

Building Resilience

An Actionable,
Science-Based Model
for Leaders



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“ I was astounded by the level of chaos, noise, and disorganization I experienced at the highest organizational levels. Every leader that I worked with this year was in full-on reactive mode most of the year. ”

Bob Kinnison | AIIR Dallas

For years, leaders have contended with competition, complexity, chaos, and continual change. Over the past decade, however, the scale of these challenges and the frequency with which leaders encounter them have steadily increased. Today, leaders face a future characterized by challenges that are exponentially greater than anything they faced in the past.

In this environment, leaders and their teams will no doubt experience setbacks. And, for many, the prospect of failure is fueling a catastrophic increase in stress. 68% of business leaders feel overwhelmed by the rapid pace of change.¹ And Gallup found that more than two-thirds of workers report feeling burned out, with leaders reporting more stress and worse physical health than the members of their teams.²



Resilience

Resilience is the psychological capacity to adapt to stressful circumstances and to bounce back from adverse events.³ Today and tomorrow, resilience is an essential leadership competency. Studies show that resilient leaders:

- > Experience less stress and better mental and physical health.⁴
- > Are more able to adapt to change and overcome setbacks.⁵
- > Are about 31% more satisfied with their lives than their less resilient peers.⁶

And importantly, resilient leaders are better equipped to build more resilient teams and organizations.

Although research indicates that some people seem to be naturally more resilient than others,⁷ it has also shown that resilience can be learned. Below, we share actionable, science-driven strategies for building your own resilience as a leader and for building a more resilient team.

Building and Maintaining Resilience: The AIIR Model

Research shows that resilience-building behaviors fall into 3 main categories:

- > Adopting an optimistic mindset
- > Building a strong network
- > Investing in wellness

Below, we detail specific strategies you can use to increase your resilience in each area.

Adopt an Optimistic Mindset

Adopting an optimistic mindset is not the same as ignoring the obstacles that stand in your way. Studies have shown that most people already tend to overestimate their own competence and underestimate their shortcomings, and refusing to learn from your failures can lead to dangerous gaps in self-awareness with the potential to derail your career.⁸ So, while we encourage leaders to acknowledge their failures and build self-awareness around their areas for improvement, there is also ample evidence that an optimistic outlook plays an important role in determining success. In fact, studies show that an optimistic outlook — belief that your future will be better than your present — leads to better workplace outcomes⁸ and an increase in happiness.^{9,10}

Following are three ways you can adopt a more optimistic mindset when faced with adversity.

Avoid Catastrophizing

Catastrophizing is a common cognitive distortion in which we automatically imagine the worst possible outcome for a given situation. In other

words, catastrophizing is our tendency to make mountains out of molehills — a blown deadline that you're sure will get you fired (and probably unable to find a new job) or a terse interaction with a superior that signals, at least in your own mind, an immovable obstacle blocking your career path. How can you keep yourself from catastrophizing?

Use grounding exercises such as focusing on each of your five senses or mindful breathing to bring yourself into the present moment. Focus on the known facts (e.g., your boss scheduled an unexpected 1:1 meeting at the end of the day) rather than assigning those facts added meaning (e.g., you never have a 1:1 meeting, it's at the end of the day, it's probably something bad). And, if you can't keep your mind from focusing on the worst possible outcomes to a given scenario, work on finding the silver linings.

Reframe Setbacks as Opportunities

Research from both psychologists and neuroscientists suggests that cognitive reappraisal — reframing your setbacks as opportunities — is a valuable tool for changing your emotional response to both minor (car trouble) and major (a car accident) challenges. Car trouble becomes an opportunity to have the rest of your vehicle inspected. A car accident becomes an opportunity to better appreciate life itself. Studies have shown that regularly reframing challenges as opportunities in this way not only leads to better long-term psychological health and well-being but can change activity within the brain.¹¹

Practice Gratitude

Is your recollection of the day often dominated by disappointments? Evolution has given human brains a natural bias toward negativity, which persists today. That means we tend to pay more attention and give more weight to negative experiences over neutral or positive experiences, even if those negative experiences are relatively minor.

Writing down, talking about, or even simply mentally focusing on your positive interactions and experiences can help you counteract negativity bias and improve your mood. Studies have shown that weekly gratitude journaling can lead to a long-term increase in both physical and psychological well-being.¹²

Build a Strong Network

We tend to think of resilience in terms of individual characteristics, but research shows that your relationships with others matter just as much, if not more. Relationships are a critical source of the hormone oxytocin, the presence of which has been linked to numerous health benefits.¹³ Conversely, feelings of social isolation have been linked to an increased likelihood of depression,¹⁴ lower immune function and more inflammation,¹⁵ and lower performance, limited creativity, and lower capacity for reasoning and decision making at work.¹⁶

Your network is a combination of strong and weak ties, both of which matter for your resilience.

Survival of the Networked

Hours before it made landfall in Puerto Rico, Hurricane Maria devastated Cayo Santiago, a tiny island where researchers at the Wharton Neuroscience Initiative had spent years studying a population of rhesus macaque monkeys. Though all of the monkeys miraculously survived the initial trauma, they began dying from stress-related illnesses in the weeks that followed.¹⁷ Through careful tracking of the animals' social interactions both before and after the storm, researchers found that the monkeys with more robust social networks were more resilient and therefore more likely to survive.

Maintain Strong Ties

The American Psychological Association asserts that “the primary factor in resilience is having caring and supportive relationships within and outside the family.”¹⁸ These close relationships provide perspective, help you

process difficult or challenging circumstances, and “offer encouragement and reassurance” that “help bolster a person’s resilience.”

