

Personal Resilience Overview

Introduction

As the pace of change in the world continues to increase, managing the many disruptions in our lives has become one of the most important tasks we face. If you work in an organization, you are almost certainly involved in a number of major transitions, such as new technology, shifts in systems and structures, and reorganizations of teams and functions. You probably have additional changes affecting you and those close to you, such as health issues, moving to a new home, or changes in relationships (such as marriage, divorce, having kids, or losing loved ones).

We are not always very good at adapting to this accelerated pace of change. Research suggests that a large number of organizational changes fail to accomplish their desired goals, and our personal changes don't do much better, even when we think they're the right thing to do—think of the number of marriages that fail, and the New Years' resolutions that are never kept.

At its core, successful change depends on whether you as an individual can adapt to new ways of thinking and operating, and whether a critical mass of individuals in an organization can adapt together. But many people lack an understanding of how change affects them and what they can do to better anticipate and adapt to changes that come their way.

Why Change is Challenging

Although we don't always like to admit it, humans seek control. We use our past experiences to establish *expectations* about how things in our life are likely to unfold. These expectations provide a sense of control. Change is challenging precisely because it disrupts our expectations – it creates a new reality that doesn't match the expectations we have created. This causes us to feel a loss of control. We sometimes exert a lot of effort to try to get the world to match our expectations. When that doesn't work, we try to establish expectations that match the new reality. This, however, takes energy.

Adaptation is the process we use to adjust to the positive or negative implications of a major shift in our expectations. *Adapting to* or *assimilating* change is costly because it requires personal resources to make the shift. The resources we use include mental energy (to unlearn old ways of doing things and learn new ones), emotional energy (to work with our feelings and reactions), and physical energy (to engage in new behaviors).

Everyone has capacity available for adapting to change. Some have more than others do, but no one has an unlimited amount. Think of your adaptation capacity as a “bank account” of points you can use to pay for changes that take place in your life. Each change draws on this account. When the level of demand for adaptation to change exceeds the energy available, people display a wide range of behaviors that do not contribute to their own well-being or that of their organizations, families, or others. This dysfunction can show itself in a variety of ways, including defensive behavior, stress-related illness, depression, and increased errors and accidents.

Personal Resilience

Of all the factors that contribute to adapting to change, the single most important factor is *resilience*—the capacity to absorb high levels of change and maintain high levels of performance. When resilient people face the ambiguity, anxiety, and loss of control that accompany change, they tend to grow stronger from their experiences rather than feel depleted by them.

What is resilience? Based on a great deal of research and observation of people going through change, we have identified a set of characteristics that help people use their adaptation energy more effectively. We think of these characteristics as “change muscles.” We believe that everyone has the ability to apply and develop each one. Just as certain physical muscles are stronger in some people than others, people differ in the strength of their resilience muscles. And, just as regular exercise will strengthen physical muscles, so resilience muscles can be strengthened through practice. When a change muscle is weak, it can certainly still be used, but the person must apply more effort to get the same result as a person who has developed greater strength in that area.

There are seven resilience characteristics:

1. **Positive: The World** Resilient individuals effectively identify opportunities in turbulent environments.
2. **Positive: Yourself** Resilient individuals have the personal confidence to believe they can succeed in the face of uncertainty.
3. **Focused** Resilient individuals have a clear vision of what they want to achieve and use this as a guide when they become disoriented.
4. **Flexible: Thoughts** Resilient individuals generate a wide range of ideas and approaches for responding to change.
5. **Flexible: Social** Resilient individuals draw readily on others’ resources for assistance and support during change.

6. **Organized** Resilient individuals effectively develop and apply systems, processes, and structures when dealing with change.
7. **Proactive** Resilient individuals initiate action in the face of uncertainty, taking calculated risks rather than seeking the comfort of the status quo.

Each of these characteristics plays a role in the effective use of energy during change.

- The two *Positive* characteristics allow you to engage your energy in addressing the challenge, rather than draining energy by retreating into worry and defensiveness.
- The *Focused* characteristic allows you to direct energy toward your most important goals, rather than diffusing it across too many options.
- The two *Flexible* characteristics allow you to open up a wide range of possibilities and resources rather than limiting yourself to the familiar.
- The *Organized* characteristic allows you to generate efficient, effective approaches rather than applying your energy unsystematically.
- The *Proactive* characteristic allows you to experiment with action in the face of uncertainty rather than holding back until everything is clear.

Each of these seven characteristics of resilience is important by itself, yet they are most effective when combined in action. This allows you to call on the specific change muscles that are most needed to address a particular challenge. As an example, you might run into a situation where the most important element is the ability to be extremely flexible and think of a wide range of possible actions. Another situation might call for you to stay deeply focused on your objective. At various points in time, all the characteristics are important. For this reason, it is impossible to say that there is a single “trait” called resilience. Instead, we view resilience as the ability to draw on whichever characteristic, or combination of characteristics, is called for in a particular situation.

Developing Resilience

Each of the resilience characteristics can be developed through consistent practice and development of new mental habits. For example, developing strength in the “Positive: The World” characteristic involves taking time to look for possibilities and opportunities in situations that may at first seem primarily negative, and doing this consistently enough that it becomes a regular part of your thought process. It’s important to practice during the times when you are not overwhelmed with disruption, so your muscles are ready when the challenges hit. It may also be helpful to identify someone who can serve as a resource or a coach as you work to develop one or more of the characteristics.

The payoff for increased resilience is strong for both organizations and individuals. Organizations benefit from being able to implement changes more quickly and effectively, which gives them a competitive advantage compared to organizations with less-resilient people, and from lower levels of unproductive behavior during turbulence. Individuals benefit from being able to achieve their own goals in the midst of uncertainty with less wasted energy, leading to greater productivity and greater satisfaction.

Team and Organizational Resilience

While the focus of this article is on individual resilience, it's also possible to consider the resilience of teams and organizations using the same basic set of resilience characteristics. A *Positive* team, for instance, is one that is able to effectively engage the energies and talents of all its members. A *Proactive* team is one that can effectively evaluate risk and take action in the face of uncertainty. Team resilience is a function of both the resilience of its individual members and the process by which it draws out and leverages the strengths each person brings.

An organization's resilience is, of course, partly determined by the resilience of the individuals and teams within it, but it is more than that. There are aspects of the organization's leadership, context (vision/mission/strategy), and culture that set the stage for effective performance during change. For instance, a *Flexible* organization is one that has effective capabilities to innovate as a response to changing market conditions, while an *Organized* one has effective disciplines around the use of processes and structures.

In conclusion, while the challenges of change place significant demands on everyone, both inside and outside organizations, a focus on identifying and developing resilience can help individuals, teams, and organizations effectively use their available mental, emotional, and physical energy to respond to these challenges with higher levels of performance.