

CHAPTER 4

Developing Personal Resilience in Organizational Settings

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Abstract

Changes that take place in the workplace often have a significant impact on the well-being of individuals both at work and at home; in turn, the ability of individuals to cope with change affects organizational productivity and effectiveness. This makes the workplace a natural place to develop resilience. This chapter summarizes studies linking resilience to work performance and showing the organizational impact of resilience interventions. It provides examples of how resilience concepts and tools have been applied at individual, team, and organizational levels. It offers guidance on effective practices for planning and deploying resilience interventions in organizational settings. The overall goal of this article is to provide resilience practitioners working in a variety of organizational settings ideas and evidence that can help them increase the quality and effectiveness of their interventions.

Key Words

Personal resilience, organizations, resilient culture, performance, sponsorship, team resilience

Developing Personal Resilience in Organizational Settings

Most individuals spend a substantial part of their lives working in organizational settings. The changes that take place in the workplace often have a significant impact on the well-being of individuals both at work and at home, and, in turn, the ability

of individuals to cope with change affects organizational productivity and effectiveness. This makes the workplace a natural place to discuss and nurture resilience. The overall goal of this article is to provide resilience practitioners working in a variety of organizational settings ideas and evidence that can help them increase the quality and effectiveness of their interventions.

Organizational settings are often a good place to help people strengthen their resilience. This is true for several reasons:

First, from the individual's point of view, the organization provides a rich environment for developing a capability that can benefit all aspects of life. Most workplaces have at least moderate levels of change taking place, with these changes having the potential to present disruption, challenges, and even trauma to people inside and outside the organization. Layoffs, reorganizations, new technology, new work processes, and other organizational changes call on individuals to engage their resilience and coping mechanisms on a regular basis. The ability to respond effectively to disruption is useful in the workplace, but potentially even more useful in addressing challenges in life outside of work.

Second, developing individual resilience is a desirable goal from an organizational perspective. Organizations need to periodically make significant changes to stay competitive in the marketplace, and many of these changes have major impact on the individuals involved. To the extent that individuals can recover quickly and effectively from any negative implications of organizational changes, the organization's performance and the well-being of its employees are enhanced. In addition, individuals who are affected by negative events outside the workplace often carry the stress and strain into their work environment. Increases in resilience are likely to reduce the organizational impact of non-work issues.

Third, from a pragmatic perspective, organizations often possess the resources to provide support and training that might not be as readily available in other settings. This means that

individuals have the opportunity to learn perspectives and skills related to resilience that have broad applicability both inside and outside the organization.

The goal of this chapter is to provide practitioners working in organizational settings ideas and evidence that can help them increase the quality and effectiveness of resilience interventions.

A Framework for Resilience

There are multiple ways of defining and approaching resilience. Our selected approach is based on a model that articulates a set of seven resilience characteristics (ODR 1996), developed on the basis of a review of the literature and observations of individuals encountering change in organizational settings. The characteristics are briefly defined in Table 1.

In practice, these characteristics are presented as a set of elements that work together to help individuals use their energy most effectively when dealing with disruption. We often use the metaphor of “change muscles” to describe these characteristics; this implies both that there are individual differences in the extent to which people employ each characteristic, and that the characteristics can be developed through exercise and practice.

A 75-item online assessment, the Personal Resilience Questionnaire (PRQ) (ODR 1993a), allows individuals to gain an understanding of the extent to which they tend to display each of these characteristics when facing uncertainty and disruption, with scores on the resulting Personal Resilience Profile (PRP) (ODR 1993b) based on comparisons to a database of over 70,000 individuals. These characteristics are then linked to developmental activities presented in one-on-one, small-group, and classroom settings. In the next section, we will discuss some research linking the PRP to a range of performance outcomes; at this point we will also note that research to support the internal-consistency and test-retest reliability of the instrument (Bryant 1995), as well as its construct validity (ODR 1996), has been conducted.

