

How To Build Resilience During The Coronavirus Era And Other Times Of Uncertainty

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Leadership Strategy

I write about strategy, adaptive leadership and managerial psychology.

A lot of us these days are looking for the light at the end of the tunnel. COVID-19 has consumed us and changed our lives for months. While many businesses have found ways to continue their operations (with essential personnel only or through adaptive measures like video calls), other businesses, particularly small businesses, may not be so fortunate. That is why, now more than ever, building executive resilience, as a leader, manager or human being, is so important.



Resilience helps individuals thrive, regardless of the direction they are pointed in.

Getty

Understanding resilience versus toughness

Resilience is the ability to bounce back from a challenge. Broadly speaking, there are basically two approaches to developing it. The first you may be more familiar with: mental toughness. This is the positivity approach. If we stay optimistic and tell ourselves we can do it, we can. We see this approach frequently in command-and-control type environments. There are books about it written by Navy SEALs and other special ops professionals. It's a model that's used in professional sports as well, to varying degrees of success.

Mental toughness is about favoring the fight over the flight or freeze responses to threats. It's using the energy from stress and focusing it on the task by staying positive about your abilities. For achievement-oriented individuals, it can work. It may boost one's confidence for a period of time as well. But it also has drawbacks. We can pursue goals blindly as we tough them out, afraid to fail. As Daniel Gilbert has shown in his famous Prudential commercials, we expect the future to be better, so we lose touch with the real obstacles that may get in the way. We can become overconfident in our abilities, making the fall harder if a goal isn't reached. By being positive, we may not be authentic. By focusing on toughness, we create competitive over collaborative cultures.

Taking a more introspective approach

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We don't have to be warriors to be resilient! That's where the second approach comes in. Researchers who have been studying mindfulness, empathy and compassion, like Dr. Rick Hanson, a senior fellow at the Greater Good Science Center at U.C. Berkeley and author of "Resilient," offer an alternative. Resilience, in this view, is about finding inner peace and working through the challenge on your terms. It's about building awareness to understand what makes the challenge a challenge. It's using self-compassion to understand your strengths and limitations so that you can choose a course of action that you can follow through with. It's about building your confidence by achieving mini-goals.

That is why I prefer this more introspective approach: It uses our reward system instead of our stress system to encourage us to act, relying on three neurochemicals: dopamine, oxytocin and serotonin.

Using our neurochemical reward system

Dopamine is the neurochemical responsible for that happy feeling we get when we are rewarded by our own efforts – those breakthroughs! – and want to keep going as a result. When we are learning something, it also makes us feel good. So, the more we progress on the challenge we are given, the more dopamine shots we may get.

Oxytocin is the neurochemical associated with social bonding. According to neuroeconomist and professor Paul Zak, it is also the neurochemical associated with trust. The more we trust, the more oxytocin is released, which gives us that warm feeling of being liked that makes us want to do a good job. When we collaborate, we boost oxytocin. When we compete, we lower it by releasing our stress hormones, adrenaline and cortisol, instead. (Being mentally tough is about using adrenaline and cortisol, our stress response system, to motivate us.)

Serotonin is believed to be the primary neurochemical that plays a role in our happiness and well-being. It too, is reduced in periods of prolonged stress, when adrenaline and cortisol are present. If we are toughing our way through a challenge, our serotonin levels are likely lower. This may explain, for example, why we can be cranky in the evenings with our families when we are stressed at work: Our body chemistry hasn't yet had a chance to rebalance itself.

So how do you build your resilience the introspective way? It's all about becoming aware of how you think and reframing the challenge into something you can do.

Building awareness

Believe it or not, we think before we feel or act. It may not seem that way, but in order for our bodies to decide how they are going to respond to a situation, our brains have to give it a direction. Our emotions seem so hardwired sometimes that it can be difficult to think that we have some control over them, but we do. It's just that the part of the brain that helps us think out loud to ourselves isn't the part of the brain that receives that first signal. But we can work on slowing down that first response system to re-direct that signal.

