

How resilient are your leaders?

Written by Declan Woods, Managing Director, Board & Executive Coaching, Penna Plc. and first appeared in Penna Perspectives, Issue 4, Feb 2012.

Let's be honest. Who hasn't experienced stress in today's fast-paced world of work and wished they had more resilience? If this describes you, you are not alone. According to the HSE (the national health and safety watchdog), the number of people reporting experiencing work related stress appears to have doubled since the early 1990s.

A straw-poll among Penna's Executive Coaches supports this view and highlights that work-related stress - a harmful reaction to undue demands placed on people at work – is on the increase. Research has shown that one of the major causes of work related stress is the impact of leaders and their skills to manage it. It is important executives take note because they have a moral duty to ensure their people are not made ill by work as well a legal one.

While leaders can safeguard against stress, they are not impervious to it themselves. It is a bygone fallacy that leaders have endless stamina to cope with the demands organization's place on them. Leaders can all-too easily burn out if they ignore the signs they are reaching their limits. If leaders possess a significant role in protecting others from stress, then they must learn to look after themselves. Recognizing the different forms resilience can take and knowing how to develop it are key capabilities for those leading people and organizations.

Many of us associate resilience with the ability to endure excessively long working hours. One size does not fit all where resilience is concerned, however. What about the leader whose career takes an unexpected path and who is not promoted despite everyone's (including their own) expectations or the manager who has a blip in otherwise outstanding performance. In some 'up or out' cultures, this might be enough to send people out the door almost irrespective of circumstances. Resilience in these circumstances can involve a "U-turn" or turnaround where flexibility and adaptability can prove real assets. The challenge here is less avoiding such situations rather overcoming them when things are going badly.

Who doesn't remember Jonny Wilkinson's last-minute drop-kick in the 2003 Rugby World Cup where England was at a critical turning point in the closing moments of the match? This situation required a different type of resilience: the ability to deal with a crucial event. Key to this is managing oneself –

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having the confidence to rely on your capabilities and focus your efforts at a specific time.

Many of Penna's executive coaching assignments have building greater leader resilience as part of them. They entail inquiring into what resilience is for a leader in a particular organizational context rather than the now somewhat outdated stance of increasing stress thresholds. There are positive ways that leaders can develop resilience:

- building awareness - listening and using our feelings to guide rather than dominate our behaviour and consciously choosing our response;
- Emotional intelligence: recognizing the impact you have on others and implications for maximizing/minimizing stressful environments;
- Wellbeing: paying attention to our own and others needs and maintaining well-being to ensure optimal work functioning and performance.

Stress is on the increase. This places a premium on leaders being able to recognize, manage and develop resilience in themselves, their people and the organizations they lead from which we can all benefit.

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