The Public Manager

The Quarterly for Practitioners
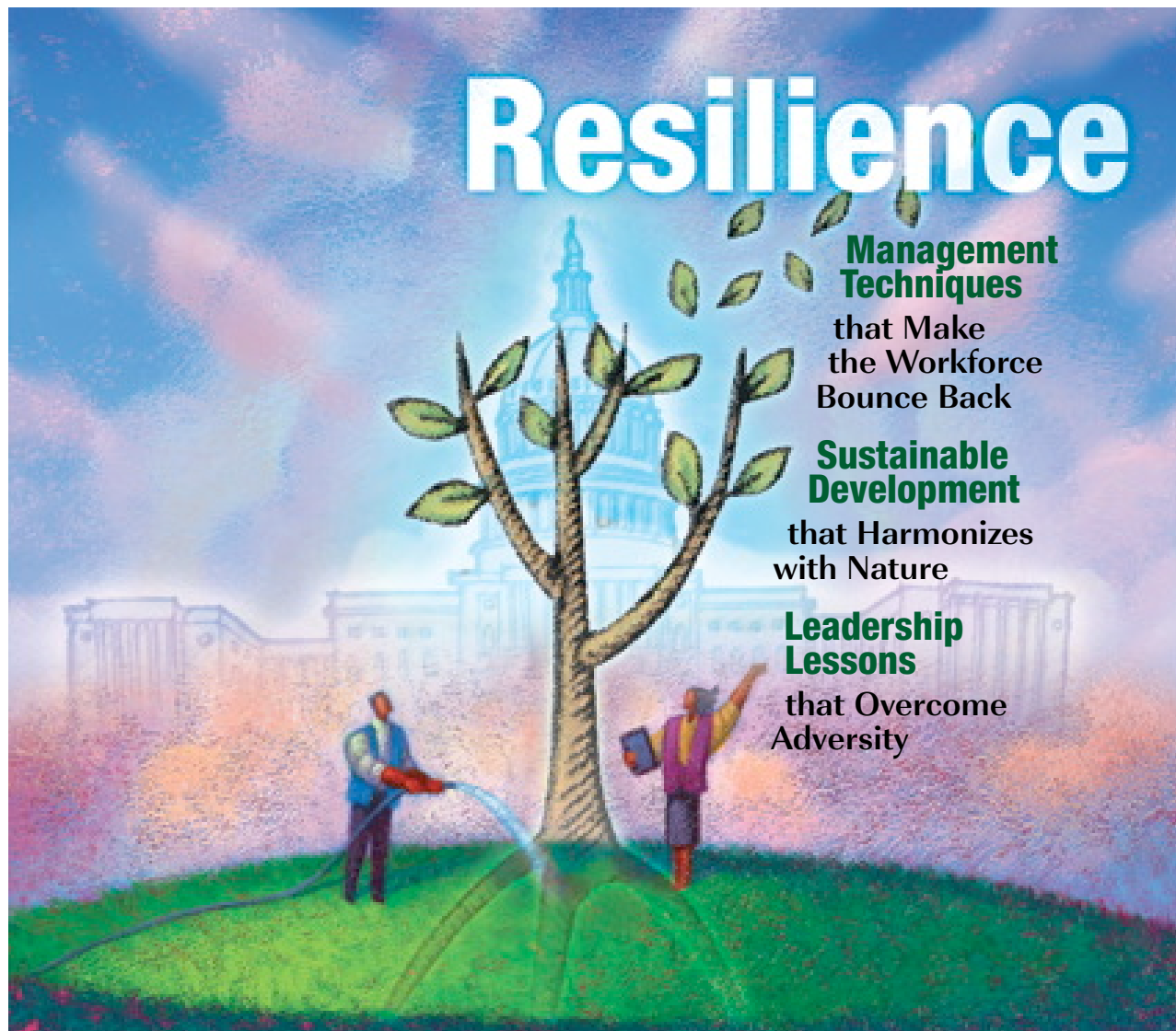
Resilience

Management Techniques that Make the Workforce Bounce Back

Sustainable Development that Harmonizes with Nature

Leadership Lessons that Overcome Adversity

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Strengthening Workforce Resiliency in the Public Sector

By following practical guidelines from the new field of resiliency psychology, public managers can navigate through rough periods of change and bounce back from setbacks.

by Al Siebert

I n today's world of nonstop change, public managers need a highly resilient workforce. In the past, government managers ran stable, efficient organizations, which operated for decades without much change. Public-sector workers did what their managers told them to do and were evaluated on how well they followed their job descriptions.