Table 1. Summary of Personal Resilience Characteristics

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Related constructs</i>
Positive: The World (PW)	Resilient individuals effectively identify opportunities in turbulent environments.	Optimism Positive affectivity
Positive: Yourself (PY)	Resilient individuals have the personal confidence to believe they can succeed in the face of uncertainty.	Self-esteem Self-efficacy Internal locus of control
Focused (FO)	Resilient individuals have a clear vision of what they want to achieve and use this as a guide when they become disoriented.	Value clarity Life meaning/purpose
Flexible: Thoughts (FT)	Resilient individuals generate a wide range of ideas and approaches for responding to change.	Creativity Cognitive complexity Ambiguity tolerance
Flexible: Social (FS)	Resilient individuals draw readily on others' resources for assistance and support during change.	Interpersonal comfort Extraversion Social support
Organized (OR)	Resilient individuals effectively develop and apply systems, processes, and structures when dealing with change.	Conscientiousness Self-discipline Planfulness
Proactive (PR)	Resilient individuals initiate action in the face of uncertainty, taking calculated risks rather than seeking the comfort of the status quo.	Risk-taking Sensation-seeking

Resilience development activities can certainly be accomplished without the use of an assessment tool. Informal self-evaluations are useful, and even general sessions that give people insight into how each characteristic is developed and applied—without exploring individual differences—can provide value. However, we have found that people are much more engaged in the learning process when they have information that helps them understand their own strengths and weaknesses from an objective standpoint. For this reason, most of the applications described below involve the use of this tool.

Building the Business Case

Before an organization will invest in developing employee resilience, leaders understandably want evidence that resilience is related to business outcomes, and that efforts to increase resilience will have a meaningful result. We have taken two basic paths to building an effective business case. The first approach is to use research data to link resilience characteristics to performance related outcomes, and resilience interventions to changes in performance.

To establish the relationship between resilience and business-related outcomes, we have summarized a number of studies looking at the relationship of the dimensions of the PRP to performance-related outcomes in business and other settings. Table 2 displays the source of the research, the population studied, the performance criterion employed, and relationships that were found to be statistically significant at $p < .05$ (indicated by +).

As an example of other literature linking resilience to business outcomes, Shin et al. (2012) recently reported that psychological resilience, mediated by positive emotions, predicts higher levels of normative and affective commitment to change.

These findings suggest that organizations going through change are likely to benefit from the presence of individuals with high levels of resilience. The next important question, of course,

Table 2. Summary of Research Linking Resilience to Performance Outcomes

<i>Source</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Criterion</i>	<i>PW</i>	<i>PY</i>	<i>FO</i>	<i>FT</i>	<i>FS</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>PR</i>	
Bryant (1995)	College freshmen	Adjustment to university life	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	
ODR (1996)	Employees in a financial services organization	High vs. low performers	+	+	+		+		+	
ODR (1996)	Employees in a financial services organization	High vs. low performers	+	+	+					
Chehrizi (2002)	Parents of children with autism	Healthy adaptation (less social isolation)								
Isaacs (2003)	School principals	Transformational leadership practices	+		+	+		+	+	
Wang (2003)	International students	Adjustment to university life	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	
Sylvester (2009)	Front line sales professionals	Transformational leadership behaviors	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	
Resilience Alliance (2011)	Workers in a telephone call center	Supervisors' performance ratings		+	+			+		
Fletcher (2011)	Sales force for a large organization	Sales performance								
			+ for composite score: Manager resilience predicted sales team performance, mediated by manager skills							

is whether interventions designed to influence resilience have the desired impact and, by extension, whether it is worthwhile for organizations to engage in efforts to develop employee resilience.

Both anecdotal evidence and preliminary investigations suggest that resilience interventions have the potential to shift individual perspectives, at least in the short-term, and that long-term practice can create deeper shifts in how individuals approach and respond to change. This is supported by neuroscience research describing the plasticity of the brain and the ways that experience and internal mental activity (thoughts) can affect the structure of the brain (emotional life) (Begley & Davidson 2012).

Table 3 summarizes findings from several interventions in organizational settings.

