RESILIENCE AT WORK
Navigating a Dynamic World

Dr. Alan Graham, Ph.D.

Karlin Sloan
CEO, Sloan Group International

Sloan Group International serves leaders, managers, and individual contributors in organizations around the world through executive coaching, team facilitation, leadership development programs and assessments.
What is Resilience, and why is it important?

The Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate® Dictionary, Eleventh Edition defines resilience as, “an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.” Reivich and Shatte identify four uses for resilience. Many individuals must call on their reserves of resilience to overcome the negative experiences of their childhood. Abuse, divorce, poverty, and neglect can weigh heavy on those who have experienced any of them during childhood. Resilience helps to contain the damage of these experiences and help the individual live the life they want. Resilience also helps us steer through the everyday stresses and hassles that fill modern life. A third use of resilience is to help us bounce back from adverse events such as job loss, divorce, a death in the family. We can become either helpless or resigned to our fate or can use our internal resources to bounce back. Finally, resilience helps us reach out into the world and find renewed purpose and meaning in life. This allows us to achieve what we are capable of.

There has been much research in the past fifty years about resilience, mostly about children growing up in difficult circumstances. How did at least a third of these children become successful, resilient adults? Researchers, such as Werner (1982) and Garmezy (1974), identify a number of positive protective factors that are common to these children. Primarily, there was a caretaker in their environment who believed in them, such as a parent, relative or teacher. These kids also had a positive social support network, such as involvement in a church or community group. What traits do these kids display? They feel confident in their ability to problem solve, make decisions and communicate. They are empathic, work well with others and are willing to ask for help and give help. Additionally, they view mistakes as obstacles to overcome; they set realistic goals and they are internally driven.

So, if an individual did not have someone who believed in them or had little social support and has few resilient traits, is that individual doomed to a life of adversity and misery? More and more evidence is indicating that this is not the case. Martin Seligman, in Learned Optimism (1990) determined that resilience skills can be learned. While we cannot change the events of our past or the world around us, we can change the way we think about those events. One of the ways we can start changing our resilience mindset is to be more realistic in our thinking. By accurately assessing one’s own strengths, identifying the true causes of problems and evaluating oneself and others, we get a truer picture of the events unfolding around us and our level of control over those events.

Many people tend to view events in an overly positive way while many others are overly pessimistic. Reivich and Shatte believe that developing “realistic optimism,” the ability to maintain a positive outlook without denying reality, actively appreciating the positive aspects of a situation without ignoring the negative aspects, helps to build resilience. In “The Resilience Factor” (2002), they offer seven skills an individual can learn that can build resilience.

1. Learning your ABCs – a technique whereby you learn to identify your thoughts and how they affect your feelings and behavior
2. Avoiding thinking traps – a technique to identify the thinking mistakes that people regularly make when faced with adversity
3. Detecting icebergs – a technique for identifying deep beliefs and determining when they are or are not working
4. Challenging beliefs – a technique to test the accuracy of your beliefs
5. Putting it in perspective – a technique to deal with the “what-ifs” so you are better prepared to deal with the real problems that come along.

6. Calming and focusing – a technique designed to help you stay calm and focused during stressful times.

7. Real-time resilience – a technique whereby you can quickly change your counter-productive thoughts into more resilient ones.

Positive psychology research has identified more techniques that can build positive emotion and optimism. Seligman and Peterson have examined the “Three Good Things” procedure as a means for boosting optimism. In this exercise, an individual writes down, on a daily basis, three good things that happened that day. Next to each entry, the person writes down why the good thing went well. In this way, the writer comes to see that they had an impact on the event. This method has been shown to build positive emotion and optimism over time as long as the individual continues to practice this exercise. Just like with physical exercise, we need to exercise our optimism “muscles.”

By continuing to “work out,” we build our resilience and are better able to overcome our negative past experiences, steer through the everyday stress of life, bounce back from adverse events, and reach out into the world and achieve our purpose.
What is the organizational impact of Resilience?

