

# Develop Resiliency Skills

## How valuable life lessons can breed resiliency.

By Al Siebert

HIGHLY RESILIENT people flourish in a constantly changing workplace while compliant individuals trained to fit in and follow instructions flounder in an environment of nonstop change. Individuals with high-level resiliency skills hold up well under pressure, orient quickly to new demands, adapt to changing circumstances, and can work without an updated job description.

But, can resiliency skills be learned?

Yes they can, because resiliency is not something you are born with. You develop resiliency strengths gradually as your competencies increase.

The emerging new science of resiliency psychology has identified many skills and abilities related to resiliency. To understand the process and relationships, it is useful to organize resiliency strengths into a five-level hierarchy.

### Health and well-being

At level one, you consciously and actively take care of their health and well-being. Employee wellness programs and a corporate culture that supports healthy lifestyles can develop this most basic resiliency.

There is an important mental barrier to overcome, however. It is the myth of stress. The widespread belief that people have stressful jobs is an artificial, consensus reality. Hans Selye, the physician who conducted the pioneering research about stress, confessed in his memoirs that he should not have used the term "biological stress." He said he should have called his research findings the "strain syndrome."

One consequence of the false cultural belief about stress is that many employees blame their working conditions and their managers for their feelings of distress. They feel like victims and do not try to develop resiliency strengths. People hold up under pressure much better

when they understand that unpleasant strains experienced personally or professionally are their subjective reactions.

Distress you may feel is not a result of what actually occurs; it is a result of how you perceive what is happening. What most people call "stress" is really their internal, physical feeling of anxiety or strain that they don't like. This is not just semantics. Stress is a mental interpretation of an external event; strain is the internal effect.

To develop level one resiliency, replace stress reduction classes with sessions on how to develop strengths for coping with emotional and workplace strains. Make wellness and healthy lifestyle programs a high priority. Inquire to see what resiliency strengths your employee assistance program can provide.

Selye wrote about how we all need some strain to remain healthy. This means becoming aware of our personal, optimal strain zone. Handle each workday like you are at a fitness center. Become conscious of what is your optimal strain level, and pause between strains to relax and breathe before engaging the next strain.

It is important to create a positive workplace atmosphere. Research by psychologist Barbara Frederickson shows that positive emotions during the day broaden a person's cognitive skills and strengthen resiliency. Enjoy your work and create pleasant moments with co-workers because negative feelings of anxiety, anger, fear, and helplessness can narrow cognitive functions and decrease resiliency.

### Problem confrontation

Level two resiliency deals with problem solving. Research shows that if you focus on solving the problems then you will be much more resilient than people who disengage, feel helpless, or become highly emotional. Early resiliency research identified a strong connection between prob-

lem-solving responses and resiliency.

Employees who use problem-focused coping in a constantly changing work environment are more resilient, have higher self-confidence, and enjoy better health. The least resilient people do not problem solve. They focus on their unhappy feelings and blame their managers for their unhappiness.

To develop level two resiliency, don't just take classes on how to think "out of the box." Psychologist Robert Sternberg found in his research that three kinds of intelligence determine success in life: analytical, creative, and practical.

As Daniel Pink describes so well in his book, *A Whole New Mind*, the most effective people in today's world integrate left brain analytical thinking with right brain creative thinking. People who can shift from one mode of thinking to the other are better able to handle any pending challenges.

You should place a high value on level one and level two resiliency skills. Be satisfied if you or your employees develop good physical and emotional well-being and possess the problem-solving skills needed to cope with new and unexpected challenges.

### Mind versus body

Level three resiliency deals with three mind-body dimensions that can help or hinder the development of higher level resiliency skills. They are strong self-confidence, healthy self-esteem, and a positive self-image. These three core "selves" function like gatekeepers to higher-level resiliency abilities.

To develop level three resiliency strengths, focus on your strengths and what you have accomplished. Many coaches and trainers ignore the first word in the phrases "self-confidence," "self-esteem," and "self-image."

Effective resiliency strengths workshops require that participants write statements about their reliable

strengths, feelings of self-appreciation, and identity. Tell managers what you've done well and feel proud about.

Facilitate or attend professional development sessions that encourages individuals to list differences between people who work with an attitude of professionalism and those who do not. Lists prepared by a team that describe professionalism as a self-image will have much more influence on you or your employees than lists that are created by management.

### **Self-direction**

During level four resiliency, you develop advanced resiliency skills through self-motivated, self-managed learning. Level four resilient individuals are optimistic and self-confident people who enjoy childlike curiosity and playful humor. They learn from experience and become better at handling life's challenges.

Highly resilient people trust their intuitions and read other people well. They are the go-to people when something must be done right. They steer groups through chaotic times.

When highly resilient people are asked what they think is most essential to being resilient, they say "flexibility" or "adaptability." Further inquiry reveals that flexibility in actions, feelings, and thoughts come from having many counterbalanced complexities that give them choices for responding.

Resilient individuals can be optimistic and pessimistic, trusting and cautious, serious and humorous, unselfish and selfish, and finally, sensitive and tough. The key principle here is that they are not limited to being either one way or another.

Leave highly resilient people alone to do what they believe is best. Coach managers to listen to them and use them as in-house consultants.

### **Accentuate the positive**

Level five resiliency gives you the ability to convert accidents and misfortune into good luck. People who function at this level are best suited for a world of nonstop change. They tend to bounce back quickly from setbacks and often emerge stronger than before.

To develop this resiliency, examine one of the worst experiences of your lives to determine if you learned a valuable lesson.

After a rough challenge has been dealt with at work, determine why it was beneficial that it happened. Make learning valuable lessons from bad experiences part of your culture and your organization's culture.

### **Change happens**

When change takes place, it is not the strongest or most intelligent individual who survives. Survivors are those who adapt and flourish in the new environment. An empowering result in the resiliency psychology research is that almost every human has an inborn motivation to become resilient and can learn to handle nonstop change easily and naturally.

By knowing about this human potential, workplace learning and performance professionals can help employees make it through rough periods by facilitating resiliency strengths development.

Today's reality is that we live and work in constantly changing environments. Organizations that develop workforce resiliency acquire a significant competitive advantage.

**Al Siebert** is director of The Resiliency Center and author of *The Resiliency Advantage*; [asiebert@resiliencycenter.com](mailto:asiebert@resiliencycenter.com).

Send submissions to Development, *T+D*, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043; [development@astd.org](mailto:development@astd.org).