The second approach to developing a business case is to help organizations estimate and visualize the benefits to be gained from increased resilience in the workforce using an approach derived from utility analysis. We ask leaders to think of some of the unproductive behaviors that people have displayed when going through major change—including errors, accidents, time spent in complaining or gossiping. We then ask them to calculate the potential value of small reductions in these unproductive behaviors spread over time. For instance, if an organization has 1,000 employees being paid an average of \$15/hour, and it is able to increase by five minutes per day per employee the amount of time spent in productive work due to more effective responses to disruptive change, there is a potential, over the course of a year, to reap \$1250/day in benefits, or \$250,000 over the course of a 200-day working year.

Experiences in Developing Resilience in Organizations

The following case examples are drawn from our experiences in working to develop resilience in organizations. They illustrate some of the approaches that can be taken, and also show some issues and challenges that can arise in this work.

Table 3. Summary of Findings from Resilience interventions

<i>Source</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Criterion</i>	<i>Findings</i>
Aetna & ODR (1995)	Employees of a large organization	Changes in resilience scores for participants in a computer-based tutorial vs. control group	Larger score increases for treatment group than for control group; lower within-person pre-post correlations for treatment group than for control group
Taylor (1997)	Minority medical school applicants	Stress levels during a career-threatening milestone	Resilience training minimized stress for low-resilience participants; coaching minimized stress for high-resilience participants
Fletcher & Hoopes (2010)	Employees of a large organization	Employee survey results	Larger increases in indices of "Change," "Leadership," and "Engagement" for groups that had experienced resilience training

Case 1. Individual Coaching

A coaching client was interested in learning more about his resilience and how it might affect his leadership style. He had been very successful in his career as an individual contributor. He had been identified as a high-potential young leader, and taken on new responsibilities including managing two small groups of employees. This, not surprisingly, represented a major change for him.

One of the groups had had several managers in the previous few years, and had operated very independently with little oversight. The client had been charged with designing and implementing a new compensation model for this function.

His profile indicated that his strengths were in the areas of Positive: Yourself, Flexible: Thoughts and Proactive. His greatest developmental areas were in the areas of Focused, Flexible, Social and Organized. This would suggest that in dealing with this new challenge, he would be likely to approach it with a great deal of self-confidence, creativity, and a bias toward action. The coach helped him see that while these elements were very beneficial in his role as an individual contributor, he could benefit from emphasizing additional resilience characteristics—using the Focused characteristic to help him define and articulate a clear vision, the Flexible: Social characteristic by including employees in the design process for the new model, and the Organized characteristic by applying a clear structure and implementation approach that would help the team gain a sense of predictability as the new system is put into place.

The client found the information helpful and used it to increase his likelihood of success in the new environment.

Case 2. Team Development

A team in the HR department of a large organization wanted to explore members' individual resilience and how they could leverage individual strengths as a team. The team members had

previously attended a department-wide session where they received individual Personal Resilience Profiles. In a follow-up meeting with the team, we spent additional time helping them understand what resilience is, why it is important, and how each of the characteristics included in the profile plays a role in helping them use their energy more effectively to prepare for and respond to disruption. We shared a composite summary of the team's scores, which displayed the range and average for each of the seven characteristics described above. The team had a relatively wide range on most of the characteristics, with one or more individuals above the 80th percentile on each characteristic, and one or more individuals below the 30th percentile on all but one of the characteristics. The team's collective strengths (highest averages) were in the areas of Positive: Yourself and Flexible: Social, with their least-strong characteristics (lowest averages) in the areas of Positive: The World and Proactive. We discussed how these scores might affect the team's interactions with one another and with other parts of the organization. Key themes that emerged were the team's high comfort in social interactions, members' willingness to reach out to one another and to others for support during times of uncertainty, and a moderate level of caution in trying out new ideas.

Because the team had a high level of openness with one another and all were comfortable with self-disclosure, we also explored how each of the characteristics played out in the team's interactions. In a very exploratory and non-judgmental way, members of the team shared their strengths and weaknesses, revealing who had the highest and lowest scores on each characteristic and discussing how the team could make sure it was using its strengths most effectively. This led to some very interesting conversations, including a discussion of the Proactive characteristic, where the range of percentile scores was 23 to 90, but the average was a 46. The team wanted to understand more about what it looked/felt like to apply this characteristic. The person with the score of 90 shared his experience of feeling restless,

moving and changing jobs frequently, and being willing to take risks that might seem extreme to others. This led to further discussion about how the characteristics balance one other, how strengths might be overused, and how one develops various characteristics.

