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Resilience

Bridging the Resilience Gap

Part One



By Paula Marcondes

MOST people tend to associate the term resilience with the ability to cope with stress and bounce back from adversity. Some even equate it with mental fitness.

However, what happens if the ability to cope with stress leads someone to feel such a high level of strain over the medium to long term as a result of unsustainable coping strategies that they end up experiencing burnout or having to manage a potentially more serious crisis of a different nature? Is the ability to cope generated in unsustainable ways to be equated with resilience?

- What is resilience?
- What makes organisations and individuals resilient?
- Why is it important to build resilience?
- How can individuals and organisations build it?

Building Resilience

In May 2002, *Harvard Business Re-*

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view published an article “How Resilience Works”. Diane Coutu, the author, felt a sense of urgency to explore this topic because of the terrorism, war, and recession issues being faced then. The article quoted Dean Becker, CEO of Adaptiv Learning Systems: “More than education, more than experience, more than training, a person's level of resilience will determine who succeeds and who fails. That's true in the cancer ward, it's true in the Olympics, and it's true in the boardroom.”

In 2003, *HBR* published another ar-

ticle “The Quest for Resilience” by Gary Hamel and Liisa Valikangas. Hamel was recently ranked by *The Wall Street Journal* as the world's most influential business thinker and called by *Fortune* “the world's leading expert on business strategy”. They contended that there was a resilience gap in the world because the world was becoming turbulent faster than organisations were becoming resilient.

This is our reality today:

- The world continues to face terrorism, war, and recession;

- The increasing global economic volatility continues to place new pressures on organisations to drive productivity and performance;
- The pressure for organisations and individuals to perform with progressively fewer resources continues to rise, and
- Unfortunately, the resilience gap to which Hamel and Valikangas referred to in their article back in 2003 has widened.

From an organisational perspective of the top 20 companies in the United States by revenue in 1980, only seven remained on that list in 2003, and only six remain on that list today¹. This is not just an American phenomenon. According to *Forbes*, globally, of the top 10 public companies listed in 2003 only four remain in that list today.²

Reeves and Deimler says: "Since 1980 the volatility of business operating margins, largely static since the 1950s, has more than doubled, as has the size of the gap between winners, companies with high operating margins, and losers, those with low ones. Market leadership is even more precarious. The percentage of companies falling out of the top three rankings in their industry increased from 2 per cent in 1960 to 14 per cent in 2008."³

From an individual perspective, according to Oshinsky, some are finding it increasingly hard to cope with the pressures of their workload: "Depression, burnout, mental strain, and somatic illnesses such as cardiovascular disease are among the negative impacts that have been supported as highly correlated with workplace stress."⁴

You may wonder how the resilience gap at a personal level may affect the organisation's bottom line. Hewlett's research shows that by affecting individual's "physical, mental, and emotional resilience, stress undermines performance and productivity and directly impacts a firm's bottom line."⁵

The impacts of the existing resilience gap are costly to countries, organisations, and individuals. Watson says that in North America, "there is pressure to reduce benefit budgets, especially healthcare costs. With a significant increase in utilisation of programmes—healthcare, disability, and employee assistance programmes were reported up over 35 per cent or more."⁶

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What is Resilience?

A lot of research has been conducted on the subject since World War II. We know that resilience is neither a genetic quality nor a gift that exists inherently within a group of selected few.

Resilience is not about surviving but about thriving. However, "being resilient does not mean that life's major hardships are not difficult and upsetting. Instead, it means that these events, though difficult and upsetting, are ultimately surmountable."⁷ Difficulties are perceived as catalysts for development.

Resilience is not the same as stress management although many training programmes dedicated to building resilience are in essence basically about that. Research by psychologist Dr Mary Steinhart, professor of health education at the University of Texas at Austin, found that employees who perceived their jobs as being very stressful were the least resilient employees.⁸ In fact, stress disability claims often increase after stress management workshops instead of decreasing.⁹

A large share of the resources invested by organisations on resilience-building initiatives does not bring about the desired results because there is a lack of understanding about the nature of resilience versus that of managing stress and quick setback recovery.

There are elements of stress management and setback recovery in resilience building. Resilience, however, is more than stress management and quick recovery. It is about having the ability to recover from setbacks not only faster but better, wiser, and stronger. It is about navigating through pressure-filled and ever-changing situations feeling the strain, but also, feeling stimulated, calm, and confident as opposed to feeling stressed and deflated.

The process of building resilience is not smooth sailing because the greater challenges we face during this process are internal—how we assign meaning to the

world and how we choose to interact, manage, and learn from it.