In order to do that, we first have to build our awareness: What is making us feel stressed? It's easy to say the coronavirus, but is it the virus or something else? Perhaps it's being stuck in an apartment or not having a quiet place to work while other family members are on videoconferences. Maybe it's too much time with people that we love, but usually in smaller doses. It could be as simple as not being able to run to the store for milk without having to put a face mask on. For each of us, it's different. There's no judgment. We take an empathetic approach so that we can support each other and boost those positive chemicals.

Understanding the root causes of your stress isn't always easy. If you're struggling, try the toddler approach and ask yourself the five why's. For those of you who are not familiar with that technique, the five why's is a way to continually drill down on an issue to uncover the root cause. As an easy example, why am I afraid to go to the grocery store? The media and our governmental leaders have told me to stay away from people, which is hard to do there. Why is it hard to do? There are narrow aisles and people can come from all directions. Why does that pose a challenge? It's hard to focus on getting the food and staying six feet away

from people at the same time. Why are you afraid to get within six feet? I don't want to get sick; I don't want anyone in my family to get sick. Why? Because I care about them and don't want to cause them pain or suffering.

Reframing the challenge

Once we understand why we feel stressed, we can start to think differently about it, a technique called reframing. Using the example above, we can leverage the reward system instead of the stress system by thinking differently about going to the grocery store. We uncovered that we are afraid because we don't want to hurt ourselves or our families. That creates an opportunity instead of an overwhelming challenge. Instead of thinking about the situation as surviving going to the store, we can concentrate on the safest way for me to get groceries. It may mean using a delivery service or curbside pickup, where it is available.

Reframing is much easier than you think. It's not about looking at the positive side, it's about changing the nature of the problem. We become both adaptive and resilient when we learn to think differently and respond in ways that are comfortable.

Identifying Obstacles

Gabriele Oettingen, a professor at New York University and the University of Hamburg, spent decades studying motivation with a specific focus on mental contrasting, a problem-solving approach through which individuals visualize their futures and identify all of the obstacles that could stand in the way of success. What she found is quite eye-opening: fantasizing about the future can help with problem-solving, but it's the identification of obstacles that grounds us, enabling us to be more comfortable and relaxed when trying to address the challenge. You could think of it as the counterpoint to the reactive nature of mental toughness. Why? Once the obstacles are identified, the next step is to determine how to address them. That helps you create a plan, which reduces anxiety and enables greater focus on the effort.

Think again about the grocery store example. If you are planning to have groceries delivered or picked up, have you thought about the obstacles: some delivery windows may be unavailable, or items may be out of stock and need substitution. If you are going to the store, how do you plan to navigate the aisles? Do you have a list and know where in the store to find the items? Or are you going to be bouncing back and forth, potentially putting yourself in situations where you might be in closer contact with others?

Science shows it works

Don't take my word for it. Researchers Golnaz Tabibnia and Dan Radecki reviewed dozens of studies that evaluated different cognitive and behavioral techniques for building resilience. The authors found that actively engaging with one's stressors and fears, through techniques like reappraisal, is more effective than avoiding them. The more we understand, discuss and label our emotions, the more we can reduce our distress. That's where the five why's can help. Being able to think differently about the challenge (because we understand it and ourselves in more depth) allows us to take back the feeling of control and take comfortable steps to get it done.



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As CEO of Magpie Insights, I help organizations develop strategies that are rooted in the capabilities of their people, improving the likelihood of successful change and

As CEO of Magpie Insights, I help organizations develop strategies that are rooted in the capabilities of their people, improving the likelihood of successful change and execution. The results: higher profits, improved organizational efficiency, and greater employee engagement and retention. As a coach, I help executives become more empathetic managers and improve their adaptability and resilience as leaders. Prior to developing the Magpie approach to empathetic management, I spent nearly 20 years as a management and strategy consultant, entrepreneur, and financial services executive, while studying motivation through the lenses of psychology, neuroscience, evolutionary biology, behavioral economics, leadership and negotiations.