

The Resilient Team

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All Praesta coaches have had senior level business careers – many were Board members, CEOs, partners or managing directors of major organisations in their first careers. Thorough training, continual professional development and regular supervision are integral to maintaining high standards. As well as one to one coaching, Praesta coaches work with teams, conduct board effectiveness reviews and are leaders in working with executive women.

Praesta Insights pull together ideas and experience about topical leadership issues in an accessible and digestible way. We work closely with leaders in different spheres on thought leadership. This publication has been researched and written by Praesta coaches Hilary Douglas and Peter Shaw.

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Introduction

At Praesta we focus on helping organisations to achieve sustainable change. Ideally, that means a partnership approach, including work with leadership teams. Concerted senior team effort has the potential to influence motivation, performance and culture for the longer term, whilst the impact of individual leaders risks fading with their departure.

In this Insight document we share observations from working with executive and senior teams over many years and through changing contexts. We set out ten characteristics we notice in teams that stay resilient. Our suggested factors for success are not intended to be comprehensive: our aim is to stretch team thinking about what is possible.

The Changing Context

Expectations on leadership teams in all sectors are heavier than ever. There are stakeholders and regulators to be satisfied, reputations to be protected and always the finances to be watched. The pace of events is such that there is constant pressure to make rapid judgments and deliver at speed. There is a premium on a leader's ability to anticipate what may be coming down the track. Transformational change becomes a way of life rather than a once-a-decade event. Resilient teams have a crucial role to play - particularly at the top of organisations, but also at any level where teams carry significant levels of responsibility.

We notice that teams which stay resilient:

- 1 Know what the team is for, and what can only be done by the team acting together**
- 2 Balance planning the longer term and dealing with the here and now**
- 3 Work together to turn plans into reality**
- 4 Are proactive in response to a changing environment**
- 5 Pay attention to values and behaviours**
- 6 Engage effectively with stakeholders**
- 7 Build capability for sustainable change in the organization**
- 8 Understand and apply effective governance**
- 9 Maintain momentum as team members change**
- 10 Look after their own well-being.**

We look at each of these characteristics in more detail below, and conclude with a linked list of ten questions for teams to ask themselves.

1 Know what the team is for, and what can only be done by the team acting together

When we start working with a senior team, we often ask each member how they would describe the team's purpose, and whether they think those above and below them would recognise the description. We sometimes find there has been no collective discussion about the team's purpose, because team members are too busy reacting to the pressures and deadlines of everyday business. Resilient teams discuss what the organisation and the wider world needs them to do, to fulfil the trust vested in them. They see teamwork as a route to high performance, not an end in itself.

These teams ask themselves: "What is important and can be done only if we act together, as a group or subgroups?"

When they address this question, they usually conclude that they are the only people who, by working together, can:

- set strategic direction for the organisation or their area within it
- work out and resource a forward plan, and actively manage risks to its success
- manage key relationships, upwards, sideways and externally
- build the capability of teams below them, so they can take delegated responsibility with confidence
- ensure that as a team they draw on their collective abilities and learn from each other.

Team members may go on to articulate what is important and can only be done by their leader - which will probably include coaching them individually and in a group, and ensuring that time together is focused on their priorities. The team are also likely to look to the leader to judge when discussion has to stop, and a decision must be taken.

Resilient teams are ruthless about asking if the team is adding value on a particular issue. They do not spend their time doing things which could be done by others, given the right guidance. If they are uncertain about others' capability, they focus on the motivation and performance management challenge. If decisions have to be taken about poor performance, they support each other in having the difficult conversations. Even in a crisis, they are very clear about where their input is most needed, and when they are at risk of getting in the way. They recognise when it is best to act jointly and when individually.

Warning signs:

- vagueness about the purpose of the team
- lack of strategic direction
- team members operate in silos.

2 Balance planning the longer term and dealing with the here and now

Successful teams know their reputation depends on effective day to day delivery, but they also know the risks of being in constant fire-fighting mode. Whatever the pressures, they insist on making time for reflection on the longer-term expectations which others have of them, and the capabilities they will need to get there. If they set aside time to stand back, they can, for example, think into a future where strategic goals have not been achieved and review what the derailleurs might have been. Answers often include an inability to read the environment, a failure to manage key relationships, or a delay in developing and motivating key people.

It may emerge that the goals are far more challenging than anticipated, and require the team to reframe their approach. The discussion allows the team to plan proactively for a better outcome, explore how to manage risk, and review where their collective attention needs to be.

Occasionally, teams run the risk that they enjoy 'blue sky' thinking so much that it detracts from managing the here and now well. Addressing current reality head on will always be critical for an effective team. The balance between strategic planning and operational delivery will vary over time, but it will always be 'both and' and not 'either or'.

Warning signs

- little sign of grip on day to day events
- lack of time for horizon-scanning
- failure to anticipate risks, and lack of contingency planning.

The team were overseeing a complex project which was constantly in the public eye. Tight delivery deadlines and a multiplicity of stakeholders meant they risked spending too little time looking ahead together. Their leader insisted on putting regular reflection time in the diary. On one occasion, the team imagined a future where they had not been successful, and brainstormed what the problems were most likely to have been. Some serious risks emerged, which they would not otherwise have thought of. The team agreed action to reduce those risks, and kept them on the agenda from then on.