Today's managers must implement deep reorganization and constant change on reduced budgets while trying to meet required objectives. Every branch of government has shifted from needing cooperative, compliant employees, to needing self-motivated, change-proficient, adaptable workers capable of performing in new ways without up-to-date job descriptions. This demand distresses many managers and workers.

When public-sector employees list their challenges and difficulties, most report that they feel pressured to do more work, of better quality, in less time, with fewer people, in new ways, with a reduced budget—

while worrying whether their jobs are safe. Some succumb to this pressure, some don't. Public managers can make a difference in how well their workers cope by using simple techniques to strengthen their resiliency.

Public managers who dwell on trying to overcome employee resistance to change fail because trying to get people to stop doing something is a negative goal. A positive goal is to develop resiliency strengths in workers who are committed to their work and have positive attitudes toward change.

Public-sector managers who work proactively to strengthen workforce resiliency gain many benefits. Resilient workers hold up well under pressure, adapt quickly to change, get the right things done with fewer mistakes, and are sick less often.

Resiliency is not an ability one either has or does not have. Resiliency strengths can be developed, just as proficiency in any sport or activity can be learned and developed. How can managers strengthen workforce resiliency?

✦ Learn which resiliency strengths to develop in employees.
✦ Know the factors that support or impair worker resiliency.
✦ Be a good role model of resiliency.

Resiliency psychology offers the following practical guidelines for strengthening workforce resiliency.

Support Optimum Health and Well-Being

At the most basic level, the people who hold up well under constant pressure live in ways that sustain their health and well-being. Wellness is a way of life.

Resilience refers to the ability to

• cope with ongoing disruptive change,

• sustain good physical and emotional health when under constant pressure,

• bounce back easily from setbacks,

• overcome adversities,

• change to a new way of working and living when an old way is no longer possible, and

• do all this without acting in a dysfunctional or harmful manner.

Actively encourage employees to follow widely known practices for living a healthy lifestyle.

Increase Positive Feelings

Laughing, pleasant relationships, enjoyable moments, and feelings of job satisfaction expand a person's cognitive skills and strengthen resiliency. Negative emotions such as fear, anger, anxiety, and worry constrict a person's cognitive skills and weaken resiliency.
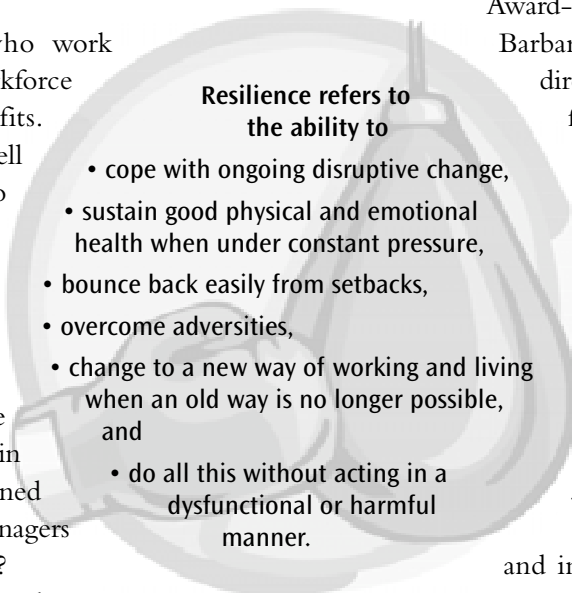
Award-winning research by psychologist Barbara Frederickson has documented a direct connection between positive feelings, resiliency, good health, flourishing, good relationships, and effective work teams. Work teams observed to have a high ratio of positive to negative emotions flourish while work teams with little positive feeling tend to languish. The lowest positive-negative ratio needed for flourishing is 3 to 1, a ratio of 5 to 1 is best.

