

# MANAGE THE PRESSURE – and find your resilience

How resilient are you in the face of workplace pressures that can erode wellbeing? Business psychologist **Dr Ivan Robertson** considers how leaders can respond to pressure and increase their natural resilience

**F**or leaders in today's public sector, periods of intense pressure have become a fact of life.

Whether you are a senior police officer leading in a climate of terrorist threat, working for a minister who demands everything yesterday or part of a civil service that is downsizing while steadily setting more difficult targets – pressure is a given.

But pressure is different to stress and can, when managed well, be a challenging and motivating force. When we say to colleagues "I'm feeling stressed out at the moment", what we usually mean is that we are under pressure. It is only when pressure exceeds your ability to cope that stress occurs. The reality is that there will always be some aspects of work that you cannot control – your workload, who your boss is, the amount of autonomy you have, your job security – but there are always things you can do to manage how resilient you are to these potential sources of pressure.

When I talk about resilience, I don't mean the well-trodden path of "working smarter", prioritising more effectively and having regular breaks. Although these are all sensible things to do, what I am talking about is how resilient you are in the face of the workplace pressures that can erode your supply of psychological wellbeing.

It is no good if leaders only perform in a crisis when everyone is looking at them. Leadership is not like being an athlete where you can use the pressure of the big occasion to perform and then relax afterwards. It requires more consistent levels of performance. When things are quiet, leaders need to be motivating, when things are chaotic they need to be a steadying influence and in a crisis they need to be strong and provide direction. And after the crisis, they can't go missing because the whole thing was too much for them. They need to keep going. That is resilience.

So where does resilience come from and how can you improve yours?

Like the answer to the age-old question about nature versus nurture, the reality is that a person's level of resilience is determined by a combination of their personality (nature) and their experience (nurture). Their actual behaviour is then a consequence of how the two interact. Research by Judge and others (2002) has established the link between certain personality factors and leadership effectiveness, by showing that the most effective leaders are more outgoing, more open to experience and more emotionally stable. And it is this final personality factor of emotional stability (the opposite end of the spectrum being neuroticism) that is particularly important in the area of resilience. When the pressure builds, those who are able to manage their emotions cope the best.

So personality is important, but you can learn how to respond to pressure and therefore increase your

natural resilience regardless of your personality. For example, one of the key tests for all leaders is how they deal with success and failure – not whether they celebrate or commiserate appropriately, but how they deal with it psychologically and whether that leaves them ready for the next challenge.

When people fail, a psychological process called "attribution" kicks in, whereby they explain to themselves why failure occurred.

Psychologists have identified different attributional styles and the particular style that leaders adopt has a big effect on how resilient they are in the face of failure.

Imagine you have just presented to the top team in your organisation and it did not go well. You fluffed your lines, the senior managers were not engaged and you did not have enough time to finish your presentation. There are a number of ways in which you can interpret your performance:

Think about what happened and ask yourself – was it...

- Temporary or permanent? Was it a one-off where nothing felt right on the day or are you just no good at this stuff?
- Specific or global? Was there something specific you did wrong like not listen to the brief properly, not practise enough or are you just a poor presenter?
- Internal or external? Was it all your fault or were there some external factors that were beyond your control? For example, you were not briefed properly.

So the way in which you process failure can have a major influence on how you experience and deal with it. The best leaders have a positive attributional style for failure where they see its causes as specific, internal/external and temporary. It is also important to adopt the right attributional style for successes, the causes of which are seen by good leaders as permanent, global and internal.

So the message is that pressure is inevitable, but without it most of us would not get out of bed in the morning. Given that pressure is here to stay, the key is to manage it effectively by understanding your natural levels of resilience and adopting effective approaches to coping with pressure and maintaining your psychological wellbeing.

This is a significant and important learning process for public sector leaders to undertake, but it can put them in a position to deliver high levels of sustainable leadership performance and, most importantly, to be there, firing on all cylinders when their team really needs them.

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# On the fast track to learning leadership

Public sector leaders are equipping themselves with the skills to tackle complex challenges, says **Adrian Pulham**, director of education and training with the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy



The Prime Minister threw down a challenge to central government in February 2004 when he said: "The talented amateur, however talented, is simply not equipped for complex, specialised tasks. In future the key roles in finance, IT and human resources will be filled by people with a demonstrable professional track record in tackling major organisational change."

But what did he mean and what has happened since 2004 to professionalise the civil service?

The finance director in today's rapidly changing public services needs core skills in leadership, strategy, operational and performance management as well as financial knowledge in taxation, audit and accountability. In future, all senior financial posts will require successful candidates to have a professional accountancy qualification and this process has already started.

Aware of the challenges presented to the civil service, CIPFA teamed up with Warwick Business School and, guided by the Treasury, developed a fast-track postgraduate diploma in public finance and leadership.

The course was launched in October 2004, and was designed to enable financial leaders in central government – as well as in other public and voluntary services – to obtain the Warwick postgraduate diploma. Students also gain the CIPFA professional accountancy qualification, which leads to membership of the world's only accountancy institute for financial managers working in the public sector.

Now in its second year, the course has more than


50 participants drawn from senior public servants in the DTI, DWP, DfID, Home Office, and local and regional government. The first group are due to sit their final exams around now.

The course, taught through nine three-day intensive residential modules at Warwick Business School over a two-year period, enables students to reinforce technical skills, but also to put the finance function in the context of wider policy and leadership issues. The CIPFA qualification is the only one taught by lecturers with public sector professional backgrounds. Each module examines a different theme in the finance function but also coaches students on public leadership, and how to deal with financial and information management.


Invariably, students want to gain the professional finance qualification – but also they are seeking to acquire the skills to lead teams and encourage them to be as entrepreneurial with resources as possible. It is about using professional skills in the context of public leadership and management. What is important is the link between professional knowledge and the capacity to make complex decisions.

The course has already received some excellent feedback from students, and its appeal is widening to include other public service organisations, including local authorities, the health service, charities and housing groups.

With this course and diploma, tomorrow's public service leaders are on their way to tackle the complex challenges that affect government at all levels.



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