

ADAPTABILITY AND RESILIENCE

Lessons for Post-Pandemic Times

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There are only three things that are certain in life:
death, taxes, and change.

To thrive in a change-heavy environment, you must build adaptability and resilience within your organization, and the added pressures of the pandemic and societal issues have made this even more necessary. As we navigated the past few months, we lost count of the number of articles that challenged us to pivot (aka adapt) or to develop our “stiff upper lip” (aka resilience), which didn’t really seem to be sustainable advice.

Adaptability and resilience are often treated as synonyms, but we’re not sure that’s the reality. There’s no doubt in our minds that they are intertwined, and the most successful of us have learned to develop and leverage both. Our experience working with leaders around the world is that adaptability and resilience is a team sport, not a solo endeavor.

In our discussions with leaders, we’ve explored the key difference between resilience and adaptability. The consensus from those conversations is that resilience refers to the capacity to quickly recover or “bounce back” from difficulties, while adaptability is the ability to adjust to those difficulties and create something positive from them.

Develop one without the other and you’ll have those short-term bursts of energy. We liken it to the energy required to run a sprint race. The risk is that as we respond to the challenges and stresses facing us with these intense moments of focus, there ultimately comes a crash of energy.

The “aha” moment for us was when we learned to hone both of these skills. It’s adaptability and resilience, not adaptability or resilience. The leaders we worked with to develop both capabilities also reported increased stamina for the longer-term marathon race, and less volatility between the peaks and valleys of their energy levels. Given all that we’re dealing with these days, reduced volatility and increased stamina sound like good news for everyone. Research shows that many of us are at a high risk for burnout, further underscoring the need to build resilience and adaptability in order to navigate work and life. The good news is that *anyone* can learn and adopt the necessary skills to become more adaptable and resilient.

WHAT DOES RESILIENCE LOOK LIKE?

We use the terms “resilience” and “adaptability” all the time, but what does resilience actually *look* like? There are



certain characteristics of resilient people. Looking at the definition of these traits as outlined by Brad Waters in his 2013 *Psychology Today* post, “10 Traits of Emotionally Resilient People,” they can include knowing their boundaries, keeping good company, and having self-awareness. But these characteristics are not innate by any means. We’ve developed our own definitions of five of these characteristics:

Self-awareness. It’s easy to ignore the subtle cues our bodies and minds send us when we’re trying to simply get through the day. But being “blissfully unaware” is not a long-term strategy for success or well-being.

It’s important to recognize our psychological and physiological needs and know what we need or don’t need, and when to reach out for help. Ignoring the problem merely allows it to bubble under the surface, which can have negative impacts in many facets of life.

We’ve introduced an icebreaker to our programs. It’s simple, yet powerful. We ask everyone “what’s your number?” on the following scale: 1 = running on empty, and 10 = firing on all cylinders. We then give everyone two minutes to do something in the moment that will increase their score by +1. It can be a moment of mindfulness, refilling their coffee mug, or taking a much-needed bathroom break.

Acceptance. Stress is a thing, for all of us. Understanding that stress is an unavoidable part of work and life is a necessary step to navigate it more effectively. Rather than denying or repressing the negative emotions you’re feeling, which will ultimately blow up in your face, lean into

what you’re feeling (*don’t* give up and let it take over) and acknowledge it. This approach can allow you to recover more quickly and efficiently.

Mindfulness. Mindfulness is a popular construct right now. It’s practically a buzzword in today’s corporate speak. However, there’s some heavy science behind this which shows that mindfulness benefits us all. Laura G. Kiken and Natalie J. Shook’s 2011 article, “Looking Up: Mindfulness Increases Positive Judgments and Reduces Negativity Bias,” in *Sage Journals* reported that mindfulness is associated with judgment accuracy and insight-related problem solving. Essentially it enhances our cognitive flexibility. Being fully present in the moment, without any judgment or avoidance, can be an incredibly effective means of healing from stress and burnout and thus building resilience.

Realism. Resilient people stay realistic in their approaches to problems. When you acknowledge your own limits and consider all possibilities, you allow for a more realistic understanding of the situation at hand that isn’t infused with personal bias. It’s important to admit that you don’t have all the answers and know when to enlist the help of others. This doesn’t mean that we should censor ourselves when considering possibilities, though. Sometimes it takes that big, hairy, audacious idea that gets us to the best, most realistic option that we can actually implement.

Mental agility. Being able to think on your feet, reframe problems, and look at things from different perspectives, in real time, is a key skill. To be resilient, you must be able



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to de-center stressors in order to manage them more effectively. This is not to say that denying or repressing stress is a good way to deal, but rather that pausing, acknowledging the situation from a neutral perspective, and then figuring out how to solve the problem allows for a more comprehensive understanding and effective solution. By taking a cognitive step back from stress, we can better manage our emotions and thus recover more easily from difficult scenarios. Mental agility helps us de-escalate, reframe, and choose our tack.

Returning to the “what’s your number?” activity, this provides the team leader with an opportunity to reframe and be mindful of how to lead the meeting. If everyone is at 3 (or less), consider rescheduling. If you have a mix, then give the benefit of the doubt to those who appear quieter than usual.

