

The Resilient Leader
Debunking the myths
and growing your capabilities

The Resilient Leader

Anyone thinking that the interest in resilience was just a ‘flavour of the month’ five or six years ago when a plethora of books on the subject hit the bookshops, may need to think again. The number of articles I still see in journals and newspapers on the subject suggests that interest does not seem to have waned. The publishing of Roffey Park’s latest report on Resilience seems as timely and relevant as ever.

Looking back, some may have treated it as ‘the latest fad’ in the early years and simply renamed their stress management training as resilience programmes. But alongside this superficial rebranding, there has been serious effort in other camps to redefine what is needed in order to survive and thrive in the turbulent world that seems to be the new normal for us all. And yet I still feel that some of the definitions of resilience that have surfaced have been found wanting and don’t really describe the kind of resilience we need.

In this paper I seek to critique some of these definitions, proposing an alternative. I will then focus on two elements of the Roffey Park model that tend to receive less press than others, taking a deeper dive into these areas. Along the way, I will give some examples of how I work with these themes in the Resilience programmes I run for some of our clients at Roffey Park.

Defining resilience – debunking the myths

Many define resilience as the ability to ‘bounce-back’ or to ‘be bulletproof’. Nietzsche would probably have agreed with these definitions when he stated: “*Whatever doesn’t kill me makes me strong*”. And I understand the emphasis on the ability to get through tough times and to cope with repeated setbacks. At the same time, I think there is both a poverty and a danger in these simple definitions.

‘**Bounce-back-ability**’ conjures up an image of one of those boxers’ punch-balls that returns to an upright position after being punched or one of those weighted toys that does the same, much to the delight of the toddler that set it in motion. This is a popular definition, but these images can easily denude adversity of its transformative power. Adversity, paradoxically, offers the potential for transformational growth – the opportunity to ‘bounce-forward’, not just to return to the position we occupied before - a point well made in the Roffey Park

research paper. Adversity can force us to ask deeper questions relating to meaning, purpose and even our sense of identity than we normally would in the humdrum routine. This can have an enormously beneficial and transformational effect on our sense of wellbeing - on the other side of the adversity. Seligman (2011) makes this point well when he says we should be talking more about Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) as a possibility rather than Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) alone. It is too easy for a ‘Disorder’ to become a defining condition, an identity that we are stuck with, that stops us seeing trauma as a potential route to a better sense of wellbeing. Pietrzak et al’s 2010 study of nearly 300 US veterans from the Afghan and Iraqi conflicts found that 72% reported growth in at least one of the assessed areas. The most common areas of growth were ‘*Changing priorities about what is important in life*’ and ‘*greater ability to handle difficulties in life*’.

‘**Being bulletproof**’, in turn, suggests an image of Superman with bullets bouncing off his chest, invulnerable to anything his enemies throw at him. This fantasy may be ok for comic books and feature films, and may have some macho attraction, but it hardly represents a healthy human condition. Those who let nothing affect them tend to be high on the psychopathic spectrum. They can make effective ‘hatchet-men’ (and they are most often men), who go in and make difficult decisions before moving on, but they are rarely inspirational leaders of the kind I want to follow. Authentic, emotionally intelligent leadership is surely about being vulnerable enough to feel for and with others in a time of adversity, being someone with real human needs yourself, not someone who is Teflon-coated and feels nothing.

In my resilience programmes, rather than ‘bounce-back-ability’ or ‘being bulletproof’, I suggest that resilience is more about:

- Remaining vulnerable enough to feel for and with others
- Becoming strong enough to live with uncertainty and ambiguity
- Learning to grow, not crumble, through adversity

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Everyone is resilient – to a degree

As the Roffey Park paper suggests, everyone has a degree of resilience or they probably wouldn't be alive and certainly not employed in a leadership position. I often use this on resilience programmes. I start by offering a working definition of resilience: 'adapting well to volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity and adversity' and: 'Learning to grow, not crumble, through adversity'. Before covering any content, I get people to look back at a time when they needed to be resilient, telling the story of that time and asking them to identify what helped them through. It reminds them that they have already accessed resources both inside and outside of themselves to get through a tough time and can call upon these resources again. This helps counteract some of the 'learned helplessness' it can be easy to develop in challenging times.

What helps?