We all need resilience, but leaders in particular need to understand how resilience – or change-readiness – can make them and their organizations successful over time. Leaders need to understand how to develop resilience in their teams and in their organizations as well as cultivating their own ability to bounce back from change and challenge.

In 2007 Luthans, Youssef and Avolio published Psychological Capital, a book designed to help leaders and managers gain competitive advantage through the people in the organization. They define psychological capital, or PsyCap, as, an individual’s positive psychological state of development and is characterized by: (1) having confidence (self-efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks; (2) making a positive attribution (optimism) about succeeding now and in the future; (3) persevering toward goals and, when necessary, redirecting paths to goals (hope) in order to succeed; and (4) when best by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (resiliency) to attain success.¹

One of the components of PsyCap is resilience. In an increasingly challenging business and global environment where things seem to be changing at warp-speed, the ability to bounce back, to be resilient becomes more and more of a requirement for success. If managers and leaders work to build psychological capital, not only will employees feel psychologically happier but they will be more productive and thus, the organization will be more successful.

The American Psychological Association, through its sponsorship of the Psychologically Healthy Workplace Program highlights the business case for investing and developing talent within the organization. The Psychologically Healthy Workplace Program is designed to identify and recognize organizations that invest and develop their employees and educate organizations that would like to become more “psychologically healthy”. This is not just a “touchy-feely” thing to do, it has measurable business benefits. The program identifies five factors that make up a psychologically healthy workplace. These are: (1) employee involvement in the decisions and direction of the organization; (2) recognizing employees for their contributions to the organization; (3) investing in employee growth and development; (4) attending to the health and safety of the workforce; and (5) supporting work-life balance within the organization.

A review of past winners of the National Psychologically Healthy Workplace Awards (PHWA) reveals that in 2008, the winners reported an average turnover rate of 11% compared to 40% nationally, only 21% of their employees reported chronic work stress compared to 34% nationally, and PHWA winners reported an 82% employee satisfaction rate compared to 66% nationally.²

¹Luthans, Fred; Youssef, Carolyn; and Avolio, Bruce. Psychological Capital. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) p.3

The resilience model for the RAWA is based on the biopsychosocial model described by psychiatrist George Engel (1977). He suggested that to understand medical issues, one needs to consider the physical, psychological and sociological factors that contribute to the illness. Our research has suggested that we can think about resilience in the same way. How we care for our bodies, think about ourselves and those around us all contribute to our ability to be resilient.

After reviewing the research described above on resilience, we created a list of attributes that resilient people display. We divided these attributes into three categories: attributes associated with how we relate to ourselves (the psychological self); how we relate to others (the social self) and how we relate to events in the environment (the context).

The following section contains a list of the 15 attributes we identified and how we distributed them among the three domains.
Attributes of Resilience

**Relationship to Self (Psychological Self)**

**Confidence**
Being confident in our ability to cope with the world. Believing in our abilities, skills, or attributes and our capacity to succeed in what we set out to do.

**Optimism**
The ability to look on the more favorable side of events or conditions and to expect more favorable outcomes.

**Positivity**
Cultivating positive emotions to find the good in life and not dwell on the negative. The ability to hold onto positive emotions despite challenges.

**Self-awareness**
Having the ability to reflect on what we think and how we feel. This includes having an understanding of how we are perceived by others.

**Self-management**
Exhibiting self-care and managing our own energy and emotions. This includes adapting our behaviors to socially appropriate norms and exhibiting self-control.
Relationship to Others (Social Self)

**Appreciation**
The ability to express gratitude and say thanks to others. The ability to receive thanks and appreciations from others.

**Helping**
Providing support to those who need it. Caring for or assisting a friend or colleague builds confidence, community and trust.

**Accepting**
The ability to ask for and receive help from others.

**Collaboration**
Being a team player means sharing information and resources to achieve better results and make collaborators more engaged.

