



ADAPTIVE MINDSET™

Does Your Company Have the Resiliency Needed to Capitalize on Upcoming Opportunities?

By Dr. Natalie Wolfson, The TRACOM Group

It is quite clear that organizations today are operating in a turbulent and ever-changing environment. To maintain a competitive edge and oftentimes just to survive, companies need to continually transform themselves through new technologies as well as strategic and structural changes. However, these changes often come at the expense of employees' comfort and psyche. From our research, we have uncovered a key competency for managing the rapidly evolving workplace: resilience.

Those who have a resilient mindset have developed a fundamental way of thinking that allows them to persevere through challenges. They adapt to stressors and change in a way that not only allows them to bounce back, but to grow from the experience. In other words, they bounce forward by finding opportunities in adversity. In our research, we've found that resilient people share several characteristics: They believe they control their own future, they see the world in a positive but realistic way, they maintain a sense of calm and focus in the face of stress, they have a strong social support network, and they face stress rather than withdraw from it.

There is mounting evidence linking resilience to a host of critical workplace outcomes. Resilient people are more likely to perform better,

remain committed to their organizations, attain work-life balance, and effectively manage change with less psychological distress. What's more, various scholars and business leaders insist that resilience is a key distinguishing feature between those who make a difference with their ideas and those who don't, those who succeed and those who fail.

What prevents us from being more resilient? Humans have deeply ingrained cognitive biases that hold us back from being as resilient as we could be. For instance, we suffer from a negativity bias, meaning we tend to see the glass as half empty. Negative information is processed more quickly and has a stronger, more long-lasting impact on us compared to positive or neutral information. For example, researchers have found that people have stronger activity in the cerebral cortex in response to negative images (such as a hospital patient) compared to positive (a pie) or neutral images (a plate). They also more quickly identify sad or angry faces compared to happy faces. This negativity bias is even evident in our language – of the 558 emotion words in the dictionary, 62% of them are negative and only 38% of them are positive. And, of the most common emotion words that people use, 70% of them are negative.



This negativity bias has an evolutionary basis

– it was crucial to the survival of our prehistoric ancestors. Cavemen were not concerned with falling in love or picking flowers – they had bigger problems. They had to be intensely vigilant for dangers such as attacks from predators, accidents, and other natural disasters. A constant vigilance towards threats was crucial for survival, because it mobilized us for activity; therefore, it perpetuated over time and was programmed into our brains. In modern times physical threats are less common - threats are more psychological in nature - threats to self-esteem, sense of control, and so on. However, they still trigger this acute negative emotional response and this ancient part of the brain still exerts control over us. So, when our boss calls us into the office, we immediately imagine the worst, or when a client calls to discuss some figures on a proposal, we often experience a surge of fear that we've messed up. And it is enormously challenging to think strategically when our stress response kicks in, pumping a sense of anxiety and urgency into our system. The negativity bias works against us in modern times because it means we see threats where none exist, we are overwhelmed by challenges, and we have difficulty identifying opportunities in difficulties.

So are we all doomed to fail, thanks to our prehistoric ancestors? The answer is no. Research shows that resilience is not a fixed personality trait; it can be developed. While the emotional region of the brain operates automatically, generating negativity and fight-or-flight instincts, the more logical part of our brain, the prefrontal cortex, can be used to calm our emotional brain and prevent the negativity bias from controlling our perceptions of events. Certain activities are particularly effective at building resilience, even on a neurological level, by altering prefrontal cortex activity and strengthening neural pathways between the prefrontal cortex and the emotional centers of the brain.

One such strategy stems from cognitive behavioral therapy. This technique involves becoming aware of automatic negative ways that we interpret the world and challenging these to cultivate a mindset that is much more realistic and adept at coping with challenges. For example, one common, automatic way of interpreting events is by “catastrophizing;” that is, imagining the worst possible outcome and

exaggerating the likelihood that this outcome will happen. Those who catastrophize are likely to say to themselves things like, “If this project doesn't go well, I will never be able to move up in the company” or “If I don't make this sale, I'll be the laughing stock of the office.” This automatic way of filtering information sucks our enthusiasm, drains us of energy, and leaves us with fewer resources to manage challenges. Once we can identify and name these thought patterns, however, we confront them in a logical way and generate more positive emotional responses to difficulties.

Another way of developing resilience is through goal-setting. Goal-setting focuses our attention and helps us persist through challenges. Research continually shows that ambitious and specific goals are powerful drivers of behavior. However, to be effective, goals should focus not only on the end result, such as running a marathon, but on specific activities for achieving that end result – run 30 miles each week and lift weights three times per week. Outcome goals, without the sense of direction in terms of how to attain them, just produce stress and burnout.

Leaders play a critical role in developing their employees' resiliency. Harland, Harrison, Jones, and Reiter-Palmon (2004) found that the degree to which leaders displayed confidence, articulated a compelling vision, and individually valued employees lead to subordinate resilience.

Leaders can also enhance resilience among their employees by embedding autonomy into their employees' work, providing ample training and development opportunities, and modeling the behavior they wish to see in their subordinates, and demanding excellence in a way that fosters a positive mood. It's been found that leaders who elicit the highest performance from their employees make their subordinates laugh three times as often as mid-performing leaders.

Change is constant; it's how we respond to change that really differentiates us. Especially now, as employees come out of this economic downturn, some with weakened resiliency due to the variety of prolonged stressors they've experienced, it is imperative that organizational leaders devote more time to fostering resilience in their employees.

About the Author

Dr. Natalie Wolfson is an organizational research consultant with The TRACOM Group. She has led efforts to develop and validate assessments and training programs on employee resiliency and emotional intelligence.

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