The 2014 Roffey Park research into Resilience has produced a solid, research-based model on what key factors make for a resilient leader. They are:

- Perspective
- Emotional Intelligence
- Purpose, values and strengths
- Connections
- Managing physical energy

My own recent work running 'what helps' exercises on the Personal Mastery & Resilience programme for managers in Macmillan Cancer Support would concur with these broad headings, although I would also add that managing, mental, emotional and spiritual energy as well as physical seems important.

I find two of these factors, Perspective and Purpose, of particular interest – partly because I have found them of great use personally and partly because many of my clients have too. So I would like to examine them more closely here.

A deeper dive...

Perspective

I find it is useful to discern between three types of perspective.

1. In-the-moment perspective
2. Short to medium-term perspective
3. Whole of life perspective

1. IN-THE-MOMENT PERSPECTIVE

The Roffey Park report suggests, quoting the psychologist and holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl (1984), that the ability to slow ourselves down 'in-the-moment' and recognise that we have a choice in how we respond is an important factor in resilience. We have "response-ability", as the late Stephen R Covey would have said. It can be easy to react without consciously choosing our response triggered by thoughts and feelings that undermine our resilience. These provoke words and actions that increase the potential threat or danger rather than mitigating it. Many people know the expression: "Just count to 10 before you respond". That's what gaining in-the-moment perspective is all about. It gives our brain the chance to think rationally with what Dialectical Behavioural Therapists (DBT) call 'wise mind' rather than 'emotional mind'. It links with the emotional intelligence element of resilience – that of being aware of our internal emotional response, moderating it with talk down techniques, if appropriate, and being able to regulate our expression of that response when needed.

2. SHORT TO MEDIUM-TERM PERSPECTIVE

This helps us to see aspects of the 'trial' we are going through as temporary rather than permanent. We are attempting to reinforce this perspective when we are saying things to ourselves such as: "this too shall pass" or "it won't last forever" or "it'll all be over by the end of the month". It can be particularly helpful, though not necessarily easy, for those who suffer intense but temporary depressive episodes to use this kind of self-talk. This level of perspective may also be addressed through the very helpful techniques of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), when it uncovers the underlying beliefs that are acting as the engine room for unhelpful thoughts and feelings.

I sometimes talk about four common thinking traps that people can fall into as a result of underlying anti-resilient beliefs:

1 Eeyore syndrome – unrelenting pessimism	3 Victor Meldrew Syndrome – everyone else is an idiot and to blame: “I just don’t believe it!”
2 Private Fraser Syndrome – catastrophizing: “we’re all doomed..!”	4 Woody Allen Syndrome – taking everything personally

CBT helps re-write some of these beliefs with more helpful and accurate beliefs, that can help underpin rather than sabotage our resilience. I often recommend that my clients write their own personal ‘mantras’ to counteract some of this unhelpful thinking, and I have a few of my own.

3. WHOLE OF LIFE PERSPECTIVE

It is this level of perspective that I find talked about less in resilience literature. Perhaps this is because it is the most difficult to address. Perhaps it is also because it can easily take us into questions of ultimate meaning, of fundamental beliefs, of philosophy, religion and spirituality, which often seem like the taboo subjects we still avoid, while the other old taboos of sex and politics seem fair game.

The pace at which we live and the urgency of the everyday doesn’t exactly encourage a whole-life perspective. Yet for me this is a key anchor for us in an uncertain world. Not only does a lack of long-term perspective undermine our resilience, it can also lead us to neglecting what is most important to us. Many of my clients identify for themselves that they have neglected their most important relationships in the busyness of the day-to-day, threatening the very relationships that could be a great source of resilience for them. This holistic sense of our priorities that is an important part of whole-life perspective is closely linked to the issue of purpose.

Like the relatively still hub of a fast-spinning wheel, a whole life perspective, or a long-term sense of purpose, can give a sense of stability in the midst of change. But how do we develop this long-term perspective and sense of purpose – in ourselves and in others? And is this really something we should be getting involved with as managers and employers? More on this later, but let’s explore first what we mean by a sense of purpose, which I also see as closely linked with the concept of ‘meaning’.

Purpose

Depending on who you read around this subject you will find different definitions of purpose.

I was excited to see that ‘Purpose’ was one of the five constructs of wellbeing in Gallup-Healthways recently published (2014) Well-being Index that they tested across the globe. I was keen to discover how they defined the word.