The last part of the session involved each member of the team identifying one or more characteristics he or she wanted to develop, and one or more characteristics for which he or she would be willing to be a coach. We then conducted two rounds of discussion in which people were paired up according to their selections and worked to develop action plans, with each person serving as a coach in one round and a coachee in the other.

This session helped the team members better understand their own resilience and gain insights into how the team operated during change, and created opportunities for team members to help one another develop their resilience.

Case 3. Organization-wide Development

The Organizational Effectiveness team in a large organization had become interested in the topic of Resilience as part of their desire to build the change-related capability of the organization. After some initial workshops, they decided to introduce the core concepts of resilience to the organization's field sales leadership at a conference. The first challenge was to figure out how to simultaneously engage 800 people in a way that was engaging and delivered value. The resulting design involved simultaneous breakout sessions, each kicked off by a leader and guided by an internal facilitator who had been trained to deliver a standard program. Participants received their confidential Personal Resilience Profiles at the session, and facilitators were available for one-on-one meetings for anyone who desired one after the session. Based on the feedback from that session, we worked with the client to develop a program that included an introductory session, recorded webinars that provided guidance on developing

each of the characteristics, and a module for managers that provided guidance on developing resilience at the individual, team, and organizational levels. Although the extended modules have only had limited traction, the basic program has spread somewhat virally to other parts of the organization, including a range of global locations. This led to the need to translate the tool and training material into several additional languages, and train instructors from global locations.

We have found that the program is most useful when used with intact groups, especially in conjunction with a group profile that helps group members see the range of “change muscles” present in their group. We have also worked with the client to incorporate resilience-related concepts into other leadership-development programs. The client has seen positive results in business-related outcomes that they are able to attribute, at least in part, to the resilience work that was done.

Case 4. Advanced Team Development

The Senior Leadership Team (SLT) of an organization in the health-care industry was composed of ten individuals, most of whom had worked together for several years. The organization has been nationally recognized for both the quality of its service and the strength of its leadership team. The organization had recently agreed to be acquired by a larger company, and the CEO decided that focusing on the team’s resilience would be important given the challenges that lay ahead.

In addition to the PRP, team members filled out a questionnaire that looked at the effectiveness of the team’s group process. This tool was based on a model of team synergy (Conner 1993), and resulted in a report that provided scores and normative comparisons on various elements of team effectiveness.

The work with the team was done over two sessions. The first session began with the CEO explaining why she decided to focus on resilience and how this work connected to previous

teambuilding sessions. The basic tenets of change and resilience were reviewed and discussed; individuals also received their Personal Resilience Profile (PRP) results and developed personal action plans, the highlights of which they shared with their peers. A chart depicting the average and range of PRP scores was reviewed. The second session began with each individual reporting on their progress in implementing their action plans. The concept of synergy was reviewed, and the SLT's synergy scores were displayed and discussed. While the group's overall results were relatively strong, they had a somewhat lower score in the Integration phase of synergy (combining diverse perspectives into innovative approaches). The facilitator was able to link this potential deficit to the overall Personal Resilience strengths and weaknesses of the group. The group members decided in the meeting that they needed to improve their results in the Integration phase, brainstormed and prioritized methods for doing so in the offsite, and have returned to the topic during their regularly scheduled meetings over the past several months. The acquisition was finalized, after some stressful delays, with minimal disruption. The SLT remains intact, has had a very smooth combination process with their acquirers thus far, and is now pursuing some very exciting new opportunities.