Managers who threaten workers and intentionally keep them fearful are acting irrationally because negative emotions increase the probability of mistakes, accidents, employee sickness, and having good people quit. Managers who create a positive, appreciative atmosphere that promotes job satisfaction strengthen resilience, increase mental alertness and accuracy, and keep the best employees strongly committed to the organization.

Provide an Emotional Paycheck

Workers become more engaged and committed when they experience emotional satisfaction. Your governmental organization renders a monetary paycheck for each worker, but your job is to provide them with an emotional paycheck. You do this by purposefully arranging for the people under your direct control to experience the following feelings each week:

✦ My work is important and meaningful.
✦ I am responsible.
✦ I am recognized for achievements.
✦ I have the opportunity for professional growth.
✦ I am valued and appreciated.
✦ I have accomplished something.

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To impart these feelings requires good emotional intelligence in a manager—an important area of professional growth.

Emphasize Problem-Solving Responses

Resilient people, when faced with difficulty, focus on solving the challenge. The least resilient people become overly emotional, portray themselves as victims, blame others, and dwell on their misfortune.

You increase workforce resiliency by arranging for workshops on effective problem-solving methods. Content should include logical "left brain" methods, creative "right brain" methods, group brainstorming, and how to find simple, practical solutions.

Encourage Self-Motivated Learning

Highly resilient people continuously learn new ways of doing things, seek new experiences, and frequently change how they interact with their circumstances. The least resilient people drift into a "calcified" condition where they try to avoid change and new experiences. Childlike curiosity, playfulness, and self-motivated, self-managed learning lead to advanced resilience skills. We are marvelously blessed with the ability to replace old behaviors by learning new ones at any age.

A problem with traditional training is that it conditions employees to be passive learners who wait to be instructed. In contrast, self-motivated, self-managed learning leads to becoming more skillful, change-proficient, and resilient year after year. This means that traditional training methods are self-defeating when used to try to increase workforce resiliency.

Resilient people are like children who never grow up. They are curious and get excited about learning better ways of doing things. Encourage workers to ask questions. Asking good questions is a far more useful skill in today's world than knowing answers that someone taught. Habitual curiosity leads quick orientation to new realities and playful curiosity can lead to practical problem-solving—one of the most basic resiliency skills.

A professional growth area for budding managers is learning how to manage with questions. Keep in mind, if you want resilient employees, you can't continue to manage workers like they were managed in the past.

Adapt to Circumstances

Adapting to new circumstances is the key to survival in all of nature. If you always respond one way and never in the opposite way, you sometimes will be helpless to stop yourself from automatically reacting in a self-defeating manner.

The flexibility found in highly resilient people comes from their complex inner nature. Here is a partial list of counterbalanced personality qualities typically found in people who overcome setbacks to achieve solid career success:

✦ Creative and analytical
✦ Serious and playful
✦ Hard-working and lazy
✦ Sensitive and tough
✦ Cautious and trusting
✦ Unselfish and selfish
✦ Self-appreciating and self-critical
✦ Impulsive and thorough
✦ Optimistic and pessimistic.

How many of these pairs of counterbalanced qualities describe you? Can you add more?

Counterbalanced personality qualities are signs of advanced emotional intelligence. Your resilience in rapidly changing circumstances comes from having many such pairs of traits, whatever they may be. The longer the list of pairs of counterbalanced, paradoxical traits you recognize in yourself, the more emotionally complex you are, which can increase your chances of successfully handling any situation that develops.

Balance Positivity with Negativity

Managers with positive attitudes typically handicap themselves by having a negative attitude about negative thinking. When managers suppress disagreement and negative thinking during meetings, they create a condition called "groupthink," in which groups make bad decisions.

Power is derived from being at the choice point between counterbalanced forces. A sign that managers have developed advanced emotional intelligence is that they feel comfortable with and can counterbalance positive thinking with negative thinking. Barbara Clark, former City Treasurer in Portland, Oregon, says, "A negativity specialist will make you think through your plans better, point out flaws, and warn you about what could go wrong. I would thank the Lord when I had a negative thinker in my department!"

