

Cultivating Organizational Resilience: Guiding Senior Leadership Through the Rebound

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Here we are faced with a pandemic of epic proportions. The stress, fear, and anxiety have created near pandemonium in many organizations. All of these emotions are real and justified, and they will not subside very soon. To expect that employees and organizations will be able to get back to business because it is an economic imperative is unrealistic. This type of thinking ignores the depth of our shared trauma. Recovery will not be quick. It will require focused time, attention, and exemplary leadership.

The myth we must face is that resilience is inherent in individuals and organizations. It is not. It is a competency that has to be cultivated, practiced, and refined. In truth, some organizations are more resilient than others. Just as some people are more resilient than others. There are organizations that are so rigid, inflexible, and entrenched that they may never develop the elasticity required to build resilience.

This article details three critical leadership activities required to build or enhance organizational resilience. These are seemingly simple interventions. If we are realistic, we know that few things are as simple as they seem. HR practitioners are tasked with assisting senior leadership with focused techniques that build the resilience required to poise the organization for the future. We are tasked with helping executives understand the intricacies of resilience. These are iterative processes that require time, resource investment, and a willingness to regularly recalibrate.

As we partner with executives, and it is a partnership, it is essential that we help them see this work as systemic, process-oriented, and collaborative. Equally as important, our partnerships should help executives develop agility. This enables them to make thoughtful

course corrections as situations warrant. The effort to build resilience never ends. There will be new storms, new trials, and new dilemmas. Each of these novel traumas requires an additional demonstration of resilience.

Find Hidden Opportunities

The first strategy is finding the hidden opportunities in the circumstances. HR professionals have to guide executives in mining the opportunities from the morass. Consider taking executives through a process where they are invited to dream new dreams for the organization. This is not pie in the sky fantasizing. It is asking them to give serious consideration to what the organization can become. It asks them to participate in a process that enables them to reconceptualize the organization.

There are any number of ways to construct the process. You can ask them to identify new structures, processes, services, systems, policies, and procedures. I often bring in postcards and magazines and ask executives to create collages of elements that they would like to embed in the reimagined organization. This makes the imagined tangible, visible, and relatable. Other approaches may include uncensored, unfiltered brainstorming sessions. Executives are encouraged to put all ideas on the table. Once they have exhausted their ability to conceive new options, they can begin grappling with it, which can be supported by the available resources.

Resources are realities that cannot be ignored. No matter how you come to the range of new opportunities, leaders will undoubtedly hold the innovations to the test of available resources. The danger here is to say that the resources to

advance the innovations do not exist. Resilient organizations are able to reallocate resources. This is not the trite 'doing more with less.' It is examining the available resources and finding new ways to deploy them consistent with the needs of the innovations proposed.

Build New Networks

The second strategy for the organization and its individual leaders is to broaden networks. This means creating new connections, deepening existing relationships, and creating new allies. In order to expand networks, it is necessary to rethink friends, foes, and allies. Often organizations have the idea that any enterprise in the same market is a sworn enemy. The position is that we have to compete with anyone in our same line of business. Shifting this perspective can create new opportunities, creative solutions, and innovative approaches.

One of the responsibilities that HR leaders have when building organizational resilience is to help leaders change their mindsets. We have to convey the importance of moving the organization and the larger industry forward post-crisis. This type of broader commitment to larger successes requires creating new relationships with competitors. Consider asking your leadership to host industry roundtables to share insights and ideas. You are not asking them to share trade secrets or proprietary information. Rather, the sharing will focus on the ways in which organizations are repositioning themselves. There are lessons to be learned from others who are facing the same struggles. Maintaining adversarial stances with competitors may not serve you well as you seek to preserve your industry.