They described ‘Purpose-Wellbeing’ as:

‘Liking what you do each day and being motivated to achieve your goals’

This was measured by the strength of agreement with two statements:

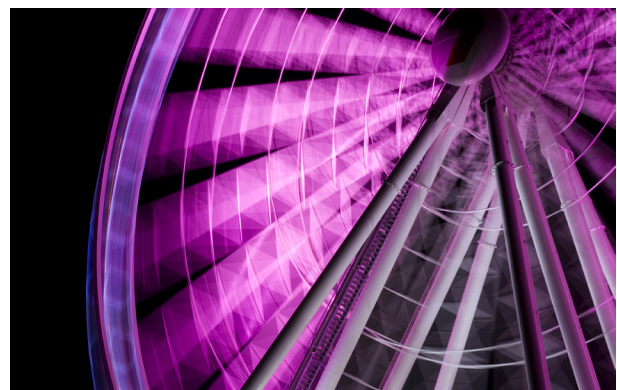
1. You like what you do everyday
2. You learn or do something interesting everyday

Am I the only one slightly baffled and disappointed by this construct? I’m not sure the statements even measure the construct, but more importantly they seem to miss out the essential long-term dimension of a sense of purpose.

I prefer the measures of purpose, values and strengths in the Roffey Park instrument. Purpose was calculated according to positive answers to the following five questions:

- I know my personal strengths and I use them regularly in my work
- The work I do helps fulfil my sense of purpose in life
- My workplace is somewhere where I feel I belong
- The work that I do fits with my personal values and beliefs
- Generally, I appreciate what I have in my work environment

These elements also link well with what Seligman (2002) called ‘the engaged and meaningful life’ – one in which we know our strengths and are using them to ‘serve something that we believe is bigger than ourselves’.



Roffey Park's Meaning & Purpose in Leadership Survey 2014

It is difficult to encapsulate in a few words such a potentially profound concept, but in my own recent research into meaning and purpose in leadership (due to be published by the end of 2014), I offered the following working definition of a sense of purpose:

'a clear reason for doing what you are doing and becoming what you are trying to become'.

In a sense, it is the 'Why?' question. Why am I slogging my guts out, day after day in this work? Why do I get up in the morning, wash, dress and feed the kids (and myself!) before going out to work and then doing a similar evening routine when I come back? It is not hard to see how indistinct answers to such questions can undermine our resilience as we battle through our multi-priority lives.

In the Meaning and Purpose in Leadership survey one of the questions I asked was: 'From what areas of life do you gain a sense of meaning and purpose?'

Top of the list came 'Family' with 95% ticking this option. 'Work' was second with a score of 83%, followed by 'My personal development' at 73% and 'My friendships outside of work' at 69%. (n=300 Managers, HR and other professionals). I went on to ask, just how important 13 aspects of these areas of life were to them. Family proved not just the most popular, but also the most important one as 74% said that 'Seeing my family/partner thrive and be happy' was 'Very important'. This contrasted with just 42% saying 'My achievements at work' were 'Very important'

If this is the case, the key question that arises, in terms of our resilience, is this: to what extent do we live as if our families and our partner are that important? I know from my own experience as well as coaching scores of executives that there can often be a distinct dissonance between our cognitive priority list and our real one in terms of where we spend our time and attention. As Covey once said – 'Few people on their deathbed say "I wish I'd spent more time at work!" Building a longer-term sense of perspective and purpose can really help to recalibrate our lives in a more healthy direction.'

Is it our problem?

Some may ask whether HR, OD or people developers should be getting involved in helping employees discover a sense of purpose. Isn't this something they should pursue in their own time? Not if Dan Pink (2011) is to be believed:

"Humans by their nature seek purpose – a cause greater and more enduring than themselves. Traditional businesses have long considered purpose ornamental – a perfectly nice accessory, so long as it didn't get in the way of the important things. But that's

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changing...purpose maximisation is taking its place along profit maximisation as an aspiration and a guiding principle"

He describes the three factors of Autonomy, Mastery and Purpose as the leading motivational factors of our age, superseding previous models of survival, reward and punishment.

How do we develop a long-term perspective and a sense of purpose?

So – let's finally return to our earlier question: how do we develop, and maintain, that long-term perspective and sense of purpose, especially if the reality of our lives is out of alignment with the values we espouse?

