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Resilience is Bouncing Forward
Prof Darren Dalcher
Series Article

Advances in Project Management Series[1]

Resilience as Bouncing Forward: Developing the capability to cope when bouncing back is no longer sufficient

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In recent years resilience appears to have proliferated the discourse in many domains and contexts to become the buzzword of choice. The term resilience is to be found in dialogue regarding policy, cities, security, development, energy, resources, food, health, politics, terrorism, natural disasters, climate change, enterprise risk, governance and organisational change. Yet, it appears to be described in different terms and understood in a myriad of ways. Nonetheless, the plurality of domains and conversations seem to regard the concept as a positive and much needed quality or capability.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines resilience as: The capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; or the ability [of a substance or object] to spring back into shape. The former invokes a certain quality, for example mental toughness; whilst the latter implies elasticity, illustrated by the ability of grass or trees to bend with the wind and ultimately return to their former shape or position.

At a fundamental level resilience refers to the ability of a system (or a person) to cope with change. In engineering, this will often refer to the ability of materials and structures to absorb and avoid damage. In psychology, it might refer to the ability of individuals to adapt to stress and adversity. In ecology, it acknowledges the potential responses to perturbations and disturbances. In urban development, cities, security contexts and enterprise planning, it might relate to the preparation for, response to, and recovery from threats and challenges.

Change is always a challenge

The growing interest in resilience corresponds to the increasing realisation that uncertainty and turbulence play an inevitable part in a world of relentless change, continuous innovation and fierce global competition. As traditional certainties and expectations are eroded and plans and assumptions become questionable, new uncertainties and ambiguities need to be addressed.

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[1]*The Advances in Project Management series includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Gower in the UK. Each month an introduction to the current monthly article is provided by series editor **Prof Darren Dalcher**, who is also the editor of the Gower Advances in Project Management series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. For more on Gower project management, visit http://www.gowerpublishing.com/default.aspx?page=2063. See Darren's background summary at the end of this article.*

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While the history of the human race appears to be continuously punctuated by change, the rate of change in recent times appears to have accelerated. Traditional measures of change such as the rate of adoption of technologies seem to indicate that new inventions and technologies are being adopted at an ever-increasing pace. Growing pressure to perform and deliver under turbulent conditions results in new and larger risks that must be borne by organisations. Uncertainties in traditional stock markets, global terrorism, unresolved political issues, catastrophic weather events, mass migration and a constant fight for resources further underpin a period of greater turbulence and uncertainty.

Resilience offers a promise to adjust to the inevitable shocks characterising an unpredictable world and survive, and even thrive, despite the disruption and upheaval of change. Ultimately, it implies a capability to bounce back and recover. However, in this new world, which changes faster than we are able to adjust, bouncing back offers modest advantages.

Learning to bounce forward

Heraclitus of Ephesus, a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher, noted that no man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man". As the water is ever flowing and nothing remains still, bouncing back to the way things used to be seems both less promising and unrealistic.

While resilience used to imply a combination of continuity and robustness, it is increasingly taken as a more positive and forward-looking capability. Continuity and robustness convey the ability to continue to operate without disruption, with robustness enabling one to withstand disruption and continuity representing the ability to maintain service as normal despite disruption. Redundancy and replication can further enhance the basic ability to continue to operate.

However, resilience implies a continuous and on-going capability that extends beyond simple resumption of service. It is not focused on recovery 'back to normal', but on the establishment of a 'new normal' following disruption and turbulence. The new normal is underpinned by the ability to adapt, a hitherto implicit part of resilience. This represents a general shift in thinking about resilience from an engineering paradigm concerned with bouncing back, towards a social and ecological paradigm defined by bounce forward and inspired by the constant flow of the water in the metaphorical river of change.

Developing organisational resilience

The established bodies of knowledge say nothing on the topic of resilience, however, the British standards Institute (BSI) has issued a new advisory "guidance on organisational resilience". BS65000 articulates the benefits of organisational resilience, describes what resilient organisations can achieve, and offers guidance on building such organisations alongside some basic tools for assessing the resilience measures of organisations.

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Organisational resilience is defined in the guidance as "the capacity of an organisation to anticipate, prepare for, respond and adapt to events".

Effective resilience is about establishing a synthesis between the continuity and adaptability aspects. Such balance will enable organisations to continue to perform in the face of disruption and develop long-term viability against the backdrop of strategic change.

Adaptability embeds the learning needed to develop new continuity patterns and responses. More resilient organisations demonstrate a capacity to improvise, innovate and experiment during the exploration of new challenges and opportunities. They also become better at scanning the horizon, anticipating trends, and issues, and developing patterns for responding to the new challenges. Organisational resilience can thus be viewed as the creation of the thinking, services and capabilities required to bounce forward by endlessly balancing continuity and adaptability.