3 Work together to turn plans into reality

Good planning amounts to little if it is not followed through. Resilient teams commission detailed planning and assure themselves that resources are in the right place, roles and accountabilities are explicit, and interdependencies are mapped. They define what success will look like, choose their performance indicators, and decide how to monitor progress.

Team members care about the collective goals, and put effort into joint problem-solving and cross-boundary working. They take collective responsibility and don't shirk difficult decisions. These behaviours run through every interaction, whether in or outside of the team meetings. Each discussion includes clear next steps, accountability for actions and defined expectations about progress before the next meeting.

Warning signs:

- decisions are not owned by the team
- the team is not clear about the management information it needs
- the team feels battered by external events and unable to move forward.

4 Are proactive in response to a changing environment

Resilient teams constantly scan the horizon and ensure they have the capability to change course if the situation requires. They ask the difficult questions of themselves, learn from mistakes and move on. They face into difficult issues and do not ignore them or run away from them. They help each other to think things through calmly and to judge whether rapid action or a more measured response will win the day. There is an old Army saying: “plans are worthless but planning is everything.” When the unexpected happens, you have to be ready to adapt to the new reality. The original plan may have to be dropped or amended, but the process of planning will have provided a good understanding of what levers can be pulled, and how fast.

Effective teams accept that a change of plan requires more than a new set of tasks. People in the organisation need to understand why something different is now being asked of them. External commentators need to be persuaded of the reasons for a change of direction. Good communications are as essential in this context as on a battlefield.

Warning signs:

- plans are rigid and inviolate
- external commentators are ignored and dismissed
- hints of complacency are evident.

5 Pay attention to values and behaviours

Teams are made up of a set of successful individuals, each with their own personalities and each with their own strengths and weaknesses. They will not naturally form a collaborative group; indeed they may each instinctively prefer to do their own thing. Yet if asked about great teams they have been part of in the past, most will say they enjoyed being part of something bigger that everybody cared about. Time and again they identify the importance of mutual trust - or at least enough trust to air their differences and take a constructive approach to resolving conflict.

Trust does not happen overnight. Team members need to work at it, knowing they will be more effective as a result. Key ingredients include:

- acknowledging the risks of groupthink, or domination by the loudest voices
- being open to challenge and taking strength from each others' input
- listening with curiosity to what others have to say, and acknowledging when others have better ideas
- showing genuine interest in where others are coming from and how to get the best out of each other.
- working with the preferences of different personality types to get best results: for example, ensuring that the more expressive members of the team give the quieter personalities space to share their ideas.
- being self-aware and welcoming feedback on how others experience them
- learning together and coaching each other in a culture of continuous improvement
- living by a set of shared values or behaviour norms, and modelling these to others
- giving each other authority to challenge in group discussions, according to the agreed values.

To summarise, these team members are committed to each others' success, because this commitment gives the team as a whole the best chance of succeeding. They combine the humility to learn from others with a clear sense of personal responsibility.

Warning signs:

- negative gossip and backbiting
- absence of mutual trust
- unwillingness to share when things don't go well.

Two senior teams from different organisations needed to work more effectively together. Trust was at a low ebb. They came to a facilitated session with a huge degree of scepticism. The breakthrough came when they were asked to describe their hopes and frustrations - and discovered these were almost identical. They realised they were more likely to succeed if they collaborated on the shared challenges. They began to work on a joint agenda, building trust along the way.

6 Engage effectively with stakeholders

It is not enough for the team to work well together. To achieve their goals, they need to influence others, whether commissioners, funders, shareholders, customers or regulators. Each team member may work with their own set of relationships, but at the strategic level there is value in taking a systematic look at the key stakeholders together.

Team members pool their insights into the drivers and success factors for each stakeholder, and what it would take to build good collaboration with that person or organisation. They recognise it may not be enough to have a compelling logical argument in order to win some stakeholders over. It may be more important, for example, to offer an organisation something that enhances their external reputation, or to give a group of customers the satisfaction of knowing they have been heard.

Team members agree who will take the lead in each of the relationships, how others can contribute, and which relationships can be delegated. They ensure that if there are multiple interactions with the same stakeholder, the message remains consistent, and everyone is kept informed.

Warning signs:

- lack of consistency in external messaging
- a haphazard approach to stakeholders
- the customer is tolerated and not embraced.

7 Build capability for sustainable change in the organization

It goes without saying that successful organisations need highly motivated employees, with the mix of skills to match future challenges. If the leadership team do not pay attention to this, no one else will.

Building capability requires understanding current strengths and development needs, and predicting as far as possible what future requirements may be. Recruitment, training and succession strategies follow - with the team members expected to set an example in effective coaching and performance management. This may involve team members recognising a need for refresher training in managing difficult conversations, so that they can coach others.

When seeking to motivate others, senior team members need to recognise that individuals' drivers and views about success may be different from theirs. Some people care most about career progression, while others want to develop new skills. Most want to feel valued at work and to know that their managers see them as people, not task machines. Achievements need to be celebrated, not taken for granted.

