

McNally & Associates

LEADERSHIP NEWSLETTER

Build Resilience for Greater Leadership Effectiveness

Resilience—the ability to bounce back from difficult or challenging experiences, manage pressure and adapt quickly to change while continuing to produce excellent results—is a key ingredient to a successful tenure as CEO. More importantly, it can be learned and improved over time.

Resilience and Response to Organizational Change

What makes a person resilient? According to Diane L. Coutu, senior editor of the *Harvard Business Review*, the three fundamental qualities that characterize resilient people are accepting reality, finding meaning in difficult situations and making plans for a better future, and being able to improvise to solve problems.

Accepting reality, rather than defaulting to denial, leads to preparedness and effective planning. This active process involves questioning, eliciting multiple viewpoints and listening to answers. It requires a willingness to examine your personal responsibility in contributing to the situation, where appropriate, so that learning can occur.

There is a difference between seeing reality and accepting and acting on it. If feedback indicates that a problem has arisen, a resilient CEO acts swiftly when, for example, a “popular” direct report is not supporting the hospital’s goals or is undermining others’ success, or when a physician who admits a large number of patients is disruptive or disrespectful to the nursing staff.

Face the reality of undesirable situations by directly confronting them in the following ways:

1. Strive to reframe the situation so that a positive outcome can be visualized. A serious patient safety event is chilling to any CEO, but when he or she can see the potential for improving operations, reality is actionable and has a positive potential. For example, creating successful safety teams and training your employees in effective planning for crisis situations can strengthen or renew commitment to the overall mission of the organization.
2. Use reality, no matter how harsh, as a learning experience. Reflection about how leaders, including the CEO, may have contributed to the development of the situation can allow for personal growth of each leader.
3. Show pride in what is going well. Maintain a dashboard of results and, during times of crisis, reflect on the strengths of the organization and employ them.
4. Maintain close contact with operations and medical staff through rounding and ongoing discussions so that reality does not come to you as a shock.
5. Practice reflection and seek feedback regularly.

Consider introducing the concept of personal resilience to your leadership team and exploring its relevance to effective leadership style and presence. Resilience could even become a core leadership competency in your organization.

The second trait of resilient leaders is their ability to **find meaning in difficult situations**, identify the important lessons and use the learning in dealing with future challenges. To reap the benefits of this learning, and thus increase resilience, leaders need to experience the impact of the difficult situation, acknowledge their vulnerability and question their habitual or automatic responses. For example, after a patient safety event, one resilient CEO acknowledged his contribution to the event, publicly committed to being a steward of patient safety, worked with clinical leaders in redesigning faulty processes and engaged board members in studying best practices.

When faced with challenging circumstances, you can react in three ways, says Jim Collins in his book *From Good to Great*:

- Dive—become permanently dispirited;
- Survive—try to return to normal; or
- Thrive—use the experience as a strengthening event.

One way to determine which approach you are likely to choose is by understanding your level of emotional intelligence—the ability to monitor your own feelings and emotions to guide your thinking and actions. A high level of emotional intelligence allows you to more readily find the meaningful components of a difficult situation.

People with a high emotional quotient tend to have a highly developed self-awareness and can build strategies to flourish in challenging environments. In other words, they can adapt. They continually reflect on their personal purpose and how their current endeavors affect their life's work. Successful adapters thrive during stress because they are fully present in the now, learning from every success and failure. Emotionally intelligent individuals engage in creative pursuits and lead multifaceted lives, so that a business failure does not equate to personal failure.

To enhance your emotional intelligence and fortify your resilience, develop a habit of mindfully reviewing the difficult situations of each day and asking yourself these four questions:

1. What was the dominant theme that drove the development of each difficult situation?
2. What direct or indirect influence did I have on each situation?
3. How is resilience, or lack thereof, a factor here?
4. What is the leadership learning I'm taking away from these situations?

Consider incorporating the above process into the regularly scheduled individual mentoring conversations you have with your direct reports and your leadership meeting agendas. Lead your staff in identifying the role crisis has in your organization and its culture. This will not only serve you well in your own career but it will also support your organization's health.

Third, resilient people are characterized by **the ability to improvise** and the willingness to let go of the familiar. They can call on their creativity and resourcefulness when solving problems. Resilient people believe in their ability to create a positive outcome and employ positive coping strategies to do what is necessary to produce good results. They explore alternatives rather than stick to one course of action. This quality can be applied directly to managing one's executive career. A resilient leader maintains a focus on the future, continually scanning the environment for emerging trends and organizational changes, and anticipates changes. For example, if a merger is in the future and job transition is possible, a resilient CEO reflects on work experiences, inventories his or her skills and competencies, envisions working in multiple settings and roles, engages in "what if" scenarios to develop strategies before changes are announced, and moves into action to pursue new opportunities.

Strategic planning exercises using different case scenarios can assist executives in fine-tuning their ability to adapt and create solutions. In addition, consider distributing suggested reading lists to your staff or have staff read books on the topic and hold monthly or bimonthly meetings to discuss them; holding meetings outside the office occasionally or planning a staff retreat to alter people's frames of reference and generate creativity; and visiting other hospitals across the country and attending national meetings to offer new venues for growth and encourage improvisation.

As CEOs cultivate their own resiliency, they encourage their organizations to become more resilient. Working to create an organizational culture focused on acknowledging reality, meaningful involvement, continuous learning and accessing creativity will allow employees to adapt to change quickly, respond with new solutions and thrive under heavy demands. Developing or improving resilience allows CEOs to have long and meaningful careers in the executive suite.

This article was originally published in the ACHE CEO Newsletter. Kimberly McNally, RN, is president of McNally & Associates, a Seattle-based firm that provides executive coaching, leadership development and retreat facilitation. She also serves as board president for an academic medical center. She can be reached at (206) 547-3133 or kamcnally@att.net.