When you shut your laptop at the end of the workday, it is critical to make time to strengthen the strong ties that sustain you — play with your children, eat dinner facing your roommate, grab a socially-distant drink with a close friend, or spend an intimate moment making eye contact with your significant other. Prolonged eye contact triggers a flood of oxytocin, the powerful neuropeptide responsible for feelings of connectedness.¹⁹

How Weak Ties Promote Diversity

Weak ties are useful beyond their ability to build personal resilience. Human beings are naturally inclined to associate with individuals like themselves. In other words, people tend to have the strongest ties with others of similar ethnicity, socio-economic backgrounds and life experiences. At companies led by a homogenous group, this tendency limits the success of referral programs designed to increase diversity. However, if those same programs are specifically designed to activate employees' networks of weak ties, recruiting efforts can become more diverse.^{25,26}

Maintain Weak Ties

In “The Strength of Weak Ties,” sociologist Mark Granovetter showed that weak ties — casual acquaintances, fellow members of professional groups or alumni associations, LinkedIn connections, etc. — make people more resilient by offering them wider access to resources and information than their close relationships alone. When faced with a job loss, for instance, people with extensive networks of weak ties were not only more likely to find a new job but also to find a job with better pay and higher job satisfaction.²⁰ Additionally, when faced with challenges that require solutions that buck conventional wisdom, having access to unconventional sources of inspiration can lead to broader thinking and cross-disciplinary innovation.

For All Ties, Create Positive Interactions

Loneliness in the U.S. has doubled over the past 50 years²¹ — a recent survey revealed that 46% of U.S. adults sometimes or always feel socially isolated, and 54% feel that no one knows them well.²² And, that's a problem. Loneliness reduces both resilience and self-efficacy.²³ Fortunately, recent neuroscience research has shown that short, intentional interactions with others — even taking a moment to share office gossip — trigger the release of oxytocin.²⁴

Invest in Your Wellness

“
I often ask executives at start-ups about the last time they did something for themselves, and all I get are blank stares. And I've learned that the more leaders fight me when I recommend self-care, the more ineffective they tend to be.
”
Dr. Justin Zamora | AIIR Salt Lake City

Under increased pressure, the tendency for many leaders is to put in increasingly long hours at the office. However, this impulse is counterproductive.

In an interview with the American Psychological Association, Dr. Ann Masten, a psychologist who directs the Project Competence Research on Risk and Resilience at the University of Minnesota, said that an important part of building resilience is building and protecting what she calls surge capacity — the mental and physical resources we use to survive stressful situations.²⁷

Unfortunately, she said, that capacity “can get depleted.” Faced with continuous challenges, we “get exhausted and overwhelmed, and then we need to step back and try to replenish and restore our capacity.” Although self-care has become a buzzword, attention to holistic self-care is critical for protecting and restoring your surge capacity.

Carve Out Time for Mental Health

Ample research has demonstrated how important it is to periodically completely unplug.²⁸ But for many leaders, taking a prolonged vacation can be difficult, if not impossible. Fortunately, research indicates that taking even short breaks throughout the day can leave you with more focus, energy, and motivation, as well as greater resilience over the long term.²⁹

The trouble is, even when we unplug, it can be difficult for our minds to disconnect from our work. Mindfulness is an incredibly powerful tool for pulling you into the present moment. Mindfulness practices such as meditation, mindful breathing, listening to soothing music, or just taking a walk activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which helps you relax, slows your heart rate and reduces your blood pressure.³⁰ And, a large-scale study in India showed that people who practice mindfulness are also more resilient.³¹

Take Care of Your Physical Health, Too

Most people know that exercise is an excellent method for reducing stress. However, recent research has proven that regular exercise is also associated with emotional resilience to acute stress in healthy adults.³² Furthermore, neuroscience research has shown that regular physical activity actually reorganizes the brain so that it reacts less to stress and anxiety.³³

For most leaders, finding time to exercise may seem impossible, but research has shown tremendous benefits can be achieved by following some common-sense guidelines:

- > Don't sit or stand for too long at a time
- > Perform 20-30 minutes of moderate exercise a few times per week³⁴
- > Eat a balanced diet³⁵
- > Get enough sleep³⁶

Spiritual Health and the Neuroscience of Self-Transcendence

Whether or not you subscribe to an organized religion, there is a reason that nine out of 10 Americans have turned to prayer in times of duress³⁷ — human beings crave meaning. Both psychologists and, more recently, neuroscience have shown the benefits of spirituality for building resilience in individuals who have undergone trauma,³⁸ families who have lost a parent,³⁹ and children in war-torn Sri Lanka.⁴⁰

Even if you aren't religious, neuroscience research has shown benefits from engaging in self-transcendent activities that promote compassion, kindness, and support of others. These typically take the shape of mentally focusing on the well-being of others, sometimes known as a "lovingkindness" meditation. Subjects in a recent study were more likely to adopt positive habits after engaging in such activities.⁴¹



Overcoming an Uncertain Present and Unknowable Future

Leaders and the organizations face unprecedented challenges and an unknowable future. They also face challenges at home — the claustrophobia of quarantine, the stress of uncertainty, and the exhaustion and overwhelm that stems from balancing their roles as professionals, partners and parents.

Overcoming the challenges we face now and those we will face in the future, will require strength and resilience. Building resilience requires conscious effort around

- > Adopting a positive mindset,
- > Strengthening your network, and
- > Investing in your wellness

With attention and perseverance, leaders who build strength around these three dimensions will have the resilience necessary to overcome the stress and uncertainty of the moment and to take on the challenges of tomorrow.

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