Themes and Recommendations

As a venue for developing resilience, the organizational setting differs from educational, clinical, and community settings in several ways. While it offers an excellent opportunity to reach large numbers of individuals, this can only happen with support from organizational leaders. In addition, there is the risk that individuals will experience efforts to help them develop their resilience as manipulative and for the organization's benefit rather than their own. Based on our experience in working with multiple organizations in several countries across a range of interventions illustrated by the case examples above, we have identified several elements that are predictive of successful interventions:

Leader Support

Whether resilience interventions come in the form of classroom training, team-based sessions, or one-on-one coaching and development, they require the investment of individual time, which is one of an organization's scarcest assets. Leader support is essential to ensuring the availability of this time and to ensuring that appropriate follow-up activities take place. Key elements in gaining leader support include:

1. *Building a compelling case.* Leaders need to see the business value of building resilience. In addition to the strategies outlined above—presenting data to show the relationship of resilience to business outcomes, and focusing on the reduction of lost time and energy—it can also be useful to focus on the competitive advantage of having a resilient workforce. Most organizations in a given industry are implementing similar initiatives in the interests of staying competitive. The organization that can execute these changes most efficiently and effectively can begin reaping the benefits faster, and workforce resilience is one important ingredient in moving through change effectively.
2. *Demonstrating personal value.* Leaders are more likely to sponsor resilience development efforts if they have personally experienced value from such activities. We typically seek to identify key leaders and introduce them to resilience concepts and tools that will enable them to strengthen their own resilience before asking them to support broader organizational efforts. A second benefit of this approach is that participants in training sessions are often much more highly motivated to learn when the session is opened by a leader sharing a personal story of how he or she has gained value from developing his or her resilience.
3. *Ensuring sponsorship.* In any organizational intervention, there are multiple roles to be considered (Conner 1993).

Sponsors are those who help people sustain new behaviors through influential communication and the use of effective positive and negative consequences. Advocates are those who would like to see change take place but are not in a position to operate as sponsors. Agents are those who do the work of planning and executing interventions. In many cases, interest in developing resilience is led by agents and advocates. While they may have financial resources to bring in training and education programs, the desired changes in mindsets and behaviors will not take place unless people are supported in their efforts to increase resilience by strong sponsors.

Participant Engagement

Resilience interventions are ineffective unless individuals actively participate in their own learning and development. Ideally, they should freely choose to engage in activities (rather than attending mandatory training), and the activities should be designed to appeal to adult learners. Some elements in creating high levels of engagement include:

1. *Making strong connections.* The best way to engage individuals is to help them immediately see things they can use. This can be done by using real-life examples, relevant stories, and hands-on application to help them address specific challenges in their current situation.
2. *Keeping it simple.* It's important to help people start with small steps and simple frameworks, and apply what they are learning to the daily challenges they face, rather than focusing exclusively on dealing with significant disruptions. While it may seem that the magnitude of changes at work is relatively small compared to some of the traumatic events that can happen in other arenas of life, evidence from neuroscience research suggests that recovery from minor challenges is strongly correlated with and predictive of how someone copes with larger sources

of adversity (Begley & Davidson 2012), which suggests that practice on the small things builds capability for handling larger challenges.

3. *Following through.* Many training programs are isolated efforts. However, developing resilience is not done quickly. It involves restructuring the brain to respond differently to stressful situations. This requires that people have multiple opportunities over a period of time to be reminded of and practice new responses. Because of the competing demands on time and energy in organizational settings, individuals will be far more likely to invest time to practice new ways of thinking and behaving when the practice is supported, encouraged, and reinforced. This can be done by helping individuals incorporate resilience into their personal development goals, using a consistent, shared language to talk about resilience in multiple settings, creating specific opportunities for practice, and a range of other things that pull the thread of resilience through the day-to-day activities of the organization.
4. *Emphasizing learning rather than performance.* There is room for everyone to increase some element of his or her resilience, whether it involves changing self-talk, challenging negative beliefs, becoming clearer about personal priorities, learning to take risks, or developing some other aspect of resilience. If we imply that there is a standard of perfection, rather than meeting people where they are, affirming their strengths, and inviting them to grow, we push people toward “performance goals” rather than “learning goals” (Dweck & Leggett 1988). Keeping the focus on learning, while positively reinforcing small gains, can lead to a positive spiral of energy. To support this contention, we have numerous stories of people who believed that the way they responded to change was something that was just part of them, and were delighted to find out that they could learn and grow in this area.

