

Resilience: From the Personal to the Organizational

Today's post comes to us from the executive director of The Workforce Institute, Dr. Chris Mullen, Ph.D., SHRM-SCP, SPHR.



Like so many other people this year, I've been thinking a lot about resilience: the ability to recover from difficult experiences and setbacks, to adapt, move forward and even grow from whatever difficult experience we have lived through or overcome. This has been a year in which we have all dealt with a lot more stress and anxiety than usual.

The New York Times has done a wonderful [series of articles this year](#) on resilience and "What we can learn during troubled times from history and personal experiences." One of my favorite articles in the series was Ellen Zimmerman's piece, "[What Makes Some People More Resilient Than Others?](#)" which includes a section on how to build resilience based on interviews with "large numbers of highly resilient individuals — those who have experienced a great deal of adversity and have come through it successfully." These interviews show that these highly resilient people share the following 7 characteristics:

1. *They have a positive, realistic outlook. They don't dwell on negative information and instead look for opportunities in bleak situations, striving to find the positive within the negative.*
2. *They have a moral compass. Highly resilient people have a solid sense of what they consider right and wrong, and it tends to guide their decisions.*
3. *They have a belief in something greater than themselves. This is often found through religious or spiritual practices. The community support that comes from being part of a religion also enhances resilience.*
4. *They are altruistic; they have a concern for others and a degree of selflessness. They are often dedicated to causes they find meaningful and that give them a sense of purpose.*
5. *They accept what they cannot change and focus energy on what they can change. Dr. Southwick (professor emeritus of psychiatry, PTSD and Resilience at Yale University School of Medicine quoted throughout the article) says resilient people reappraise a difficult situation and look for meaningful opportunities within it.*
6. *They have a mission, a meaning, a purpose. Feeling committed to a meaningful mission in life gives them courage and strength.*
7. *They have a social support system, and they support others. "Very few resilient people," said Dr. Southwick, "go it alone."*

As I think about this list of characteristics of resilient individuals, it occurs to me that many of these same qualities would apply to teams and organizations as well – not just in a global pandemic, though that was certainly the case this year, but anytime really.

Having both a positive and realistic outlook (#1) is critical. A team or a leader who dwells on negative information rather than striving to find the positive is a classic toxic boss or co-worker. When times are tough, we need to pull together and lift each other up. Hiding from the truth of the situation or making

oneself believe a rosier version of the truth isn't the answer, but neither is marinating in negativity and futilely wishing things were different. The key is to see things as they are (often with the help of multiple perspectives) and then look for opportunities to fix problems or make the best of something.

I think this characteristic of focusing on the positive goes hand-in-hand with #5 on the list: accepting what we cannot change and focusing energy where we can make an impact. As a previous boss of mine used to say, "We can do anything, but we can't do everything." You as a leader must focus yourself, your team and your organization on applying your efforts and talents where they can make the most difference and progress and let the rest – whether it's priorities you just can't get to or circumstances simply out of your control- go.

I'd group numbers 2, 3, 4 and 6 together under the heading of connecting our work as a team or organization to something larger than ourselves. Not many of us work best in isolation, a cog in the wheel of a giant machine whose purpose we don't really understand. Making sure that your team knows what you are working towards and why it's important is critical. If everyone is working together towards a shared and worthy goal, bumps in the road aren't going to stop you. It's incredible to think of all the teams who have shifted to completely remote work during these times seamlessly and have continued marching towards their goals. Just as impressive are the folks, like our healthcare and other essential workers who have continued showing up for work in uncertain and dangerous times. When we're connected to or inspired by something larger than ourselves, we show up.

Lastly, and in my book maybe most importantly, #7 – having a support system and not going it alone. We humans are social creatures, and we thrive on connection with others. Having a team where you know you have each other's backs, where you can reach out and ask for help if you need it, this is a critical aspect of having a resilient team and organization. A dysfunctional team filled with grudges and backbiting isn't going to get far. It's the team that supports each other, celebrates the successes no matter how small, works through the failures and learns from them – seeing the negative, but focusing more on the positive – that will have the most success – and the most fun.

As we start the last month in the calendar of the unprecedented year that was 2020, take some time to reflect on your own resilience as well as that of your team and organization. Have you become more resilient this year? I hope so. Building that resilience in a difficult time like the one we are in now only makes you stronger and better able to handle future challenges.