

Resilience matters – where does yours come from?

People are either good at coping in difficult situations or they're not – right? Wrong, says **Ivan Robertson**

How resilient are you? How well do you deal with adversity and recover after setbacks? One thing is for sure – if you're working in the public sector, the usual demands from constant change and heavy workload will be intensified over the next year or two and your resilience will be challenged even more. Public servants and their organisations are in for a tough time.

So, I'll ask the question again – how resilient do you think you are? If you're a manager in the public sector, how resilient do you think the people in your workforce are?



Let's start with what resilience isn't about. There is a widely held belief that people are either resilient or not – and that's it! This is a serious misunderstanding, because in certain situations some people would be very resilient, whereas in others they might feel under extreme pressure and cope very badly. It's important to get the job/person match right.

For example, consider a couple of different work situations. In the first we have a role where someone has to deal firmly with colleagues and the public on decisions that are inflexible, controversial and often make people upset or angry. In this role the job holder needs to be able to stick to a "party line" and resist pressure to change track. Someone who is confident, structured, not easily persuaded, and conscientious will cope well. On the other hand, a different role may require the job holder to make quick and creative decisions and to be flexible, perhaps having to re-think his or her whole approach in midstream. In this role, our conscientious, firm and structured colleague above would struggle to cope and be very unlikely to enjoy the role. So people are not simply more or less resilient than each other – it's more complicated than that because they find resilience in the face of different types of situations by drawing on different aspects of their personalities.

In the model that my university spin-off company Robertson Cooper uses, the key aspects of personality important in determining resilience are:

- Confidence: having feelings of competence, effectiveness in coping with stressful situations and strong self-esteem. The frequency with which individuals experience positive and negative emotions is also key
- Adaptability: flexibility and adapting to changing situations beyond our control. In many situations resilience involves coping well with change and recovering from its impact
- Purposefulness: having a clear sense of purpose, values, drive and direction help individuals to persist and achieve in the face of setbacks
- Social support: being able to build good relationships with others and get support from them can help overcome adversity.

So we can't simply categorise people as resilient or not resilient. Their resilience will depend on the situation, what demands it makes and how well their underlying personality equips them to deal with these demands. For example, during a bad week when things are looking particularly bleak I may draw mainly on confidence for my resilience, while you might take yours from a strong sense of purpose and the support you receive from your family.

But does that mean that people's resilience is fixed? No, it doesn't. People have a "resilience profile" in terms of things that their underlying personality naturally equips them to cope with most effectively, but resilience can be developed, widened and deepened.

Some of this can happen naturally, through life experiences. In fact, research has shown that both positive and negative experiences can help to build resilience. Studies by one of the key figures in positive psychology, Barbara Fredrickson, have shown that positive emotional experiences broaden our thought/action repertoire and build our psychological resources, so that we are better able to cope with adversity in future. Tough, negative experiences (what doesn't kill me makes me stronger) also help to build resilience – but only if they don't go on unrelentingly, are interspersed with periods of respite and have a clear and worthwhile purpose. And being resilient is not just about coping and being stoical – resilience provides a basis for succeeding and even thriving – rather than merely enduring difficult times.

Although resilience can be built through day-to-day experiences some more systematic support can make a big difference. Along with my colleagues, I work with many people and organisations helping them to build resilience and this can be done in various ways, with different tools and approaches. These include helping to build resilience on the job through managed challenge and stretch; identifying an employee's resilience profile using an online assessment tool; helping leaders and managers to ensure that their impact on their teams enhances resilience (rather than damaging it) and through resilience workshops teaching people core skills.

Whatever approach you and your organisation adopt, the most important point to recognise is that resilience is not dependent on the person alone or the situation that he or she works in – but how the two interact. Next time the pressure is on, use the areas above to think about where your own resilience comes from and how you can draw on it to ease the situation – it just might help.

- Robertson Cooper is to launch a free online personal resilience profile in May. To register your interest email sophie.armond@robertsoncooper.com

Ivan Robertson is managing director of Robertson Cooper Ltd www.robertsoncooper.com

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