



Creating Organizational Resiliency

INTRODUCTION

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In times of crisis leaders must create organizational resiliency. Resiliency lays the foundation for meeting challenges. It is the ability to maintain equilibrium over an extended period. Resiliency encourages confidence. Resilient people keep going and try new approaches. Resilient organizations not only weather economic turbulence, they find opportunities that position them for success.

As people face challenges, resiliency fuels motivation and promotes pride and enthusiasm. It keeps people from taking action for the sake of action and it keeps them from falling into fear-induced inaction. Resilient people have good and bad days, but on balance they remain focused, challenged and action-oriented.

What steps should executives take to create resiliency within their organizations? The approach may vary from executive to executive, from organization to organization, but resiliency can best be developed by attending to cognitive, emotional and social components.



COGNITIVE

During challenging times leaders need to pay attention to the thinking that prevails within their organizations. They can then shape how they and their organizations think.

- **Overanalyzing** Most people tend to overanalyze during times of uncertainty and stress. This leads to inaction. When over analysis occurs, leaders should push for decisions and action.
- **Labeling** During difficult times people are quick to label issues as a way of defining and simplifying a problem. Because it simplifies complex issues, labeling can offer reassurance. Unfortunately, labeling often occurs in haste and under the influence of inadequate data. Leaders need to challenge labels and avoid the temptation of easy and often incorrect answers.
- **Greener Pastures** When times get tough, it is easy for employees to assume that things will be better someplace else. Leaders need to help people stay realistic about circumstances inside and outside the organization.
- **Purpose** Every group, unit or company works best when it has clearly defined goals that employees can embrace. An overarching purpose puts current challenges in perspective. Clarity about one's role in realizing these goals makes it easier to take appropriate action.
- **Control and Impact** In times of crisis, uncontrollable events leave many feeling overwhelmed and powerless. The first step is to differentiate between the controllable and the uncontrollable. People need to control some things and influence the outcome of events. To do this, it is essential to behave in ways that influence positive results, such as making improvements and positioning for the upturn. Leaders need to reinforce this focus on the controllable.
- **Learning** Both past and current challenges present opportunities for learning, but many people are too stressed or distracted to find the benefits. Leaders should be quick to articulate what has been learned and help the organization apply those lessons.
- **Realism** It takes discipline, but it is important not to believe the worst or to dwell on it excessively. Contingency planning is necessary, but a leader should point out the probabilities associated with various outcomes, especially disastrous scenarios of low probability.
- **Success With Past Hardships** People learn new coping skills and tools when they experience difficulties. Applying these skills to the current situation can boost confidence, generate creativity and result in higher-quality solutions. Leaders should remind people of how they succeeded in the past while advising them on how to apply their trial tested skills and tools to current circumstances.
- **Change of Focus** In difficult times issues are complex and require prolonged and intense focus. However, intense focus can't be sustained indefinitely. Moving between highly emotional and complex issues and lighter, refreshing content can bring out the best thinking.
- **Expectations** Economic strains generate anxiety and take people off task. Leaders should drive expectations so that their teams don't fall into the trap of anxiety-reducing but unproductive behaviors. Clear expectations keep the organization thinking about the right issues.

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EMOTIONAL

During challenging times emotions run high and can derail productivity and foster inertia. Leaders need to attend to their own emotions as well as manage the emotions of others.

- **Admit It's Tough** It is helpful to admit that these are especially troubling times. A leader's task is to allow some emotional expression but to know when and how to move people to action.
- **Unnecessary Worry** A heightened state of anxiety can drive unnecessary worry. People will see the worst in every issue or circumstance that arises, whether it is a harmless unforeseen meeting or the daunting prospect of a company failure. Intense worrying can cause people to overreact and miscalculate.
- **Be Real and Confident** A team will see right through false confidence and manufactured optimism. These will only trigger negativity. Leaders need to demonstrate optimism and confidence, but they have to be authentic. Challenging times are an opportunity to model productive behaviors and drive confidence in the organization.
- **Redirect** Every individual needs to stay focused on the challenges. However, periodic breaks from unpleasant or intense concerns offer respite and time to recharge. By redirecting attention and energy, even if only for a brief spell, leaders can generate new energy and fresh thinking for the problems at hand.
- **Positive Emotions** When times are tough and challenges are mounting, it is too easy to become consumed by problems and concerns. It is essential to take sufficient time for enjoying interests, laughing, expressing gratitude, and spending time with family and friends. Time must be given to these positive emotions so that energy levels are adequate for confronting challenges.
- **Safe Place to Let Off Steam** Stressful times leave many feeling edgy and cranky. Suppressing emotions raises stress levels and can lead to bad decisions. Finding supportive people who will let one talk through concerns and feelings can be invaluable. But be selective. Do not vent to subordinates and avoid anyone likely to fuel negativity. If a team member needs an additional sounding board the leader may want to suggest other types of help, such as EAP or other professionals.
- **Resolve** Leaders need to demonstrate and model resolve. Resolve drives clarity of thinking, emotional steadiness and interpersonal cohesion.

SOCIAL

Effective leaders should manage social dynamics to engineer resiliency. What are some of the techniques they employ to foster resiliency?

- **Monitoring Others** Leaders need to make sure that people in their organizations don't get caught up in taking action for the sake of action. They should watch for subordinates spinning out of control and provide appropriate support. Even the person who appears to be handling things well can suddenly crash. Leaders should reach out and check on those who need it.
- **Blaming** Leaders must be on guard against excessive blaming of others. This occurs frequently in stressed organizations. It is all too common for people to think that they must look out for themselves and their own areas of responsibility, often to the



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detriment of the larger organization. People in this mindset may be less cooperative and even take advantage of others. Once alert to these dynamics effective leaders can intervene as appropriate.

- **Family Issues** Family concerns can pull people off their focus at work. It is often beneficial for leaders to discuss with subordinates how they might handle questions from stressed family members who are concerned about the organization's viability.
- **Accepting Support** Savvy leaders not only provide support, they accept it as well. Do not look to a single person for support. Instead, rely on a variety of people who can offer different kinds of support at different times. Sometimes the best social support comes from those who hold views that differ from your own.
- **Need for Increased Communication** People under stress often don't hear well. Sometimes they do not trust information when it is initially provided. Therefore it is important for leaders to communicate frequently about current circumstances and necessary steps.
- **Negative People** Leaders should be on guard to not inadvertently reinforce negativism by spending excessive amounts of time with negative people. Leaders should spend most time with those who are working on the right issues. Leaders should also intervene when they see pairs or groups of people falling into a mutually reinforcing negative spiral.
- **Isolation and Loneliness** In challenging times, people who face important decisions with significant ramifications often feel isolated and alone. Leaders should encourage decision makers to reach out to others and to develop a support network.

CONCLUSIONS

Resiliency provides a foundation that allows an organization to function effectively in times of crisis. To cultivate resiliency, leaders need to monitor their own attitudes, behaviors and emotions. They also need to manage the thinking, feelings and interpersonal dynamics within their organizations. By doing so, leaders can increase resiliency. This will not only serve their organizations well in troubled times, it will sustain them through recovery and through the challenges and opportunities associated with a return to better economic times. Think of resiliency as an investment in the future.



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