


# RESILIENCE THAT OUTLASTS RESOLUTIONS - A GUIDE FOR SENIOR LEADERS





At this time of year, conversations about resilience are in the air. There are winter blues or the southern hemisphere's 'summer blues', with workers trudging indoors as the sun still shines. There's the impact of Christmas and other holiday celebrations, bringing with them the pressure to overindulge. And let's not forget the nagging emotion accompanying so many new year's resolutions: guilt.

New Year's resolutions make sense. They should work. They tap into what psychologists refer to as the fresh start effect: that our behavior is easier to improve when we can tell ourselves a story of renewal, when we have an answer to the question 'why now?'. Making resolutions at the start of the year is a ritual that has stood the test of time, with records of the tradition dating as far back as the Babylonians 4000 years ago.

Resolutions are also notoriously unreliable. We lose interest, we rely on a finite pool of willpower that everything else out-competes, and the people around us stop holding us accountable to our goals.

Senior leaders do not have the luxury of drifting away from good intentions as February rolls around. Performance depends on it. Whilst some things are easier – financial privilege, a degree of autonomy, an invaluable executive assistant – the most senior leaders face chronic pressures that others do not. They need to know how to commit to new habits in a way that does not paradoxically deplete precious reserves of energy.

In our work with the C-suite, we find there is often a sense of relief in the realization that these challenges are a normal part of being a senior leader. The alternative is to believe it's 'just me'.

## CHRONIC DRAINS ON RESILIENCE INCLUDE:

### ➤ Pressure without an end date

Leaders may believe they should just keep going and push through, but research shows this ultimately reduces effectiveness and impact. The pressures are not going away, and so powering through does not work – there is no 'through', no obvious end, as the pressures on leaders are not going to dissolve any time soon.

### ➤ Feeling lonely in a crowd

C-Suite leaders may be surrounded by people, but the nature of the role means these can become transactional, rather than true, connections. Being seen as 'the leader' means there are fewer obvious sources of social support.

### ➤ The maelstrom of modern leadership

The C-suite can get dragged into a whirlwind of competing demands for their time and attention, resulting in cognitive overload and a feeling that their personal expertise is no longer enough.

### ➤ Assumptions about you

Later in one's career, assumptions about who you are and what you do can be deeply embedded, and harder to shift. This means it can feel difficult to reinvent yourself at work, even as the changing social and business context places new demands on you as a leader.

### ➤ It's not just about you

Many people find managing their own resilience hard. Leaders are increasingly being called upon to support the resilience of their people, and even their whole organization. Most leaders accept this as a responsibility that comes with true leadership – but it can also be a burden at a personal level.

## HOW CAN C-SUITE LEADERS SUMMON THEIR RESOLVE TO OUTLAST A STANDARD NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION?

The science of keeping the commitments we make to ourselves – so critical to coaching and professional development – is of course no different in January than at any other time of the year.

And here is the most surprising thing that the science has to tell us: forming good habits has little to do with resolve.

One 2020 study even found that 'self-control capacity' does not seem to have any effect whatsoever on how successful people are at forming new habits.<sup>1</sup> This flies in the face of everything we are taught about self-discipline and willpower, but it provides an answer to the age old conundrum of why highly motivated, successful people so often report failing to change their habits, even when they deeply want to.

## SO WHAT DOES MAKE THE DIFFERENCE?

### ➤ Aiming for progress, not perfection

All too often our goals take place 'out there in the future', accompanied by glowing visions of transformative personal change. But the research shows that the only way to reach transformative change is via the compounding of small behaviors. Think small and think about what you can do quite literally today. Senior leaders constantly strive to transform their business – they don't need the added pressure of trying to radically transform themselves.

### ➤ Making it social

Research shows us that individual willpower is a weak psychological force, while social conformity is one of the strongest. When something is 'normal', we think about it, and when we think about it, we do it.<sup>2</sup> Even as senior leaders, we need to surround ourselves with people who will – actively and just by their mere presence – make the right things feel normal. One executive team we worked with committed to putting 'thinking blocks' in their diaries, shifting the norm from endless operational meetings to a respect for strategic work.