SO, WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Resilience and adaptability are critical skills rooted in the survival of humankind (that’s bold, we know). Our ability, as humans, to adapt quickly to unexpected challenges and stress, and even thrive in these situations, is central in our evolution story. Mindfully integrating these attitudes and

behaviors into the workplace will allow you and your team to avoid being dragged down by pressures, and instead turn them into opportunities.

Pre-pandemic workplaces were steeped in stress and anxiety. These days, it’s even worse. We know that this can ultimately have a negative impact on performance and cause higher levels of anxiety, depression, and burnout. The consequences can be astronomical—lower productivity, absenteeism, anxiety, and burnout, to name a few. In the crucible that has been 2020-2021, we’re seeing this in spades with our clients. Psychological resilience isn’t a “nice to have” anymore, it’s a “need to have.” If we, as leaders, want to take care of our employees, so that they can take care of us (and our organizations, our customers, our products and ideas), we’ve got to be dialed in and paying attention to *how* our folks are doing. Helping them to build these skills will make us all better off.

Beyond just “keeping the lights on,” there’s a pretty significant upside here. Resilience and adaptability are associated with higher levels of optimism, curiosity, and energy, any of which could change the game for all of us. Increased resilience and adaptability in an organization

can allow for more creative solutions to problems and can provide a cushion for the day-to-day stressors we may be experiencing. It seems that there is a time and place for rose-tinted glasses after all!

There are organizational benefits to building these skills as well. In their 2020 *Harvard Business Review* article “A Guide to Building a More Resilient Business,” the authors Martin Reeves and Kevin Whitaker list four specific benefits to resilience in the workplace.

- **Anticipation benefit**—the ability to quickly recognize threats
- **Impact benefit**—the capacity to better withstand the initial shock
- **Recovery speed benefit**—the ability to identify what needs to happen after the initial shock for the organization to recover and return to normal, thus rebounding from the shock quickly and effectively
- **Outcomes benefit**—the increased strength of the post-shock environment

We know what resilience and adaptability are, we now know why they matter, and we can point to specific benefits of building these capabilities in our organizations. So what now?

HOW DO YOU ACTUALLY MAKE IT HAPPEN?

Clearly resilience and adaptability are important, but how do you actually put them into practice and build an environment that's conducive to them? Here are four simple tactics to encourage resilience and adaptability within your organization:

Cultivate compassion. Being compassionate is perhaps one of the most effective ways to build positivity in the workplace. More positive emotions at work lead to more positive work relationships, as well as increased cooperation and collaboration. We've learned in our research at SkyeTeam that the more we know, trust, and like each other, the more likely we are to feel empathy, have each other's backs, and keep each other safe. Connection and compassion are critical to what is called an “Ally Mindset” in *Cultivate: The Power of Winning Relationships* (Morag Barrett, River Grove Books, 2020).

Find opportunity in adversity. For some, this is much easier said than done—especially given the challenges of the last year. This is more than just “rubbing some dirt on it and getting back in the game.” This is an intentional choice. Rather than just trying to mitigate risk and restore things to “normal” following a difficult situation, try instead to adjust to these new realities and use them to your advantage.

We've seen this repeatedly throughout the pandemic. Those people (teams, organizations) that take an evolutionary approach are the folks that win. Waiting for things to return to normal is a doomed strategy. There is no “return to normal.”

There's only a forward movement to what's next. Hard times can give your company a competitive advantage as long as you are resilient, adaptive, and equipped to manage the organization through uncharted territory.

A leader we were coaching introduced a “ripples and joy” element to his meetings. He realized that his endless Zoom meetings had become focused on the work at hand and what needed to get done, and had overlooked the importance of how his team members were doing. He started to ask for (and share) examples of ripples—of the work that had moved forward, had a positive impact on others, or had positive feedback from others; and examples of joys—something that had made him smile either personally or professionally. Five minutes was all it took, and the results were almost instantaneous. The team relaxed, the banter returned (even on video calls), and the willingness of teammates to reach out to each other between calls to check in (not just because they needed something) increased.

Reward cognitive diversity. Creative solutions to problems are the cornerstone of a resilient workplace, and the different backgrounds, experiences, and personality preferences each employee brings are your greatest asset in reaching them. When you appreciate contrarians and ideas that rock the boat, members of your team will be more likely to come forward with new ideas and alternative ways of reaching solutions.

Don't count on stability. Stability is the buggy whip of 2021. We all need to collectively pull a “Frozen” on this and just let it go. Part of the reason change is so jarring is that we expect stability as the norm, when this is simply not the case. Rapid, constant change is just normal these days. It's Moore's Law for the entire world. The rate of change in the world has been increasing at an exponential rate for years. Thinking that there is going to be a pause or some sort of respite from that change is a fool's errand. Expect change as the default, rather than stability. You and your organization will be able to adjust more quickly and effectively, and everyone will be better for it.

The constant changes and occupational stress so many of us experience are often unavoidable, so it is imperative that we learn how to navigate them and adjust to situations where they arise. By implementing any or all of these strategies, you, your team, and your organization will be better equipped not only to deal with these challenges but to thrive in the challenging, high-stakes times we're all trying to navigate. [AQ](#)

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