Expectations on individuals and teams must be clear to everyone, and result from open discussion about priorities and resources. They should be reviewed regularly in the light of new developments.

When there are changes in prospect, nearly everyone feels apprehensive. They want to know about the big picture and the reasons for change, but they also want to know what it means for them as individuals. They need to be assured that managers are not hiding anything, that there will be opportunities to share in shaping the future, and that people will be treated fairly.

An effective team develops the narrative, speaks with one voice, and devotes time to answering people's questions through every available means of communication. They recognise the shadow they cast as a team and that others will be mirroring their approach and behaviours. Trust is again the key word. People will go a long way for leaders they trust.

Warning signs:

- expectations are vague and not communicated clearly
- training and coaching are not embedded in the team's approach
- succession planning is given a low priority.

The senior team led an organisation of technical experts. In a fast changing environment, the business needed to change its traditional ways of working, but the team knew they would meet passive resistance. They took time out, and imagined what it would feel like to be different groups of employees and managers: what would motivate each group, what would they be worried about, and what might they most need from the leadership? The exercise felt strange at first, but was helped by team members who had once worked further down the hierarchy. It led to some big changes in their engagement strategy.

8

Understand and apply effective governance

Effective governance is necessary for senior teams to ensure they comply with their legal duties, but it goes much further than that. Accountabilities are written down and are unambiguous. A well-planned forward agenda encourages focus on the team's priorities, and ensures that less important decisions are not delayed by being referred upwards. An agreed format for written papers supports good decision-making. Fit-for-purpose processes and policies mean teams can avoid wasting effort on returning to first principles on every issue. Decision-making and monitoring is supported by the right data, in usable form. The chair brings all discussions to a conclusion with recorded actions, and everyone abides by the decision outside of the meeting.

Members of effective teams regard their meetings as productive, because they are focused on the things that only they can do. These teams are not afraid to invite scrutiny from time to time from independent observers - indeed they value the insights this can bring.

Team members expect their own performance to be judged by their contribution to team success, and by their leadership of the teams supporting them.

Warning signs:

- papers and meetings are unplanned
- external scrutiny is seen as an unnecessary diversion
- governance and oversight is seen as mere bureaucracy.

9 Maintain momentum as team members change

It is not unusual for a strong team to lose momentum when one or two key players leave. There can be a sense that everyone has to start again, and even that there is no point in starting until the gaps are filled. Resilient teams spot the trap. They keep their good practices going because they cannot let performance stall.

The continuing members give even more attention to supporting each other through the transition. Their values and ways of working are a critical part of the induction of new arrivals - whilst welcoming the fresh perspectives that new colleagues can bring. Dynamics, insights and ways of working change with different personalities but the underlying purpose remains.

Warning signs:

- teams revert to silo working whilst waiting for vacancies to be filled
- new team members feel their views are unwelcome
- too much harking back to the 'good old days' - or too much rubbishing of the past.

10 Look after their own well-being

Teams in demanding situations are under constant pressure. They need to sustain the physical and mental well-being of all their members, for the sake of the whole organisation. Exhaustion and stress in a senior team are a drain on everyone's vitality and rarely lead to good decision-making.

All teams need a conscious strategy for recharging batteries as a team and as individuals. Team members watch out for each other to ensure each member gets downtime. They look for danger signals, such as frequent 4am emails, or emotional outbursts. Team success matters so much to them that they instinctively move to support a colleague in difficulty.

Warning signs:

- there is competition about who works the longest hours or takes the shortest holidays
- instant reactions prevail over considered responses
- time for team reflection is given low priority.

On the next page, we conclude with ten questions, linked to the ten characteristics.

Key questions for teams to ask themselves

- 1 Do we all agree on what the team is for and where we need to focus our collective attention?
- 2 Are we taking enough time to think about the future, alongside this week's challenges?
- 3 Does the organization see us focussed on delivery together, and taking collective ownership of decisions?
- 4 Are we flexible in responding quickly, when circumstances change?
- 5 Are we explicit enough about our values and behaviours?
- 6 Do we need to take a strategic look at how we engage with stakeholders?
- 7 How do we best engage our people, and build future capability?
- 8 Do our governance arrangements serve us effectively?
- 9 When team members change, how do we ensure that momentum is enhanced and not diminished?
- 10 Are we truly committed to each others' success and wellbeing? What are the consequences if we are not?

Some suggestions for further reading

100 Great Team Effectiveness Ideas

by Peter Shaw, Marshall Cavendish, 2015

The Reluctant Leader

by Peter Shaw and Hilary Douglas, Canterbury Press, 2016

Superteams

by Khoi Tu, Penguin Books, 2012

Systematic Team Coaching

by Peter Hawkins, Kogan Press, 2011

Senior Leadership Teams

Wageman et al, Harvard Business School Press, 2008

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team

by Patrick Lencioni, Jossey-Bass, 2002



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Hilary and Peter also draw from their experience of senior non-executive leadership roles: Hilary is a Vice Chair of the British Red Cross and Peter is Chair of the Guildford Cathedral Council.

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