American psychologist Albert Bandura in the 1970s.<sup>7</sup>

The most important aspect of self-efficacy is the conviction of one’s ability to act, even in difficult situations, and to have an impact on events and on the world. While others make chance, luck, misfortune, other people and other uncontrollable external factors responsible for events, resilient people share an **internal locus of control** – the belief that they can have a significant influence on the course of events.

As an indispensable component of resilience, self-efficacy appears to be particularly significant, if only because it reflects a basic human need to have control over one’s own circumstances.

<sup>7</sup> Albert Bandura, ‘Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change’, *Psychological Review* 1977, Vol. 84 (2).

All change management measures that do not take this factor sufficiently into account are doomed to failure, as countless examples have shown.

## **Resilience and leadership: What can managers do to make themselves and their companies more resilient?**

### **How managers can increase their own resilience**

The five factors of emotional intelligence (see above), which should be part of any management training programme, create the basic requirements needed to increase personal resilience.

In addition, from my work as a consultant, trainer and coach, I believe the following steps are helpful for increasing resilience. I have formulated them here as commandments:

**Identify the purpose of your existence  
and define the most important goals for  
your life!**

**Give difficult situations a constructive  
meaning!**

**Strengthen inner self-belief  
(self-efficacy and internal locus of  
control)!**

#### 1. IDENTIFY PURPOSE AND GOALS

We start from the questions that managers have to ask themselves at some point:

***Who are we? Where do we come from?  
Where are we going? What do we live  
for?***

The real purpose here is to find a genuine answer to the question 'What do I live for?' – an answer that links you to something beyond your own life and that provides a purpose: something to achieve that is bigger than yourself.

This self-reflection<sup>8</sup> will lead you to the purpose of your existence and the most important goals in your life. It will also reveal your strengths and weaknesses

<sup>8</sup> Self-reflection always includes feedback from others.

and anything that is driving you forwards or holding you back.

#### 2. FIND CONSTRUCTIVE MEANINGS

We have already talked about **reframing**. This is the ability to see things differently and to give them a new, constructive meaning. Reframing lets you mobilise positive energy that you can use for problem solving.

The following questions can help us reframe a situation:

- ***To what extent could the situation I am experiencing be made for me?***
- ***What can I learn from this situation?***
- ***What opportunity might it present?***
- ***What other ways are there of seeing the problem?***

The last question brings us to the source of creative solutions, the place where all innovations begin.

#### 3. SELF-EFFICACY

Strengthening the **internal locus of control** should be something managers do as a matter of course. Your role as a manager involves a clear call to action, which assumes you believe that your actions can actually achieve something. But how can you ensure that your locus of control is realistic and not just a figment of your imagination?

Writing at the interface between reframing and internal locus of control, Anthony Robbins<sup>9</sup> describes how managers can develop their own control model. These are the important questions that managers ask when they feel control slipping away from them in a situation:

<sup>9</sup> See <https://training.tonyrobbins.com/building-your-control-model-where-do-you-spend-your-time/> and Anthony Robbins, *Awaken The Giant Within: How to Take Immediate Control of Your Mental, Emotional, Physical and Financial Life*, 2001.

- **How can I focus my energy on those things I can control and influence?**
- **What empowering meanings can be drawn from this event? What meaning will I give to those events, so that they enable me and others to benefit from them?**
- **What steps do I take to let go of the things that are causing me to experience stress – those things I can't control?**

Managers need to be able to identify which of these three conditions for action apply to a situation:

Is the situation characterised by things that I have under control, I can influence, or that lie outside my control and influence?

Obviously, it does not make sense to wear yourself out over things that you cannot influence.

In his influential book *Awaken the Giant Within*, Anthony Robbins describes three things we all have a hold on:

1. Where we direct our attention.
2. What meaning we give to things.
3. What we do next.

This self-efficacy belief is what sets resilient people apart from those who believe that they are primarily a pawn of fate.

'Nothing in life has any meaning – except the meaning you give it.'  
Anthony Robbins

Moreover, we need to admit that our influence over others is not nearly as great as we might like. We cannot control the behaviour of other people, however hard we try.

**The only thing over which we can have complete control is ourselves and our emotional reactions.**

## How managers can strengthen a company's resilience

'Resilient leadership' is the term used to describe those **leadership behaviors that help others** withstand crisis, adapt to, or rebound from, adversity.<sup>10</sup>

How can leaders increase the resilience of individuals and, at the same time, foster a culture of resilience within the organisation as a whole?

**Leadership actions** on the six logical levels<sup>11</sup> have proved particularly effective in practice.<sup>12</sup>

This is what leaders can do:

1. Their leadership behaviour enables everyone in the company to identify with the purpose of the organisation and to find their own personal meaning from it.
2. Their leadership behaviour systematically strengthens the self-assurance of managers and staff.
3. Their value-based leadership ensures that everyone's day-to-day actions are guided by the same values.
4. The leaders make sure that the company effectively and systematically promotes individuals' self-efficacy. The most important instrument here is delegation and the transfer of responsibility (empowerment).
5. The leaders are role models for solution-oriented behaviour and promote this approach at all levels.
6. The leaders create open, robust conditions and ensure that employees have the resources they need to deal with difficult situations.

<sup>10</sup> George S. Everly Jr., Resiliency Science Institute (RSI), (emphasis U.G.).

<sup>11</sup> See Robert Dilts, 'The (Neuro-)Logical Levels', e.g. in Dilts, Robert, *Changing Belief Systems with NLP*, Meta Publications, Capitola, CA.1990.

<sup>12</sup> The Xcellence Institute works with this model successfully in Germany. See also Geerd Philipsen and Frank Ziemer, 'Mit Resilienz zu nachhaltigem Unternehmenserfolg', *Wirtschaftsinformatik & Management 2 / 2014*.

It is necessary to implement adequate measures **on all six levels!**

The reward will be an organisation that not only survives crises better, but uses them to emerge stronger than before.

Isn't it exactly this we all wish for our organisations?

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The article was published by the Gen Re Business School in their magazine **Risk Management Review 2015**