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Reflections on resilience for mindful managers
Prof Darren Dalcher
Series Article

Advances in Project Management Series [1]

Reflections on resilience for mindful managers [2]

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The notion of resilience is habitually invoked in difficult and trying times. The idea of resilience appears in many domains and conversations, often relating to the ability of something to recover quickly following shock, turbulence or another unpleasant occurrence (see, Dalcher, 2015 for a more comprehensive discussion). Whilst resilience has traditionally been used to describe the ability of materials or systems to respond to sudden changes in their external environment, it is increasingly also applied to describe the capacity of organisations, society and individuals to bounce back from adversity. Not surprisingly, as we attempt to recover from the Coronavirus pandemic, resilience is often mentioned as an important coping and recovery strategy.

Where are we now?

Global events challenge individuals and societies. The changes unleashed by the recent pandemic and the efforts to bring it under control have resulted in economic uncertainty, political turmoil and social unrest. Locked in at home, frozen out of normal routines and well-established habits, often struggling to cope with the sudden change and loss of predictability, many individuals have struggled to cope with feelings of loss, sorrow, trauma, tragedy, adversity, stress, anxiety – and the inevitable change to life as we know it.

Young and old alike have found an undermined period of enforced lockdowns with an added measure of restrictions both difficult and detrimental to their well-being. Indeed, uncertainty often proves to be a very uncomfortable and distressing state. Yet, some people seem to bounce back from adversity, almost recharged by their experience, whilst others appear to be knocked down and deflated by the very same conditions.

Coutu (2002) maintains that resilience can help survive and recover from the most brutal experiences and can be cultivated using three essential practices (re-paraphrased below):

Face down reality: Adopt a pragmatic stance recognising the reality of your situation, instead of slipping into denial to cope with hardship.

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Search for meaning: Devise constructs about your suffering to create meaning for yourself and others, and resist the temptation to label yourself as victim.

Continually improvise: Be inventive and make the most of what you have by putting available resources to use in creative ways and imagining new possibilities.

People often come out of big crisis damaged, so the proposed practices endeavour to develop a coping attitude that seeks to embrace the new conditions, make the present manageable rather than overwhelming, believe and continually seek improvements. Seligman (2011) similarly concludes from his extensive research on resilience that those who survive upheaval tend towards optimism, interpreting setbacks as temporary, local and changeable. Using more contemporary change management thinking, Coutu's practices can therefore be repositioned as a speedy recipe for a new change cycle designed specifically for coming to terms with urgent and unwelcome change and adversity through the creation of a positive and sustainable narrative.

Thinking through adversity

Life is an emotional roller coaster ride involving highs and lows and the ability to shift from one state to another and maintain a positive focus. Indeed, most individuals have experienced setbacks and impediments in their lives. The challenge is to be able to deal with the most challenging circumstances which often requires coming to term with some notion of experiencing failures, impediments and disappointments, whilst being able to continue the journey, breathing again, bouncing forward and rising to the next high points (see for example, McArdle, 2014; Sandberg & Grant, 2017). Some of the seminal thinking in the change management literature emerges from reflection on how patients and their families deal with the emergence of information about their difficult and life changing condition and how they manage to come to term with and embrace the new change. Many of the adjustments required to cope with significant change necessitate mental adjustments and shifts in attitude and perspective.

Similarly, mental resilience is essential in overcoming crisis and thriving in difficult times. Hougaard et al. (2020) affirm that the emotional and psychological response to a crisis needs to be carefully developed, nurtured and trained, and propose three strategies in order to achieve that:

- Calm the mind; pay attention to what is going on
- Look out the window; in order to reflect and gain perspective
- Connect with others through compassion; build new connections to overcome isolation and replace previous support mechanisms that have been shut down or temporarily closed

Owen (2019) proposes that the basis for dealing with adversity is captured by the maxim, *feel good, function well*. He notes that the same event can trigger different reactions in different people. Moreover, slightly different circumstances and a distinctive state of mind can lead to altered responses even from the same individual. Owen therefore concludes that there is always

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an element of choice about how to react to unfolding events. If one can choose how to react to events, it then becomes possible to identify an individual path to resilience.