**Empathy**
The ability to put ourselves “in another’s shoes” and view the world as they see it.
The ability to shift our perspective, and see “reality” in a new light. Seeing challenges as learning opportunities encourages reasonable risk-taking, and fostering personal and professional growth.

Setting goals that gives us a compass to guide ourselves through life’s journey. By setting realistic goals, we have a better chance of reaching those goals.

The ability to envision new possibilities that get ourselves beyond the “here and now” and better able to put what is occurring in the present into better perspective.

The ability to test decisions to see if they are consistent with one’s values and beliefs.

Being able to think ahead to prevent possible problems and take advantage of opportunities. Taking charge of events rather than experiencing life as a victim of circumstance.
Our first task was to create items for each of the attributes. The challenge was to determine which items in the assessment had the greatest internal consistency and would assure us that we were getting valid and reliable responses. To identify the strongest items, we created 85 items (5 or 6 items for each attribute) and checked the Cronbach’s Alpha (a reliability coefficient statistic) for each item relative to the scale and subscale scores. We also had 101 people take a social desirability scale along with the 85 item assessment to determine whether we were getting a “halo effect”, and we found that as a group that respondents were generally honest and accurate in their responses. They were not trying to put themselves in an overly positive light. We have also gathered input about the design of the assessment and the generated report from multiple facilitators and coaches who have used the tool with individuals and teams.

After collecting this data and feedback, we took the 15 items (3 per attribute) that had the strongest reliability relative to the three scales that we were studying. These are the 45 items that we included in the RAWA. We recognized that having only three items in each subscale would lower the reliability of those subscales. We decided that it was more important to keep the length of the assessment short enough to be completed in under 15 minutes. The first version of the RAWA had 50 items, including 5 “research” items that we could evaluate for inclusion in later revisions of the assessment. After administering the assessment to 810 leaders, we obtained reliability values for the three domains. (Specific Cronbach’s Alpha scores based on a 2012 sample of 810 leaders: Full assessment = .914; Self = .798; Others = .839; Environment = .772.) We felt that these numbers were strong enough to feel confident that we had a reliable assessment with good face validity.

The leaders who took the first version of the RAWA come from the following demographic groups.
2013 Sample | AGE RANGE | 2015 Sample
--- | --- | ---
3.1% | 18 - 29 | 4.2%
18.4% | 30 - 39 | 24.8%
35.1% | 40 - 49 | 21.9%
32.0% | 50 - 59 | 32.0%
11.4% | 60 + | 6.9%

2013 Sample | EDUCATION | 2015 Sample
--- | --- | ---
1.3% | High School Graduate | 2.5%
6.6% | Some college | 6.2%
2.2% | Associates | 2.1%
31.1% | Bachelors | 42.7%
58.8% | Masters | 41.7%
0.0% | Doctoral | 4.2%

2013 Sample | ETHNICITY | 2015 Sample
--- | --- | ---
2.2% | Black/African-American | 5.2%
5.7% | Hispanic/Latino | 2.4%
7.0% | Asian/Pacific Islander | 8.0%
0.4% | Native American or Alaskan | 0.5%
84.6% | White/Caucasian | 76.4%
0.0% | Not Specified | 6.2%

*Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding*
Three Factors

To further refine the assessment, we ran an exploratory factor analysis on the data we collected from these 810 leaders. We found that the responses clustered around three factors: Positive Explanatory Style, Negative Explanatory Style and Physical Resilience.

The stories we tell ourselves reflect our mindset and our worldview, and they are called “explanatory style.” How do you explain your circumstances? Your history? Your future? Do you describe yourself as powerful, capable, and adaptive? Do you see others as supportive or helpful? Do you view failures as opportunities to learn? Do you tend to see a glass as half-empty, or half-full?