Give your leadership team tools to build strategic networks. Encourage them to

forge new partnerships and alliances. This extends to connecting with organizations outside of your industry. There are lessons that can be learned from different industry sectors. Resilient organizations do not succeed alone. They are intentionally interconnected. Their leaders create dynamic partnerships to address the complex problems inherent in our current climate. New alliances give the organization additional tools to create outcomes aligned with our emerging realities. This is intentional work aimed at serving the greater good while still preserving your organization. If we are to build organizational resilience, we have to commit to teaching leaders how to proactively initiate non-traditional positive action.

Create an Adaptive Environment

Adaptive environments revolve around strategies that foster the type of change that builds and enables the capacity, at the individual and the organizational level, to thrive. The interventions associated with adaptive leadership build on the past, particularly past successes, while creating a different future. It requires organizations to look dispassionately at the past and determine what is essential moving forward and what is expendable.

This approach relies heavily on experimentation and the integration of diverse perspectives. It requires a reframe that allows for the development and utilization of a relevant strategy that reflects current and anticipated realities. Adaptive environments are characterized by the willingness to displace, rearrange, and restore entire systems or elements of those systems (Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009). The restoration is not a return to the past. Instead, it is restoration that retains the best of the past and actively creates a novel path forward.

The practice of creating an adaptive environment begins when employees at all levels are able to demonstrate behavioral flexibility. Inherent in this is the willingness to experiment. The experimentation needed to employ adaptive behaviors is situationally relevant (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). The approach that works in one type of adversity will not be suited in another. Leaders are responsible for

helping employees discern which behaviors, approaches, and strategies to use and when. A knowledgeable HR practitioner will guide them as they guide the rank and file. It should also be noted that patience is required when helping employees cultivate this ability. It takes time to develop the discernment to determine which experiments are appropriate for which situations. Our current evolving environment requires a lot of shape shifting, comfort with trial and error, and the willingness to get back up after being knocked down. This creates stress and pressure, but it is necessary when building resilience.

Leaders able to build a resilient culture are able to find the balance between fluctuating goals and competing values that require difficult tradeoffs. For instance, reliability and efficiency may compete with the need for innovation within the organizational system (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). This requires leaders to understand and use “both/and” rather than “either/or” thinking. This thinking asks all stakeholders to consider multiple perspectives, integrate different positions, and promote pioneering solutions. As this capacity is developed, reflection and continuous learning offer new ways to interpret the environment and new ways to approach the work (Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009). Guiding leaders in the development of their own adaptive skills is an imperative for HR. Once they master the competency, they are able to integrate them throughout the enterprise.

Obstacles to Building Resilience

Organizations that are wedded to every element of their past, value constancy over creativity, and have intractable beliefs are least likely to build resilience. HR practitioners are responsible for surfacing these elements of the culture if they exist. They are challenged with helping leaders both see these obstacles and understand the consequences in a rapidly moving world. This is not to say that every leader will accept this assessment. Some will opt to ignore or descend into denial.

Other obstacles include oversimplification of the new dilemmas faced by the organization. Leaders have to acknowledge the complexity created by chaotic

change. There are no simple solutions or quick fixes. A systems approach to creating the renewed organization requires observation, analysis, and ongoing measurement of outcomes. It also requires a deep understanding of the importance of inviting and including diverse perspectives.

Additionally, it is important for leaders to dissect the organization into its elements. The organization is not a large monolith; it is a collection of different, often distinctly so, parts. Failure to recognize this reality makes creating resilience more difficult as each segment of the organization requires a different approach.

Summary

While it is incumbent upon leaders to commit to building a resilient culture, it is among the most difficult tasks facing them in the midst of seemingly endless adversity. The chaos created by the pandemic presents opportunities for HR practitioners to contribute to leadership learning by introducing them to ways to find the hidden opportunities, to teach leaders to expand networks, build new alliances, and create new partnerships. Ultimately we seek to create an adaptive organization poised to rebound and thrive post-adversity. This work is not without obstacles. There has to be a willingness to create a climate that embraces complexity, is prone to thoughtful analyses, and comfortable with mistakes and missteps. These are the challenges associated with creating a resilient organization.

References

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