Adopting a longer-term take on sustaining performance, Owen offers ten main themes consisting of key habits of mind which can help to build resilience in individuals (slightly paraphrased below):

1. Think well, live well: Reacting positively through the power of optimism
2. See the light in darkness: Emotional self-regulation through the power of emotional intelligence
3. Be kind to yourself: Informed and improved choices through the power of fast thinking
4. Control your destiny: Reacting to setbacks positively through the power of self-belief
5. Reach out: Building relationships and influence through the power of connections and networks
6. Recharge your batteries: Learn to switch off and find a balance through the power of recovery
7. Stay mindful: Turning crisis into opportunity and surviving the make or break points through the power of choice
8. Craft your mission: Focus, pace and position through the power of purpose
9. Keep on learning: Continuous development, improvement and learning through the power of growth
10. Find your sanctuary: Identify the context where you can flourish through the power of culture

The difficult part perhaps, is learning to embrace and enjoy the journey – and remembering that the process of journeying, much in common with the roller coaster ride, undulates through the peaks and troughs of life as we accumulate new experiences and respond to events and circumstances we encounter.

The mindful manager

While crises are typically viewed as unexpected, they often emit signs and little warnings and signals that things are not quite right, in advance of their full-blown manifestation. Veil (2011) invokes leaning barrier model as a theoretical lens for explaining how individuals and organisations ignore warning signs that can lead to crises and failure. The perspective identifies three significant rhetorical barriers, summarised below:

Classification with experience: Inability to see past own experiences to recognise emerging warning signs.

Reliance on success: Featuring past successes blinds people (and cultures) to potential failure and to warning signals not aligned with the expected success.

Trained mindlessness: Following recognised procedures and blind adherence to routines can induce mindlessness and blindness to context, thereby training practitioners to ignore warning signals (p. 125).

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The result is a form of wilful blindness to conditions that do not fit, that enables individuals to ignore and normalise early warning signs. This implies a wishful ignorance of the potential for failure or disaster and ignorance of an impending breaking point, until a breakdown actually materialises. Yet, it is only after the crisis that many of the early warning signs are recognised, analysed and accepted. Veil (2011) therefore advocates mindfulness as a process of looking at a given situation rather than the preconceived notion of what the outcome should be (2011: 134). The perspective offers alertness to early learning opportunities and subtle deviations, that may turn into a crisis if left uncontained (Weick, 2006). Weick's notion of sensemaking is useful in spotting weak signals, reframing situations and dealing with the impending changes. Individuals can thus become mindful of potential deviations, encouraging learning, adaptation and change. Mindful thinking and learning can thereby offer an approach for coping with impending adversity and crisis situations.

The coronavirus crisis suggests that such skills are absolutely essential in guiding management, leadership and governance in turbulent and uncertain times, especially in supporting responsive decision making. Shared meanings and emotion now play a key part in enabling more helpful and responsive engagement with crises and failure (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

An obvious question is, how susceptible is project management to blindness and mindlessness that can lead to failures?

The guest article this month is written by Dr Elmar Kutsch and draws on a recent book *Mindful Project Management: Resilient Performance Beyond the Risk Horizon* by Elmar Kutsch and Mark Hall published by Routledge. Kutsch and Hall do a good job in reminding us that major projects can run into serious trouble. Deterministic project management approaches often fail to recognise contextual warnings of impending adversity, and the teams responsible for successful delivery often fail to address rising concerns and adapt to different conditions. Some of the weaknesses are inherent in the traditional ways of project working, leading to a growing litany of failed undertakings.

Adversity requires managers to identify deviations from expectations and recover from undesirable conditions. Yet, the management of uncertainty offers multiple challenges to project managers trying to establish a planned state in an unfamiliar and novel setting. The inherent uncertainty and lack of information necessitate the application of mindfulness to make sense of the ambiguity and contradictions that are often observed, and avoid the tendency to limit attention and the mindlessness that encourage practitioners to dismiss data that does not fit or make sense.