There are many implications from such a paradigm shift. Chief amongst them is the recognition that resilience is no longer the adoption of a defensive stance, but rather the development of an informed long-term thinking. It is also a proactive, and well-planned position rather than a mere response to events. The intention is to sustain and develop a thriving organisation (or temporary organisation). It also implies looking beyond the risks, and engaging with the emerging ambiguities and uncertainties, often in the form of experimentation and exploration.

Developing project resilience

Resilience requires preparation and acknowledgement of the unexpected. In contrast, prescriptive project management methods and approaches advocate unrealistically well-defined processes for addressing project needs and delivering successful results. The litany of project failure hints at the existence of some limitations to that approach.

The discipline of managing projects is increasingly concerned with developing an understanding that extends beyond tools and processes to encompass people and organisations. This month's contribution, *Project Resilience—Moving beyond traditional risk management*, written by Dr. Elmar Kutsch and Dr. Neil Turner provides a much-needed new perspective on project theory and its relevance to practice. The article offers a behavioural people-driven perspective of risk management that addresses the limitations of traditional risk management.

The article is developed from the book: *Project Resilience: The Art of Noticing, Interpreting, Preparing, Containing and Recovering*, written by Elmar Kutsch, Mark Hall and Neil Turner, published by Gower. The book makes an important contribution to project management literature by looking at how to make projects and project managers more resilient. In the process, the authors develop an alternative understanding of projects as organic constructs, which are constantly challenged by environmental adversity. These organic constructs are living, temporary, and finite arrangements that encompass people, structures and processes. The adoption of the

resilience lens enables managers to notice more, interpret better, prepare more effectively, contain and recover from adversity.

The new thinking advocated by the authors offers forward thinking projects, with foreseeable relevant scenarios that can be managed in new ways. Such projects can recover and bounce back from shocks, thereby improving overall project performance.

The resilience contribution

Resilience can become a key to enduring and long-term success because it offers new ways of addressing future performance. At its most basic, it is concerned with adjusting to the inevitable shocks inherent in an increasingly unpredictable world. However, intelligent deployment can offer new means for engaging with the unexpected by absorbing disturbances whilst also maintaining function and purpose. This allows people, communities, infrastructure and systems to maintain core purpose and thrive under conditions of turbulence and uncertainty.

Resilience will continue to be a key growth area. Many cities and corporations are in the process of introducing Chief Resilience Officers (CROs) to establish a vision, foster innovation and develop enterprise visibility, coordination and integration. Resilience connects many diverse areas in projects including risk management, emergency management, continuity and recovery, governance and supply chain management. This reflects the growing corporate importance of this perspective, organisational function and way of thinking about projects, risks and the unexpected.

Resilience depends on preparations and choices made before the disruption. Well thought out planning and execution enable projects and organisations to survive, thrive and prosper by overcoming the unexpected, accepting a new reality and bouncing forward.

US attorney, Elizabeth Edwards, noted that resilience is about accepting a new reality even if it is less good than the previous one. Managers will increasingly be encouraged to build resilience not just inside projects and within an organisation, but across networks, in partnership with others and into supply chains and stakeholder chains in order to strengthen and improve long-term performance. Ultimately, bouncing forward will enable managers to exploit and harness the new possibilities that emerge from the unexpected and to improve and embed the new reality that is uncovered. Consequently, it can become a growing positive adjustment capability that is continuously developed and improved over time.

References:

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Darren Dalcher, Ph.D. HonFAPM, FRSA, FBCS, CITP, FCMI is Professor of Project Management at the University of Hertfordshire, and founder and Director of the National Centre for Project Management (NCPM) in the UK. He has been named by the Association for Project Management (APM) as one of the top 10 "movers and shapers" in project management in 2008 and was voted Project Magazine's "Academic of the Year" for his contribution in "integrating and weaving academic work with practice".

Following industrial and consultancy experience in managing IT projects, Professor Dalcher gained his PhD in Software Engineering from King's College, University of London. Professor Dalcher has written over 150 papers and book chapters on project management and software engineering. He is Editor-in-Chief of *Software Process Improvement and Practice,* an international journal focusing on capability, maturity, growth and improvement. He is the editor of the book series, *Advances in Project Management*, published by Gower Publishing of a new companion series *Fundamentals of Project Management*.

Heavily involved in a variety of research projects and subjects, Professor Dalcher has built a reputation as leader and innovator in the areas of practice-based education and reflection in project management. He works with many major industrial and commercial organisations and government bodies in the UK and beyond.

He is an Honorary Fellow of the APM, a Chartered Fellow of the British Computer Society, a Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute, and the Royal Society of Arts, and a Member of the Project Management Institute (PMI), the Academy of Management, the Institute for Electrical and Electronics Engineers, and the Association for Computing Machinery. He is a Chartered IT Practitioner. He is a Member of the PMI Advisory Board responsible for the prestigious David I. Cleland project management award and of the APM Professional Development Board.

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To view other works by Prof Darren Dalcher, visit his author showcase in the PM World Library at http://pmworldlibrary.net/authors/darren-dalcher/.