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What Makes a Resilient Leader?

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With the spread of Covid-19 and the swift economic downturn, resilience now is among the most important qualities for leaders. One common definition for resilience is the ability to recover quickly from difficulty, failure, disappointment, and loss. That characterization speaks to how people react to circumstances that are out of their control: Some people feel powerless and depressed, while others pick themselves up and move on. Leaders with this quality are not only able to recoup quickly, they also set an example and encourage others around them to do the same.

The internet is replete with advice and tips for how to become more resilient, with suggestions such as avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems, keep things in perspective, accept change as a natural part of life, keep focused on your goals, and take decisive action. Many of those are easier said than done!

My experience with leaders who have weathered crises successfully – including those who have taken big steps into the unknown, mastered dramatic shifts in their businesses, and came back from defeat to live another day – points to an important distinction. In those scenarios and others, there's something about the essence of *who the leaders are as people*, not what they do to demonstrate resiliency. Here are a few of the most important characteristics that we have observed in highly resilient leaders:

They are fundamentally optimistic.

They have an unwavering belief that things will turn out all right and are hopeful and confident about the future. This does not mean that they are unreasonably or illogically optimistic or find good in everything. Such people resemble the children's fictional character Pollyanna, who was unremittingly positive despite all evidence.

They believe they have control over what happens.

The psychologist Julian Rotter described this as having an internal locus of control, meaning that they believe events in their lives result from their own actions and take responsibility for the consequences. By contrast, people with an external locus of control believe that outside events are in control and take no responsibility for their life outcomes.

They are calm, not excitable.

They remain composed and controlled even in highly stressful situations and don't respond emotionally to events as they occur. While all else is swirling around them, they are the stable presence in the eye of the storm. This is one of the "Big 5" personality traits that shows up early in life and tends not to change much over time.

They are eager to seek out challenges.

Rather than running away from the fire, they instinctively head right into it. You can see early indications of this in people who actively pursue assignments that are new to them and which take them out of their comfort zones, and who raise their hands for assignments that no one else wants to take.

They are confident in their competence.

During periods of adversity or when circumstances shift dramatically, they are confident that they will be able to figure things out to sustain themselves and their organizations. They also have faith in their resourcefulness to invent new approaches when the ones that used to work do not work any longer.

Turns out, most highly effective senior leaders have many of these characteristics, but those who have all five of them are extremely rare. Even if you are someone who lacks certain of these ingredients, there are some habits you can adopt to show greater resilience. Here's how to build resilience:

Practice self-control. Regardless of what you may be feeling inside, think about the impact of your emotions spilling over in public before acting them out and do your best to stifle them.

Gain strength from others. Do not be alone with your fears and doubts. Surround yourself with others who have the traits presented here and learn from them.

Empathize with your team. Let others know that you care about how they are feeling but state the belief that things will pass and do so with confidence in your voice.

Adopt a positive mindset. Focus on the good things in your life, and be thankful for your family, your friends, and your health.

Take care of yourself. Get rest, meditate, exercise, eat healthy, take long walks, pet your dog, and watch that movie you have wanted to see for a long time.

The way resilience is most often characterized – as the ability to recover from adversity and quickly return to the way things were before – is only half the story. I prefer to view resilience as having the characteristics and skills to prepare for unfortunate and unpredicted events – and not just respond to them effectively. In other words, it is not about bouncing back. – it’s more about having the ability to deal with problems and crises before they occur.

Leaders who are temperamentally suited to deal with whatever comes – who have what it takes – will be the ones that you can count on in the long run.

About the author

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