

Resilience

Succeeding in today's business environment of ever-increasing pressure and unexpected change requires grit, hardiness and resilience. This post is about resilience. It is the least understood and probably the most important of these three traits because of the dire personal and professional consequences of a lack of resilience.

Having grit, hardiness and resilience are essential ingredients of sustaining high performance, but they are not the same. Grit is the will and capacity to hang in there; hardiness is the physical and mental toughness to do so; and resilience is the ability to bounce back from setbacks and stress.

This is a distressing and all too frequent story I hear.

"I feel stalked by my job" is the way Larry described himself. "I sit back on the couch with my wife to watch our favourite show and my mind keeps wandering to work. I jump up and say 'I'll be back', rush to my folder, and make myself a note. We go away for the weekend to a friend's country house and I keep my phone in my pocket to make sure I reply to emails and don't miss calls from our US head office. 'I can't afford to get behind', I tell myself. It's the same before I go to sleep, I check my email in-box – and my Twitter mentions. Mustn't miss anything."

Larry is in a state of constant cognitive arousal. And it's inevitable that Larry (and everyone else like him) will start to react in detrimental ways. He will feel an urge to 'shut down'. Wish the world would go away. His sense of achievement is impaired, "I am failing". He exhibits the tell-tale signs of emotional and physical exhaustion, accompanied by insomnia and excess consumption of food ("I need energy to keep going") and alcohol ("I need a drink to relax").

In short, Larry is burning out¹. He hasn't learned to be resilient.

Resilience defined

In her 2015 Harvard Business Review paper, [What Resilience Means, and Why It Matters](#), Andrea Ovans teased out the essential elements of resilience:

- ✓ Recovering from setbacks,
- ✓ Adapting rapidly and effectively to change, and
- ✓ Keeping going in the face of adversity.

The resilient people I know who behave in the ways Andrea Ovans describes all have a strong belief that their life and work are full of meaning; they get up in the morning to find and fulfill this meaning every day, to the very best of their ability.

What resilience is not

I often find pre-conceptions of resilience that are wrong and misleading, resulting in even greater difficulties in coping with the demands we place on ourselves.

Resilience is *not* about putting up with overwork and the accompanying mental and physical exhaustion. In fact, 'putting up with' behaviours are the very opposite of resilience. Resilience is *not* about working to

¹ Burnout is a well know syndrome characterised by emotional exhaustion, a lack of a sense of achievement, and the depersonalisation of clients, friends and family members. Burnout is more than a state of exhaustion. When you've run 15 kilometres in a personal best time, you're both exhausted and elated. The exhaustion of burnout combines deep weariness with a tormenting feeling that you can't and won't succeed because the task is never-ending.

2am and being back in the office at 8am the next day. It is *not* about 'toughing it out' or, as a lawyer client once put it to me, about having a 'high crack point'. It is *not* about wearing the badge of honour awarded for working in the office all Sunday morning.

Resilience and recovery

The essence of resilience is the capacity to recover. The key to being resilient is working really hard, pausing, taking a recovery break, and then working hard again. Just like an athlete in training. The more time you spend performing, the more time you need to recover. Otherwise, you risk burnout.

Recovery can be learned

The key word in the title of Shawn Achor's and Michelle Gielan's super article [Resilience Is About How You Recharge, Not How You Endure](#) is '*recharge*'. Like a battery, your mental and physical energy run down. If you recharge, i.e. recover, then you avoid the vicious cycle of burning energy simply to overcome your exhausted state, rather using your precious reserves to perform to your best in your professional and private life.

To build your resilience you need internal and external recovery periods to recharge and replenish yourself.



Internal recovery refers to short periods of relaxation within your work setting, whether scheduled or spontaneous. You can create these breaks by shifting to other, unrelated work tasks, spending a few minutes at the water cooler with others, or walking up and down flights of stairs while focusing on the muscles you are using or your breathing.

You find external recovery opportunities outside work. Attending your child's sports game, having a drink with friends (no shop talk), taking a

vacation, or indulging in a game of golf or gardening. These are all recovery periods.

But do not confuse these internal or external recovery breaks with 'taking a rest' while you continue to worry about a work problem, check your emails before going to sleep, and a document for tomorrow.

To recover, you have to stop. Switch off your email. Meditate. Eat lunch away from your desk. Watch a movie on a business flight. Go the gym. Walk regularly. Use up your full annual leave allowance – without being asked to. The more you can turn these recovery periods into rituals, the more resilient you will become. Why? Rituals are habits built into the day, like cleaning your teeth. You don't have to make a conscious effort or remind yourself. You just do it.

The evidence is clear

1. You become resilient by learning to build recovery into your life and work.
2. Resilience enables superior, sustained performance without accompanying stress and burnout.

More on resilience

- ✓ [Resilience Is About How You Recharge, Not How You Endure](#) by Shawn Achor & Michelle Gielan in Harvard Business review, June 2016
- ✓ [To be a top performer, manage your energy, not your time](#), my July 2015 post