Kutsch and Hall make a convincing case for a behavioural, people-driven perspective to address uncertainty through mindfulness. They position mindfulness as the human capability to anticipate key events, constantly adapt to change and rapidly bounce back from adversity. In doing so, it enables individuals and organisations to overcome the barriers to good performance identified by Veil. This enables mindful thinking to be utilised as the art of managing uncertainty and overcoming adversity, thereby providing a more intelligent and human-centric approach to learning, coping and operating effectively under non-deterministic conditions.

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The addition of mindfulness and resilience enables managers to enhance their repertoire of responses and develop new critical capabilities for dealing with uncertain contexts and adverse conditions. As a result, the act of managing is enhanced into a much wider canvass encompassing the new areas of noticing, interpreting, preparing, containing and recovering, as managers begin to engage with and more intimately explore the road to resilience.

Reprise: The resilience paradoxes

Resilience offers a promising notion that enables individuals and organisations to withstand, rebound and bounce back, particularly in times of crisis and adversity. The interest in applying resilience in such settings is growing. The notion is increasingly associated with well-being, but its' use can lead to new challenges and the emergence of a number of new paradoxes and potential mismatches that question the ability of individuals and groups to gain full benefit from resilience.

The first resilience paradox: Added protection makes us less involved

Greater resilience capability may result in diminished motivation to take pre-emptive action, reluctance to consider risk responses, or reduced emotional engagement. The first resilience paradox emerges from research in psychology that suggests that enhanced personal capacity to deal with extreme events, such as climate impacts, might also have the contradictory subsidiary effect of dampening the same people's willingness, so as to limit their own contribution to climate change (Ogunbode et al., 2019: 704). In other words, the impact of reduced negative emotional reactions to extreme conditions, enabled through greater resilience, may also mean diminished motivation to address the main phenomena or its causes, for instance, climate change (p. 706). If resilient people are less inclined to act, this can lead to a situation where individual resilience could be at odds with the interests (or resilience) of a wider community, and may even thwart efforts to address issues more globally.

The second resilience paradox: Added protection makes us more vulnerable

Enhanced resilience capability may reduce the interest that organisations, governments and society have in the original problem. In other words, if the response to a particular risk is matched by enhanced resilience and capability to mitigate the negative outcomes, the offending item may get forgotten or be delegated to a lower risk/concern level. This may equate with a novel form of trained mindlessness that allows organisational memory to expunge events that may have been partially dealt with – thereby suggesting a partial corollary form to the first resilience paradox. Yet, such wilful ignorance leads to significantly enhanced vulnerabilities.

The third resilience paradox: Resilience training may be fundamentally flawed.

The third and final resilience paradox is derived from Bastian (2019). Bastian claims that resilience training programs often build people's capacity to maintain positive thoughts and emotions and promote strategies designed to minimise stress, such as mindfulness. However, a focus on positivity and stress reduction is insufficient. Bastian notes that '*reducing stress rather than engaging with it productively does little to promote the capacity to respond*

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effectively to adversity'. (ibid.). In emphasising the wrong aspects, we may be creating chilled rather than effective leaders for adversity.

The three paradoxes demonstrate that resilience is a complex phenomenon that merits further study. Resilience thrives on positive human experience and is closely linked to the development of learning, trying out things and even to the intimate relationship to failure on route to improvement. Challenges will always be a part of our interaction with our wider environment, however a positive focus on gains and a passionate pursuit of finding a way forward can propel a journey and maintain a forward trajectory.

Ultimately, resilience is inspired by nature's own response patterns, offering an authentic alternative to anticipation and full knowledge. Resilience reflects the desire to bend without breaking and thereby to bounce back and resume operations. However, resilience also enables the rethinking and relearning that results from experience, recognising a potential for harnessing and responding to new opportunities. The spirit of resilience is perhaps best captured by Mizuta Masahide, a 17th century Japanese poet and samurai, who wryly observed that '*my barn having burned down, I can now see the moon*'. For sheer positivity, obstinate reflection and pure passion for life, Mizuta Masahide represents the ultimate yardstick for demonstrating unconditional and unwavering resilience in the face of adversity.

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