Employ a Flexible Style

Do you expect that everyone will respond well to the way that you want to manage, or do you manage people in a way that gets the best responses from each individual? In today's workplace, a flexible management style gets the best results.

Two of the most well researched personality factors are "external locus of control" and "internal locus of control." Hundreds of research studies show that people who cope best in difficult situations score high on measures of "internal control" beliefs. They feel personally responsible for how well their lives go, and know that they have some control over events and their responses to events. People who feel helpless and victimized, and blame others, score high on measures of "external control" beliefs. They do not believe that their personal efforts could make anything better. They believe that solutions to their unhappy condition are under the control of other people and external forces.

A fascinating truth about the human mind is that whatever you believe, you will find evidence that supports your belief. Thus it is that "external" and "internal" belief systems are both self-validating.

As a manager, it is nonproductive to try to get employees to change from their way of thinking to your way of thinking. If you adapt how you interact with each worker to get the best results from them, everything will flow much easier for all.

Figure 1 is a visual guideline on how to use a flexible management style that gets the best results from a diverse workforce. You start by observing where each person is on the external-internal dimension. Use the appropriate management mode with them, and then follow up with appreciation.

This management strategy lets you avoid a typical failing in managers: spending most of your time trying to improve the performance of your least productive workers. A much smarter strategy is to tell people who need to be told what to do exactly what you want them to do. Leave your best workers alone to do what they know has to be done. Then devote most of your management time to the middle group who want to learn how to be more effective. It's a much better experience for all.

Figure 1. The Seven Modes of Flexible Management
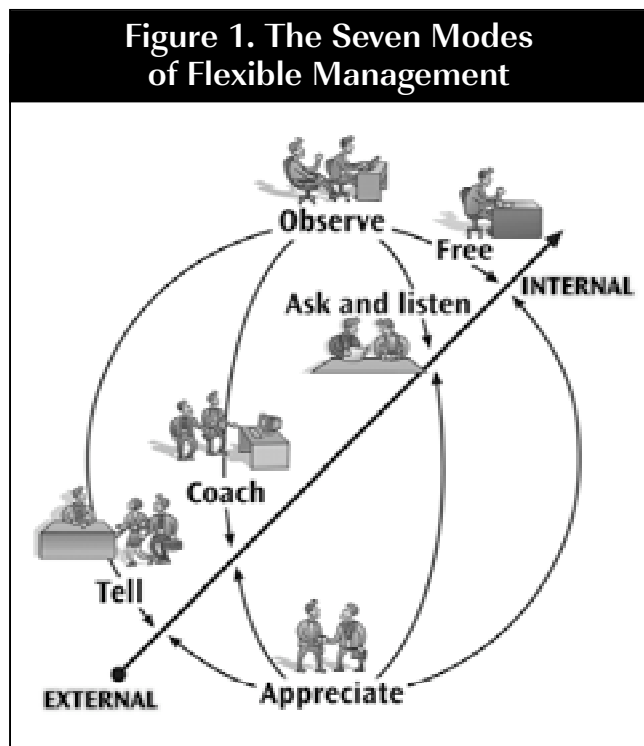
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Bounce Back Stronger

Resilience means being able to bounce back from setbacks that may seem overwhelming at first. When resilient people have their lives disrupted, they handle their feelings in healthy ways. They allow themselves to feel grief, anger, loss, and confusion when hurt and distressed, but they don't let it become a permanent state. An unexpected outcome is that they not only heal, but often bounce back stronger than before.

Public-sector managers and employees who function at the highest resilience level are best suited for a world of nonstop change. They adjust quickly to new circumstances and move confidently through chaotic turmoil to reach good outcomes.

Resilient people handle major difficulties more easily than others. They expect to overcome workplace disruptions in ways that work out well, and the struggle to overcome difficulties can develop new strengths. Resilient organizations have stories of how adversities in their past turned out to be valuable experiences.

We live in a constantly changing world. Some people make their lives difficult by resisting or fighting the ongoing changes. Others adapt and flow with them—it's each person's choice. Managers who understand the importance of workforce resiliency can help employees (and themselves) navigate through rough periods of change skillfully and easily. ❖

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