An exercise I use to good effect on my resilience programmes is: '90th Birthday Speech'. (Some use a similar 'Write your own obituary' exercise. I prefer this slightly less morbid alternative!) I invite participants to write and deliver the speeches that they would like to be given in their honour by friends, colleagues and family on their 90th birthday. What would they want them to say about the person they have known and what you have achieved by that stage of your life? It can be a profound and deeply moving exercise both to complete and then to witness those speeches being delivered.

This exercise can also be a useful precursor to an exercise that Covey (1984) suggests in 'The 7 habits of highly effective people'. His second 'Habit' is to: 'Begin with the end in mind'. Towards this end, he encourages the reader to write their own personal mission statement, something that expresses what they value and what they aspire to towards a long-term sense of purpose. This is an exercise that both I and my clients have found extremely helpful, though it is not an easy one to complete. It took me several years of revisiting my personal statement before it became an expression that remains as relevant to me today as it did when I signed it off 15 years ago. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised. As Viktor Frankl once said:

"We detect rather than invent our missions in life"

If we have been used to living with no reference point of a long-term sense of purpose, it can take some detecting. But I have found it a profoundly helpful exercise that still helps to anchor me and restore a sense of long-term perspective in times of turbulence and uncertainty.

Conclusion

So, we have tried to reframe the definition of resilience into one that is more human and less like a psychopath's manifesto. We have looked at the Roffey Park model and how it helps us consider some of the key factors that contribute to a more human and robust view of resilience.

We have also spent time focussing on two of these factors: the twin issues of perspective and purpose and looked at how we can develop a long-term sense of meaning and purpose for ourselves and others.

Obviously, if our fundamental belief is that life is meaningless, then some of the exercises above may also seem meaningless. (And one or two have challenged me on this basis over the years). Personally, I agree with Frankl when he says:

“Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life...Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus everyone's task is as unique as is his specific opportunity to implement it.”

And if a man who survived the horrors of Auschwitz, losing his wife and most of his close family in death camps, can say this and then spend the rest of his life helping countless others find meaning in, and through, suffering - that's good enough for me.

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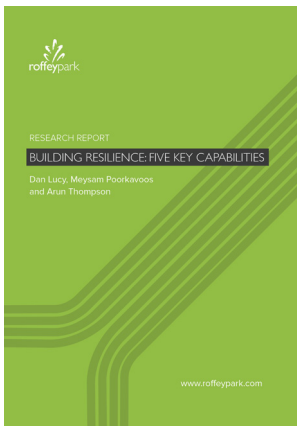
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On graduating from Durham University, Adrian worked for charities in Europe, Africa and the Middle East before gaining experience in UK central and local government management and training. During this time he developed an organisational standard known as 'Investors in Equality' which featured in two national journals. Adrian developed his own freelance portfolio before joining Roffey Park, and has worked with clients across the private, public and not-for-profit sectors in the UK, Europe and Asia.

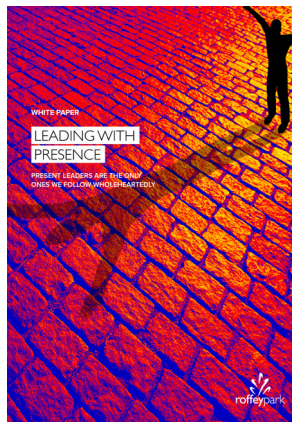
Adrian's expertise includes executive coaching (up to and including chief executive), leadership, change, personal effectiveness, resilience, strategic thinking, diversity management, performance management, top team development and strengths-based approaches. He is also an experienced Action Learning Set facilitator.

He is a published writer and international conference speaker and has been quoted in the press on topics such as leadership, resilience (individual and corporate), emotional intelligence and diversity management. He is the developer of Roffey Park's Deep Questions Model™ (used in coaching and resilience programmes) and of the Roffey Park Strategic Cycle. He is currently researching the impact of a sense of purpose and meaning in leadership.

Related Reading and Resources



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RESILIENCE CAPABILITY INDEX

- Can you adapt to stressful situations better than others?
- Do you have the ability to manage a large workload?
- Are you paying attention to how you cope with change?
- Are you able to recover quickly from adverse experiences?

Resilience is as relevant now as it has even been as we juggle a workplace, that is disruptive and ever changing, with the demands from home. Based on robust research Roffey Park has developed the Resilience Capability Index (RCI), a short online tool to help you assess your own resilience capabilities across five domains.

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