

# Resilient Leadership

## Now is the time for grit & determination

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Without a doubt, this is a time when leaders have to develop and demonstrate resilience, grit and determination. The world is confusing and unsettling on all fronts. While “resilience” is an overused term, it is important to begin with a clear definition. According to Janet Ledesma, it is the ability to bounce back from crises, adversity, frustration and misfortune [adapted from “Conceptual Frameworks and Research Models on Resilience in Leadership,” Sage Open Creative Commons, July-Sept. 2014]. As we continue to reel from the COVID-19 pandemic that is sweeping the globe, leaders have to find ways to develop and demonstrate real resilience. The stressors and pressure of this time in our lives demand it.

This article details seven keys to developing and demonstrating resilient leadership and, ultimately, resilient organizations. Each of the keys is actionable. They can be implemented immediately at the individual, team and organizational levels. Leaders who implement the following seven key strategies will find they are contagious and have the potential to breathe a calm wind into a chaotic environment.

### Heighten Self-Awareness

All development, whether individual or organizational, begins with developing a deeper knowledge of one’s self. When leaders are facing great challenges there is a profound need to create clarity about one’s core values, real purpose and deepest desires. Digging deeper to come to terms with one’s self requires time for reflection. Protected quiet time is easily lost in the whirlwind of instability. It is difficult to carve out this space, but it is necessary. Having clarity about values, purpose and desires enables a leader to take risks that are congruent with what is most important.

The same applies at the organizational level. Lead the organization through the process of exploring its fundamental reasons for being. Heightened self and organizational awareness



foster the ability to have well-informed turning points. These are purposeful pivots. Deepened awareness provides valuable information for determining what needs to be shed, what needs to be adopted and which midcourse corrections are most viable. Delving into what is buried at the core of the organization surfaces strengths and weaknesses, and exposes blind spots. This is important data for charting an informed course forward.

### Develop Elasticity

The ability to expand the repertoire of leadership skills is essential. No longer can we do what we have always done. Crises call for flexibility in thought, communication and action. But what, exactly, does that mean? It means that leaders have to develop new ways of relating to employees, customers and the very work that they are responsible for. Consider ways to approach customers and employees with compassion. This does not mean that leaders can no longer be candid, but they should use a thoughtful approach to relating to people that considers the fact that they have not been the only people impacted by the tumultuous environment we have been thrust into.

Elasticity also entails the need to evaluate our business models. Build collaborative relationships to explore novel ways to sell and service that are reflective of our “new normal.” Begin by asking for input and insight from employees, suppliers, customers and colleagues outside of your industry. The perspectives you cull from multiple sources will enable you to expand the range of options for rebuilding your business.

### Develop & Demonstrate Unwarranted Optimism

By expecting positive outcomes, leaders increase the likelihood of attaining goals in spite of profound setbacks. As tough as it is, people look to leaders to provide hope. This means communicating that the business will survive and

thrive again. It means communicating messages of confidence — confidence in the enterprise, the industry and each individual employee. In real-time, it means having individual and group conversations about your vision for the business after the crisis. It means creating consensus on the fact that there are real possibilities for a future — albeit a new and different future.

Demonstrating optimism means that you, the leader, have faith that the organization cannot only bounce back, but soar forward. This requires deep reflection on whether or not you actually believe that. If you do not, it is far better to be honest about intentions to close, sell, retire, merge or whatever your true intentions happen to be. Do not create false hope. That will be more damaging in the long run.

If you have genuine optimism, deepen it each day by reflecting on what you have learned and can teach from the crisis. Strengthen your optimism by making time each day to assess and acknowledge the gifts and blessings that came as a result of the adversity. Even in the worst times, if we search, we can find a gift. Small gifts may be the only ones that we find, but they are gifts just the same and can be used to boost the hope of your team.

### Emphasize Adaptation

Grieving the past, mourning losses and looking back are necessary to move forward. The problem comes when you keep your focus on the rearview mirror. Allow time for the necessary sadness and then shift your energy to adjustment. Once you are able to adjust, you can adapt. Adjustment is like trying on new shoes: You wiggle your feet around to be sure they fit and you walk around for a few minutes. But even if they are your size, they may not fit comfortably.

When the initial strategies that you try post-crisis do not really fit, it is absolutely acceptable to try the next strategies. Once you find the strategies that fit — like the right pair of new shoes — begin using them. This is where adaptation comes in and you begin modifying policies, practices, procedures, services and systems to reflect your new way of being. Adaptation also means that leaders constantly look at their own behaviors to be sure they are in alignment with the adaptation expected from everyone else. Adaptation requires frequent attention to recalibration. Leaders are also responsible for making sure that, as they adapt, they also pay attention to refining all that has been modified.

### Reward Hardiness

Hardiness, the ability to make the best of the worst situations, is required for resilient leadership. It entails the ability

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to find meaning and purpose in life. This includes all the quadrants of a balanced life: family, social, spiritual and work. Notice that hardiness does not focus exclusively on work; it encompasses every area of a leader's existence. Hardiness is developed when stressful experiences occur. Celebrate hardiness in yourself and others.

Hardy leaders are believers. They believe they can positively influence surroundings, organizations and even entire industries. These leaders understand that while they cannot always influence the outcome of events, they can certainly control how they respond to those events. Inherent in being believers and influencers is the heartfelt belief that learning and growth can be the byproducts of adversity, crises and misfortune. Hardy leaders believe that growth is always a possibility — even a probability — with the right mindset. Hardy leaders demonstrate persistence and relentless determination.

### Use Support Systems

During crises, it is often tempting to believe that we are in it alone. We can isolate and create barriers between ourselves and potential allies. The realization that there are communities and support systems is one that can be an aha! moment for leaders facing turmoil. Consider building relationships with competitors who are facing the same threats as you. Reaching out to colleagues in the industry can create a necessary support system. Having trusted peers reduces the likelihood of isolation and offers the possibility of forming beneficial new collaborations.

There are also opportunities for support systems within your organization. Leaders sometimes think they have to demonstrate Herculean strength, never showing doubt lest they be viewed as weak. Allowing a little vulnerability can actually garner more respect and allegiance from employees. They begin to see you as a human being who, like them, needs encouragement. This is another of the behaviors that, when modeled, creates a resilient culture.

### Purposefully Build Organizational Resilience

A characteristic of resilient organizations includes the ability to structure and restructure as needed. They are nimble enough to reconceptualize the mission, allow for evolving purpose and reassess strategy. In short, they do not stay in a state of shock because of crises, nor do they remain stuck in past practices.

Building a bounce-back culture begins with encouraging individual and team contributions that pull the organization through tough times. While the contributions may be

small, they add up to greater success for the organization. This requires leaders to occasionally shift from the macro view to pay attention to the activities that enable survival at the micro level. Pay attention to the small victories that make organizational survival possible.

Communication skills are essential in building organizational resilience. These are not phony “rah-rah” speeches to placate employees. Instead, they are clear messages that acknowledge the present and present a range of options for the future. These messages cannot be monologues; they should create dialogue and open communication in the organization. Employees should be encouraged to ask questions, and express doubts and fears. Employee voices have value and can be integrated into decisions regarding restructuring, reconceptualizing and reassessing. Wise leaders understand the value of hearing from the people closest to customers and the work, particularly during trying times.

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### Summary

As organizations continue to ride tsunami-like waves that threaten their survival, it is essential that leaders at all levels develop resilience. That resilience is as important for individuals as it is for the entire enterprise. There is no escape from the disequilibrium that has now become the norm. Use these seven keys to build a reserve of resilience that puts you in position to weather the storms that keep coming. ■

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