<sup>1</sup><https://www.frontiersin.org>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.davidkalkstein.com>

## ➤ Taking away the need for a daily decision

Some of the most interesting people in history have known when to be really, really boring. Barack Obama famously wore the same suit for the eight years of his presidency in order to avoid a daily decision about what to wear. Know when to be dull. Creating small routines, even if it's 'every day at 8am I walk the dog, saves us from the cognitive effort of deciding whether or not to follow through with our commitment. Tagging a new habit onto an existing routine streamlines your decisions even more.

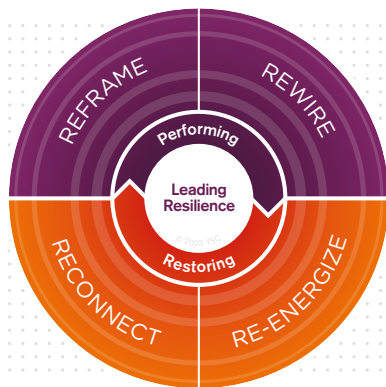
## ➤ Understanding that failures mean your planning was bad, not that you are bad.

Looking at the points above, what really matters is setting things up so that you have the best chance of sticking to your new habits – not 'being someone' who changes their behavior through the sheer virtue of their character. This means that failures are not a window into your soul or worth. When failure is not personal – being about what I did, not who I am – we are more likely to respond with positivity and proactivity.

## LEADERS KNOW 'IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT ME'. SO WHAT CAN YOU DO TO SUPPORT THE RESILIENCE OF OTHERS?

The resilience of senior leaders matters. As the saying goes, you adjust your own oxygen mask before helping others. Still, a leader is defined by the conditions they create for other people. Beyond making sure that they are in a fit state to lead, radiating resilience into their teams and organization, what can leaders do to directly support others?

YSC's Leading Resilience framework is about the skill of supporting others to build their own resilience. The four actions provide a toolkit for senior leaders to use in one-on-one and team conversations where pressure, stress, and overwhelm make their way onto the agenda.



## ➤ Reframe: how leaders coach others to change the stories they tell themselves about a challenge

Create the space to look at the challenge from different perspectives and open up different responses. If you are speaking to an individual or team, how can you offer them another way of seeing the issue, one that may be more positive or proactive? If you are addressing an entire organization, what compelling story could you offer to replace dominant narratives of fear or anxiety?

## ➤ Rewire: how leaders coach others to change the stories they tell themselves about themselves

Help others to let go of unhelpful personal narratives. We have more control over these than we sometimes think. This applies equally to organizations, which are often bogged down by ingrained negative beliefs. How often in your career have you heard mutterings like 'we are too old-fashioned', or 'our processes are impossible to improve' or 'no one would really choose to work here'? Senior leadership is about giving people something better to say to each other.

## ➤ Reconnect: how leaders help others find social and practical support

Sometimes – maybe when navigating yet another business disruption and the urge to withdraw is strong – people need a nudge to reach out to each other. At an organizational level, encouraging people to speak to those they would not normally speak to is powerful.

## ➤ Re-energize: how leaders support others to do more of what brings them energy, in and out of work

Bust the myth that good recovery is about lying down on the sofa, away from people, 'doing nothing'. Passive recovery, as it's termed, is a good alternative to overwork and burnout, but those are not the only options. Re-energizing, or proactive recovery, is about doing more of what we love. Some activities bring us into a 'flow state'.<sup>3</sup> This is a form of productivity that is actively re-energizing and a gift for those in senior leadership positions. Help others to understand not only what is urgent and important, but what brings them energy. Whilst responsibilities that deplete us cannot be avoided, an awareness of what re-energizes us personally provides an alternative to a numbing cycle of overwork and withdrawal.

## IN A NUTSHELL

Resolutions fade, but senior leaders do not have the luxury of drifting away from good intentions. Performance – personal and organizational – depends on the commitments they make to their resilience. The best leaders employ more than their resolve. They create the right conditions for themselves to stay on track. They consider their personal resilience to be a pre-requisite for the resilience of those around them, and by extension their entire organization. They do what it takes to create the conditions for others to feel resilient as part of true leadership.

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Email [info@ysc.com](mailto:info@ysc.com) to find out how we can support your leadership strategy.

[YSC.COM](https://www.ysc.com)

<sup>3</sup>Csikszentmihalyi <https://positivepsychology.com>