


REVISITING
RESILIENCE:
BUILDING A
MORE EQUITABLE
APPROACH



Resilience has become an overused term, one that is easy to dismiss as corporate speak or another social media buzzword. At worst, it can be used by individuals or organizations to set unfair or unrealistic demands of people. Assuming that people from marginalized groups have almost superhuman resilience due to the unique hardships they have experienced can lead to othering. If leaders assume those from underrepresented or disadvantaged groups have the ability to bounce back from adversity, this can result in failure to provide the necessary support and access to resilience building resources.

Despite the overuse of the word resilience, it is something that most people like to think they have – and yet still seek advice to be more resilient. Due to outdated role models, leaders often have a perception that resilience is purely about withstanding relentless pressure and persevering through adversity. This narrow and reactionary view of resilience is limiting in and of itself. It also easily leads to assumptions as to how people from disadvantaged racial, gender and other minority groups deal with problems. There can be a tendency to assume they have higher tolerance for setbacks and can rebound more quickly, which in turn can lead to insensitivity about the needs and struggles of team members, creating an environment where employees feel they cannot ask for support.

Leaders have a unique opportunity to role model positive resilience habits whilst creating an environment in which others can build their own resilience reservoirs. When it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), it's crucial to recognize biases in your thinking and how they might influence your decision-making and interactions with others. Doing so will help you spot missed opportunities to support others through an immediate challenge and help form more constructive resilience habits in the long term.

3 WAYS TO LEAD MORE EQUITABLY

REWEIGHT RESILIENCE

One way to clarify your understanding of resilience is through the frame of surviving and thriving. Survival speaks to endurance. Can we withstand the hardship before us and live to tell the tale? In a corporate setting, the answer is most likely yes. Most of us face few physical threats at our places of work. Thriving is a different matter altogether. This isn't about the ability to withstand pain, but about altering the experience altogether. Thriving is about the quality of the workplace environment, the trust across team members, the support systems in place.

Through our work with corporate leaders, we have identified four steps to cultivate and strengthen resilience for yourself and your people:

1) Reconnect with those around you, even when you just want to hibernate. Take a moment to be curious and connect with your team before moving on to tasks.

2) Reframe your problems by focusing on the options in front of you. Help others to do the same by

asking simple coaching questions like “What is the opportunity that lies in this challenge?”

3) Rewire how you view yourself and your capabilities. Note others' strengths and achievements to help them rewire their own beliefs about their capability.

4) Re-energize by doing what brings you energy, as opposed to resting by doing nothing. Explore with your people how they have been able to re-energize when feeling flat or low in the past.

TAKE A PERSONALIZED APPROACH

Different people are affected differently by the significant challenges in our world and the day-to-day pressures. Leaders must always keep this in mind and check the expectations they are placing on various groups, considering what existing pressures they are facing in their work roles and beyond. Don't assume that people from marginalized backgrounds will have higher levels of resilience. Meeting people where they are prevents leaders from dismissing their people's concerns, overlooking real problems when they come, and neglecting to take necessary and appropriate action.

In providing support to employees during the COVID-19 pandemic, companies realized early on that remote work enablement and mental health resources were crucial. And yet, record numbers of

women were dropping out of the workforce because what this group really needed was childcare support. Recognize that different groups often have different requirements and responsibilities, and need to be accommodated differently.

CONSIDER YOUR ROLE

Too often we use resilience as a mechanism to put the onus on the individual managing the problem, rather than taking responsibility for the problem itself. At its worst, resilience is a corporate cop-out that enables organizations to deflect responsibility to the person dealing with the fallout. Sometimes, the problem is not of individual resilience but of flawed systems or unfair use of organizational resources.

Challenge yourself not to make judgments about an individual's level of resilience; consider what you or your organization could do to enable your people to build their resilience reservoirs. Few leaders have the insight and self-awareness to consider their role in setting their employees up for hardship. The difficult truth here is that the two are not mutually exclusive. It can be true that both the person and the system need to make changes. Take the opportunity to reflect on what might need reform and redress so that resilience is not required in the first place.

IN A NUTSHELL

Leaders can never assume that people who have gone through hardship are less vulnerable to psychological or circumstantial setbacks in tough times, or that they have an easier time recovering. Indeed, disadvantaged groups and individuals may need greater or different kinds of support in difficult situations. It is crucial to always pay attention to the organizational and systemic issues that cause difficulties to begin with and how they impact people differently.

There are biases embedded within our thinking and behavior on resilience that need addressing. Challenge the assumptions you make about others and their resilience resources. Rather than assuming what others need or don't need, the simplest path is to stay open and curious to understand what people are experiencing. Consider how your organization is set up to ensure your people are not expected to survive, but are enabled to thrive.

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