Creating Trust

Because there are so many benefits to an organization for helping employees become more resilient, individuals can sometimes see organizational efforts to develop resilience as manipulative and self-serving. In addition, the work of learning to become more resilient often calls for revealing areas of weakness and vulnerability, which can be very difficult for people in situations where they feel they may be judged for doing so. Some things that can help an organization establish an environment of trust include:

1. *Guarding confidentiality.* Individuals must believe that information they share, and data they provide, will be treated confidentially. As an example, we set clear expectations with organizations that individuals are the only ones (other than administrators who have agreed to strict confidentiality guidelines) who can see their PRP scores, unless they choose to share them, and that there should be no pressure to share them. Managers and others with whom individuals share their data must be clear that the information is to be used for development purposes only, and that it is not appropriate to use this information to judge or make decisions about individuals. If this confidentiality is breached, it can cause irreparable harm to future efforts, as individuals will be motivated to share information that places them in a favorable light rather than being candid about their own concerns and issues.
2. *Sharing responsibility.* Inviting individuals to develop their resilience sends a healthy message—that individuals can take responsibility for their own responses to change. But it's very easy for people to read this as: "We are planning more change, and we don't really care about its impact on you; we just need you to get on board—here are some tools, but it's your own fault if you're not happy." To create greater trust, it's important for organizations to send

a different message: “Change is a part of life in this organization. We (leaders) have a responsibility to manage the amount of disruption in the organization, both by implementing changes as effectively as possible (including communication, involvement, and well-thought-out plans) and managing the number of changes we are seeking to execute at once. You have a part in this, too. If you are able to increase your own ability to deal effectively with change-related disruption, it will help the organization be more successful, and you will have some tools and skills you can use when facing challenges outside the workplace as well.”

3. *Building resilient cultures.* An organization’s culture is the set of shared norms and values that shape behavior. Organizational culture can reinforce or undermine resilient behaviors. For instance, an organization in which mistakes are harshly punished is likely to see little experimentation or risk-taking, which are both important to resilience. An organization in which people are encouraged to reach out to others for assistance is likely to see a stronger level of interpersonal support, which is also important to resilience. Leaders who wish to foster resilience should do their best to model and reinforce resilient ways of thinking and acting.

Reaching a Broad Audience

One of the advantages of using organizations as a venue to develop resilience is the number of people that can be reached. Effective practices to increase the reach of resilience interventions include:

1. *Developing internal resources.* One of the best ways to increase the number of people reached in an organization is to prepare members of the organization to serve as educators and coaches for resilience. While people who are interested in serving in this role often come from the Human Resources and/or Organization Development

areas, it's also useful to draw on people who are in other areas of the business, as they can provide practical guidance to help the people they work with apply their learning to daily challenges.

2. *Applying technology.* Although work to help people strengthen their resilience is often best done in person, there are several ways that technology can be helpful. Web-based education can be useful for the initial stages of building awareness and providing information. Simulations and other game-based learning approaches can be useful in reaching workers who are geographically dispersed or prefer to learn on their own. Web links to useful resources (books, articles, videos, etc.) can enable people to quickly find what they need.
3. *Working globally.* Although there are cultural differences in how the various elements of resilience are manifested, the human process of adapting to disruptive events is universal. Reaching people across the globe requires sensitivity to cultural differences and nuances, thoughtful work to translate tools and concepts into a range of languages (we were interested to find, for instance, that in some cultures it was difficult to find a word reflecting the conceptual equivalent of “resilience,”) and ongoing exploration of effective ways to reach diverse populations.

Conclusion

Both data and practical experience suggest that it is not only possible, but also useful, to use organizational settings as a venue for helping people develop their resilience. The things individuals learn while dealing with workplace challenges can be applied in the home, the community, and the larger world. This article has described one way of conceptualizing resilience, summarized data to support its effectiveness, provided examples of various applications in organizational settings, and presented ideas for

increasing the power of organizational interventions. It is our hope that this information will prove useful to people in a variety of situations and settings.

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