We further identified subscales within the factors. Within the Positive Explanatory Style factor, we identified two subscales: “Positive Stories About Me” and “Positive Stories About Others.” Within the Negative Explanatory Style factor, we identified two subscales: “Negative Self-Talk” and “Derailers.” We identified derailers as more strongly worded negative self statements (i.e. I can never achieve the goals that are set for me at work).

The third factor, Physical Resilience, has no subscales and appears to account for about 10% of total resilience. We determined that the aspects of physical resilience that we assess in the RAWA are related to how leaders take care of themselves (i.e. getting enough sleep, exercising, etc.). Since the RAWA is actually a snapshot of an individual’s resilience at the time, we surmise that the self-care practices assessed here do not play as big a role in an individual’s resilience in the short term as it does over time.

Findings

As a result of our subsequent research with the RAWA, we have found that some of these attributes are more heavily correlated with overall resilience than others. The three attributes that strongly correlated with overall resilience are: purposeful, future minded and collaborative. This finding suggests that individuals who have a strong sense of purpose, are able to envision new possibilities and effectively collaborate with others are more likely to be resilient.

There are seven of the attributes that are moderately correlated with overall resilience. These attributes are: self-management, self-awareness, appreciative, helpful, empathy, reframes, and goal-oriented. This finding indicates that individuals who exhibit these traits contribute to overall resilience but individually may not have as strong an impact on resilience.
Correlations between resilience and age, education, gender, ethnicity or level of management

We also looked at the demographic data from the 2015 sample and studied whether there is any correlation between resilience and age, education, gender, ethnicity or level of management in the organization. We discovered a number of positive correlations. It is important to note that correlation does not equal causation. We know that the phenomena exists, we do not have enough data to know whether one factor causes the other.

What is also important to understand is what is not correlated. We found that there is no correlation between a leader’s ethnicity and their level of resilience. Also, there is no correlation between men and women leaders and their level of resilience.

Total Resilience by Level of Management

The graph below displays the level of resilience found among individuals at varying levels of management within organizations. The trend line clearly indicates that the more people that a leader manages, the greater is their level of overall resilience. Our data cannot determine whether leaders become more resilient as they move up in an organization or that the more resilient leaders move up in an organization. The data merely indicates that there is a correlation.
Positive Explanatory Style by Level of Management

The graph below displays the extent that leaders utilize a positive explanatory style to manage their world compared to the level of management they hold within their organizations. The trend line clearly indicates that the more people that a leader manages, they are more likely to utilize a positive explanatory style to describe their experiences. When correlations between the subscales of Positive Explanatory Style and level of management were evaluated, the same positive trend held true. As one moves up in an organization, the more leaders utilize a positive explanatory style to describe themselves and their relationships with others.
Total Resilience by Age Range

A review of the graph below demonstrates that as a leader ages, they become more resilient. This suggests that as leaders gain more experience, they are better able to manage setbacks and move forward.
Positive Explanatory Style by Age Range

The graph below highlights the positive correlation between a leader’s positive explanatory style and their age. As a leader ages, they tend to utilize a positive explanatory style more often. This is also true for leaders as they age to use a positive explanatory style to describe their relationships with others.
The following graph illustrates the correlation between a leader’s level of education and their resilience. The trend line indicates that the higher the level of education that a leader has, the more resilience they display.
Physical Resilience by Level of Education

The graph below highlights the correlation between a leader’s level of education and their self-care practices (physical resilience). The data illustrates that the more education a leader has attained, the more they engage in the self-care practices that leads to physical resilience over time.

Summary

To date, more than 2000 leaders have taken the Resilience at Work Assessment. The most important findings that we have gathered from our work thus far has been the resilience attributes that contribute most to a leader’s resilience. Those three attributes are: Future-Minded, Purposeful and Collaborative. It reinforces for us that the most resilient leaders are those who look to the future, see their work as part of a bigger endeavor and are comfortable collaborating with others to move into the future. We have also found that the older and more educated the leader is, the more likely they will deal with setbacks with a positive mindset and ultimately, be more resilient.