Some people believe that "resilience describes the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially highly stressful or traumatic events."^{10,11,12}

To others, resilience is an outcome, "an interactive product of beliefs, attitudes, approaches, behaviours, and, perhaps, physiology that help people fare better during adversity and recover more quickly following it."⁷

In the Mayo Clinic Web site, resilience is defined as a skill—"an individual's ability to adapt well and recover quickly after enduring stressful, life-changing situations, including adversity, trauma or tragedy." In my view, resilience is more than a process, outcome, or a skill. It is a state of being that can be consciously developed.

Foundations of Resilience: Sustainability and Wellness

The most fundamental components of resilience are sustainability and wellness. Resilience can't exist without either of them, although sustainability and wellness do exist without resilience.

Most people, when they come across the term "corporate sustainability" tend to associate it with a greener way of doing business. This, however, is just an outcome of a sustainable management paradigm.

Corporate sustainability, in essence, is about staying alive, producing value for shareholders and building an enterprise that will not only survive, but succeed over the long term.¹³

To achieve these goals in an increasingly turbulent environment, organisations must create sustainable competitive advantage. Sustainability is, therefore, a fundamental aspect of resilience.

Sustainable competitive advantage can only be achieved if an organisation is able to adapt rapidly. To do that it must be really good at learning to do new things and finally, it is people who learn to do new things, have new ideas, and make companies great.

If people are stressed and unwell, and if they are working in an environment that does not promote well-being, they will not be able to learn quickly and innovate. A major study of organisational effectiveness by Right Management found compelling evidence linking health and well-being to employee engagement, organisational productivity, talent retention, and creativity and innovation. It reported that fewer than half of the nearly 30,000 employees who participated worldwide said that their

organisations actively promote employee health and well-being.¹⁴

At a personal level, if strategies used for coping with stress or bouncing back from adversity are not sustainable, they will create strain that, over time, may lead to burnout or potentially more serious physical or psychological conditions of a different nature.

Ultimately, if coping strategies are not sustainable, the final goal—to recover from setbacks better, wiser, and stronger—will not be achieved. Therefore, sustainability and wellness are the foundations of resilience.

Unfortunately, many managers and leaders think that wellness is just another buzz word. In most organisations, the crucial task of building wellness is delegated to human resource departments. The leadership in these organisations has not yet realised that wellness is an issue of the highest strategic importance that is directly related to the organisation's ability to adapt, build sustainable competitive advantage, and resilience and, ultimately, be profitable.

Research shows that “workplace wellbeing and performance are not independent. Rather, they are complimentary and dependent components of a financially and psychologically healthy workplace.”¹⁵

Investing in building resilience and wellness will only bring about the desired results if the right management paradigm is in place. Sending employees to resilience-building programmes and expecting them to become well-being champions usually only places more strain on them if they are to come back to a sick workplace. How can someone focus on well-being if all of his energy is being invested into surviving?

To bridge the resilience gap successfully and cost-effectively, organisations will need to go through a management paradigm shift to prepare them to address sustainability and wellness weaknesses that may exist in the way they operate. Companies like Ernst & Young and Google recognise that. Matthew Thomas, manager, employee relations, Ernst & Young says: “Supporting our people must begin at the most fundamental level—their physical and mental health and wellbeing. It is

Figure 2: Four Sources of Resilience

Self (Individual)	Core (Organisation)
1. Physical	1. Staff, resources, offerings, brand, space, and systems
2. Mental	2. Mindset, strategies
3. Emotional	3. Climate
4. Spiritual	4. Leadership: core values, vision, mission, and management paradigm

Source: Paula Marcondes

only from strong foundations that they can handle the complex issues and challenges that they face every day.”

“At Google, we know that health, family, and well-being are an important aspect of Googlers’ lives. We have also noticed that employees who are happy and healthy, as well as respected and rewarded for their contributions, demonstrate increased motivation and productivity. From both a work-life balance as well as a job satisfaction perspective, our programmes work to ensure that Google is and remains an emotionally healthy place to work,” says Lara Harding, people programmes manager, Google.

Where Does Resilience Come from?

Resilience, as a state of being, is expressed at different levels. I call these the three levels of resilience.

Our state of being encompasses all aspects of who we are—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. How we manage each aspect of who we are determines how resilient we are. I call these different states of being the four sources of resilience.

The Self at an individual level, and the Core at an organisational level are where the four sources of resilience reside.

At the level of Self, we are in our most private space. This is our internal space where our beliefs and values exist and where our perceptions and dreams are formed. This is where our choices are made and where self-love or the lack of it, self-confidence or the lack of it, and stress are formed. If an individual or an organisation is not resilient internally, a resilience gap exists even if externally this individual or organisation may seem to be resilient. ✎

Figure 1: Three Levels of Resilience

Individual	Organisation
Internal	
1. Self	1. Core
External	
2. Personal and Family	2. Shareholders, Stakeholders, Government, and Community
3. Occupation and Career	3. Customers and End Consumers

Source: Paula Marcondes

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