



Resiliency in the Workplace

Resilience is a key skill for managing stress, overcoming adversity, and adapting to challenges. Resilient workforces have higher levels of engagement and a higher capacity to adapt to change and learn from difficulties, increasing their innovation and success. Moreover, resilient workplace cultures equip employees with the tools and strategies to manage stress, leading to more productive and happier employees. Here's an overview on resiliency and what your organization can do to build a resilient workforce.

Resiliency: What is it and Why is it important?

Resiliency is the ability to adapt to changing and challenging situations. This includes the capacity to overcome and recover from stress. Resilient individuals positively cope with challenges, learn from problems, and adapt to future obstacles.¹⁻² Importantly, resiliency is a skill that can be learned and developed by anyone.³

Why should resiliency matter in the workplace?

Learning how to build resiliency can be an important workplace skill to help teach and prepare employees on how to respond to changes and approach challenges in a positive, healthy, and productive way. Moreover, resiliency is a critical component of operating agile and innovative organizations.⁴

How do your employees respond to an unanticipated change? How does your organization proactively learn from changes or failures and adapt to identify new solutions that work? The workplace is filled with wrong assumptions, failed products and experiments, and inaccurate forecasting data. Since failure is a natural part of the creative process, learning to flexibly maneuver past these obstacles will increase your organization's ability to succeed.

Resilience has been associated with higher employee job satisfaction, employee engagement, and organizational commitment.⁵⁻⁶ Moreover, resiliency training has been shown to generate a 2:1 return on investment.⁶

Factors that develop and sustain resilience

Self-efficacy. A fundamental aspect of attaining aspirational goals is the belief that you have the capacity to achieve the goals. Managers can help employees develop self-efficacy by providing a fair and inclusive work environment where employees can feel secure and supported in their work. This can include setting fair expectations for both management and staff, providing constructive feedback, recognizing employee achievements, and building trust with the team.

Communication. Managers and staff should meet regularly with individuals to discuss work progress, challenges, and ways to provide support. Remember to stay positive and encouraging, and clearly communicate expectations, decisions, and work objectives. Managers should also strive to improve their active listening skills and solicit feedback.

Sense of purpose. Be transparent and explain the rationale behind important decisions, seek employee input, and provide employees with opportunities to discuss their thoughts or ideas. This approach can make employees feel heard and valuable, leading to higher engagement and productivity.

Emotional management. An important factor of resilience is developing emotional self-awareness and self-regulation to manage relationships between co-workers and clients. This can be developed by perspective-taking, learning to re-frame thoughts, and practicing mindfulness.⁷

Strategies to develop resiliency

Shift perspectives and reframe the problem.⁸ One of the most useful practices to overcome a challenging problem is to take a step back and approach the problem from a neutral standpoint. How would you advise someone else to overcome the problem? What tools/resources would they need? What would your expectations be for them? Many times, we react to a problem rather than respond.⁷ Another useful exercise is to label the feelings that arise from the problem. Does it make sense to feel this way? Labeling the feeling and deconstructing it can help with letting go and getting past the emotion itself and allow us to approach the problem in a clear and more positive state of mind.

Practice mindfulness. Mindfulness has been shown to help promote resiliency.⁹⁻¹⁰ Sometimes we can get caught in a mental loop with our inner critic. To get out of this cycle, change your focus from internal to external. Focus on the feeling of your feet on the ground, the feeling of your chest rising and falling as you breathe, or name three things that you see. If the negative thought is particularly invasive, try telling yourself "Stop!"

Treat yourself with compassion.¹⁰ When we encounter a tough problem, it can often trigger negative memories. Your brain triggers those past experiences to help you learn what works and does not work. Many times, we focus on the negative emotions from these memories and use them as ammunition to label ourselves, rather than our actions or decisions. Remember that you are not alone in these feelings, and that your mistakes make you human. Give yourself permission to be imperfect and forgive your mistakes – they are part of life and the human experience.

Take a break. To overcome difficult circumstances, we need to approach them with a clear and focused mind. Like any other muscle, our brains can become fatigued and operate at suboptimal levels. It is during these times that we have a higher risk of making poor decisions or reacting instead of responding. We can help protect ourselves from these mistakes by taking a short break, stepping away from the situation, and letting our mind recover. This is a good time for some relaxation breathing or a short walk outside.

Resiliency training. This learning process focuses on teaching individuals how to positively respond to and recover from challenges. Studies have shown that resiliency training is effective at reducing stress and anxiety, and improving work performance, mental health and well-being.¹¹ Many of these programs apply principles of mindfulness, self-compassion, and cognitive re-framing to help develop a more resilient approach to challenges. You can find a list of online resiliency training programs at the end of the article.

Regular guided conversations. Major aspects of a resilient workforce are employee engagement and manager support. To show support and maximize employee engagement, managers and staff should commit to regular check-ins and guided conversations. They should focus on current problems and how they are working to solve them, what they have learned that can be applied to their life and work in the future, and successful experiences and achievements.¹² These conversations are a great way to demonstrate concern and show support for employees. They also can be used to set expectations, assess work motivation and engagement, and recognize achievements. More importantly, these conversations provide an opportunity for the manager to receive feedback and learn what she can do to better equip employees for success.

Therapy. Sometimes you may face an insurmountable issue that cannot be overcome by yourself. In these cases, it can be helpful to see a qualified therapist or mental health professional. These providers can help you develop the skills you need to learn from experiences, overcome difficulties, and prepare for future challenges.

Resiliency training programs:

Mayo Clinic: <https://resilience.mayoclinic.org/>

University of Pennsylvania: <https://ppc.sas.upenn.edu/services/penn-resilience-training>

Army Master Resilience Training:

https://www.army.mil/article/36520/army_master_resilience_training_course_provides_valued_instruction

American Psychological Association: <https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience>

References.

1. Ungar M and Theron L. (2019) Resilience and Mental Health: How Multisystemic Processes contribute to Positive Outcomes. *Lancet Psych.*
2. Hougard R, et al. (2020) Build Your Resilience in the Face of a Crisis. *Harvard Business Review.*
3. Riopel, L (2020) Resilience Skills, Factors and Strategies of the Resilient Person.
<https://positivepsychology.com/resilience-skills/>
4. Bloomberg J. (2014) Innovation: The Flip Side of Resilience. *Time Magazine.*
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/jasonbloomberg/2014/09/23/innovation-the-flip-side-of-resilience/#24be91914d9a>
5. Goh J, Pfeffer J, Zenios SA. (2015) The Relationship Between Workplace Stressors and Mortality and Health Costs In The United States. *Management Science.*
6. Masten AS, Cutuli JJ, Herbers JE, Reed MG. (2009) 12 Resilience in Development. *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology.*
7. Fernandez R (2016) 5 Ways to Boost Your Resilience at Work. *Harvard Business Review.*
8. Building your Resilience. <https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience>
9. Hauck C (2016) How People Learn to Increase Their Resilience. <https://www.mindful.org/how-people-learn-to-increase-their-resilience/>
10. Jacobs, T (2015) Evidence Mounts that Mindfulness Breeds Resilience.
https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/evidence_mounts_that_mindfulness_breeds_resilience
11. Kopans, D (2016) How to Evaluate, Manage, and Strengthen your Resilience. *Harvard Business Review.* Center for Workplace Mental Health. Resilience: A Strong Workforce Needs It. American Psychiatric Association Foundation. <http://workplacementalhealth.org/Mental-Health-Topics/Resilience>
12. Sluss D, Powley E (2020) Build Your Team's Resilience – From Home. *Harvard Business Review.*