



RESILIENT LEADERSHIP

HOW TO THRIVE IN THE FACE OF THE PRESSURES OF MODERN WORKING LIFE

By IMD Professor George Kohlrieser – March 2015

IMD
Chemin de Bellerive 23
PO Box 915,
CH-1001 Lausanne
Switzerland

Tel: +41 21 618 01 11
Fax: +41 21 618 07 07
info@imd.org
www.imd.org

Resilience is the capacity to adapt well in the face of adversity, loss and failures, and to recover and thrive again. It is a crucial characteristic of high-performers, and one that leaders must cultivate to avoid becoming a hostage to events and forces around them, or even to themselves.

Resilient leaders sustain their energy levels under pressure and cope with unexpected change; they bounce back from setbacks and overcome difficulties without engaging in destructive and detached behavior. When facing challenges, leaders are also responsible for helping sustain the energy of their teams, because leadership itself is sustainable only if individuals and teams are able to consistently recover high energy levels.

Firstly, resilient leaders must master self-leadership. A high-performing leader needs to be physically, mentally and emotionally fit – as well as resilient – in order to inspire and guide others to achieve ambitious goals. The journey to inspiring others starts with, “How do I inspire myself?”

Positive mindset

Cultivating a positive mindset is one of the keys to resilience. The human brain is immensely powerful and complex and it allows us to strengthen certain thought patterns over others. Mindset enhances resilience, because how we think about stress determines whether it is positive or negative. Recent research suggests that stress, even extreme stress, can be good for the heart, the brain, and other aspects of human functioning depending on how you think about it. If you believe stress is good for you, it will enhance your wellbeing; if you believe it is bad for you, it will be destructive.

Embracing a positive mindset does not mean ignoring feelings of loss, disappointment or grief. We must allow ourselves to grieve in order to get over what we’ve lost – colleagues, friends, projects, dreams, etc. Understanding loss and failure is fundamental to the recovery process. Setbacks are inevitable in life and we must learn to welcome the lessons they yield. Extracting meaning from adversity allows us to move on.

Bonding sustains us through hardships

Resilience involves the heart as well as the brain. A high capacity to form attachments and bond with others is one of the pillars of resilience. These special types of bonds become “secure bases,” relationships with a high level of trust that give us a sense of protection, comfort and inspiration. They provide the energy to move forward and recover from setbacks without being taken hostage by them. In addition, secure bases guide our mind’s eye to give meaning to difficult events and transform negative experiences into positive ones. The stronger our secure bases, the stronger our resilience in dealing with adversity.

There is a link between bonding and engagement. Top managers who are disconnected from other people create low trust in their working relationships and low engagement in their organizations. Gallup studies show where there is a caring boss and a high level of trust there is also high engagement.

Important secure bases can also come in the form of a place, a goal, or even an object that dares us to go out of our comfort zone. They provide a sense of protection, safety and caring to dare, take risk and seek challenge. Nelson Mandela is an example of a secure base who led the nation of South Africa through apartheid. The poem *Invictus* by William Ernest Henley constituted a secure base for Mandela – reminding him that hardship and fear are no match for an “unconquerable soul”. Great leaders draw strength from their secure bases, and they in turn become secure bases for others, thus enhancing the cycle of inspiration in times of adversity and trouble.

Working with stress

How well leaders manage stress helps to determine how resilient they are overall. Stress reactions such as a pounding heart and fast breathing prepare our bodies to meet a threat. They energize us to act: they are an integral part of the “fight or flight” response that has allowed humans to survive dangerous situations since the dawn of our species. Stress can help galvanize leaders and teams at a critical juncture. In contrast, people who don’t have a sense of urgency and fail to react to a threat cannot get their organization to optimal levels. There has to be a balance between too little tension and too much tension.

There are four areas where stress manifests itself. 1) Physical symptoms include feelings of exhaustion and lowered resistance to infection. 2) Intellectual symptoms include diminished creativity, cynicism and negative thinking. 3) Social symptoms include people progressively isolating themselves or engaging in conflict. 4) Spiritual symptoms include a loss of a sense of meaning and purpose in work and life as well as feelings of despair and a sense of emptiness.

Leaders must be aware of stress levels and heed the body's distress signals both in themselves and others. They can then find ways that allow them to relieve tension and regain their positive energy. These stress management options include "talking out" worries and concerns, creating clear and specific goals, mindfulness exercise, physical exercise, optimal sleep, and remembering to laugh. They must also become attuned to the stress levels of people around them and reach out to those experiencing stress. Here questions are a powerful tool to engage in an honest discussion: "Is everything all right? Is there anything I can do to help you?" The questions should be respectful.

Leaders want vibrant, inspired and energetic employees. To avoid stress becoming a performance issue, they can take an active role in promoting resilience and boosting energy in their teams. Pacesetter leadership styles that push employees beyond reasonable levels can create environments that decrease rather than increase productivity. A Secure Base leadership style that balances caring with daring is one that enables individuals and teams to sustain performance for the long-term.

Building resilience is essential, but we must also remember that beyond success the goal is to find joy in work and life. We want to thrive not just survive. This is a new model of leadership for sustainability of human energy where the different facets of our identity are in balance. It is about the question, "Am I a hostage or am I leading my life?"

George Kohlrieser is a Professor of Leadership and Organizational Behavior at IMD, where he directs the High Performance Leadership (HPL), Advanced High Performance Leadership (AHPL) and Learning Leadership (LL) programs.

Kohlrieser is author of the award-winning bestseller Hostage at the Table: How Leaders Can Overcome Conflict, Influence Others and Raise Performance. His latest book is Care to Dare: Unleashing Astonishing Potential through Secure Base Leadership.

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