



Humility Gorge, ©Mehmet Ozgur

The world of work and the world at large continues to be unstable and unpredictable requiring us all to remain flexible and self-reliant. The ability to confront this constant change and stay productive appears to come easily or even naturally to some, but for others it remains a capability often needing development.

Organisations are increasingly aware that productive, engaged and committed employees require access to essential resources and support to remain effective in the face of stress and upheaval.

Whether employees are dealing with global issues such as terrorist threats or rising unemployment or more personal matters like surviving a downsizing or reporting to a new manager, adjustment to these disruptions, recovery from stress, and maintaining high levels of productivity are important to organisational survival.

A weak economy can certainly test resilience. A job loss can be enormously stressful, but so can staying in an unwanted (yet needed) job, or within a company where performance is below expectations and morale is low. Increasingly we find that, in parallel with having to let staff go, managers are also required to find ways to motivate inspire and increase the performance of a workforce which is de-motivated, resentful, fearful of further job losses or even feelings of guilt that they have somehow 'survived'.

In boom times it can seem that everyone is making the right decisions and performing well. In times of difficulty however, everyone has to dig so much deeper, be more determined and more resolute. Taken to the extreme however, and as demonstrated in two recent news stories (one certainly of questionable sanity), mental toughness was arguably the single most important key to success.

'Why are some people more resilient to stress, while others are not?'

I'm referring to the recent successful completion of the solo dual circum-navigation of the globe by Dee Caffari and the sad and tragic attempt of Andrew McCauley to paddle a kayak from Australia to New Zealand across one of the most inhospitable stretches of open water. The fact that both of these tales are nautical is pure coincidence, but the parallel with the rough seas that businesses are in is not. The mental toughness of these two individuals, and certainly the latter laid bare on television, sets them apart from so many others. The mental health fraternity has been wrestling with the question: Why are some people more resilient to stress, while others are not?

Is it Chemistry?

A recent study conducted by Prof Nestler (2007) and colleagues from the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Centre, Harvard University, and Cornell University, concluded that stress adaptation could be improved via the chemical messenger dopamine to lower the activity of a molecule called BDNF. The study also included the use of experimental drugs and the analysis of brain tissue in post mortems (of mice) to show that those with a genetic predisposition to lower levels of BDNF were more resilient to stress.

However, it is likely that:

- the use of experimental drugs on our employees (though we probably all know of some who might derive long-term benefit) might be illegal,
- examining live brain tissue might be perceived as unacceptably invasive, and
- premature post mortems on our higher performing staff somewhat defeats the object or, if not premature, is at very best rather late in the day.

How then can we identify those who have, or need to develop these higher levels of resilience and the ability to remain positive?

Is it only in Athletes?

The past few years have seen the sporting media become increasingly preoccupied with mental toughness. The expression is used frequently in interviews, newspaper reports and during match commentaries. Despite growing interest, large-scale empirical studies on the make-up of mental toughness are rare and the studies that have been conducted lack rigorous scientific evaluation. However, Middleton et al. (2004a) completed a series of in-depth qualitative interviews, drawing on the experience of elite athletes and coaches to reveal the underpinning components of mental toughness. Twelve components emerged: Self-efficacy, Potential, Mental self-concept, Task familiarity, Value, Personal bests, Goal commitment, Perseverance, Task focus, Positivity, Stress minimisation, and Positive comparisons. Clearly many of the above relate to self-image, self-belief and objective and subjective comparisons. There is also a strong connection with those found in the components of Positive Organisational Behaviour (see later).

Resilience in business and the workplace

According to Graham Jones in June's Harvard Business Review, personal resilience or mental toughness is the key to excellence, in both sports and business. On review of this article, we can draw out the following underpinning mental characteristics of elite performers:

- They concentrate on what they can control and don't concern themselves with the rest,
- They don't dwell on set backs,
- They have a powerful alternate focus that provides respite and recovery; examples being sportspeople with a passion for music, or business-people who are endurance athletes,
- Their observable pursuit of long term goals and aspirations helps them put minor short term failures into perspective,
- They analyse success to ensure they understand its root causes,
- They use celebration of success to build self-confidence to tackle stretch goals,
- They actively solicit feedback on all aspects of working life.

From a more scientifically researched perspective, the recent positive psychology movement has developed a concept called positive organisational behaviour (POB), defined as 'the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today's workplace.' (Luthans, 2002). Within this definition, we find four supporting characteristics - Hope, Optimism, Resilience and Self-efficacy/Confidence. Studies suggest that developing these elements leads to performance impact and competitive advantage in organisations.

Each of these is a personal characteristic, and its effect on an organisation's performance is currently work-in-progress though the following observations have been made:

- Hope has its research foundations within the athletic arena with attention now turning to its impact in the business world,
- Optimism has been found to be linked with the impact of Leaders, who have had a positive effect on organisational outcomes,
- Resilience is finding itself to be a critical component to authentic leadership where the ability to 'bounce-back' from adversity has shown to be a capacity that can be developed,
- Self-efficacy or Confidence, defined by Bandura(1997), can be adapted to apply to an individual within an organisation as 'the confidence about their abilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources and courses of action necessary to execute a specific task'. Clearly this relates closely to the context (or organisational situation) in which the individual is working.

This structure of confidence, resilience, optimism and hope offers a practical framework to begin to identify and develop these abilities in those that need them most.

According to Luthans, these Positive Organisational Behaviour characteristics can be measured and used to provide feedback to individuals and also to evaluate the effectiveness of development programmes and performance management interventions. In terms of assessment, the traditional manager-employee appraisal (a 180-degree review) or a 360-degree review could include elements of these characteristics.

Next steps

Generic mental toughness and resilience diagnostics are widely available and they measure just that particular characteristic, often solely quantitatively. Many competence frameworks also include indicators that have a relation to the concept of mental toughness, often in the context of the competency itself. This is admirable but the overall rating for the competency obscures the specific mental toughness aspect, unless the specific questions are investigated.

With the importance of mental toughness in today's (and in all likelihood tomorrow's) business environment, the assessment of the specific competency of Positive Organisational Behaviour, Personal Resilience (or some other such name as to be meaningful and acceptable in your own organisation) would be a pragmatic response to the turbulence of the economic environment. This can be achieved via the extension of a routine assessment such as a performance appraisal or a 360-degree review and doing so would be neither overplaying its importance nor clouding its measurement with other data. This would also provide a specific measure of this ability within the context of the role.

When designing the assessment for this competency, which would include indicators of personal resilience to be assessed against, do also include free text questions so as to provide for the gathering of evidence to reinforce this behaviour. Similarly, expressions of 'toughness' may not have been welcomed by those on the receiving end of them and by providing them with an opportunity to cite examples, helps them and the person being rated to explain the feedback. Finally, with these resilience indicators, expressing the indicator in a negative sense (by using a contra-indicator) is more likely to elicit a more accurate rating, as is being selective as to who (i.e. which review group) is asked to rate which indicator. (Note: not all 360 or appraisal software can do this - needless to say, Talent 180 and Talent 360 can!)

Below we offer, for your review and adaptation a selection of indicators for a Personal Resilience competency that you could use in your own assessments:

Title: Personal Resilience

Description: *The demonstration of perseverance and conviction directed towards the achievement of goals despite pressure or adversity. An individual who shows resilience would adapt their behaviour according to the circumstances, proactively coping with obstacles and recovering quickly after experiencing setbacks. Engaging in strategic planning and forward thinking, anticipating outcomes and developing contingencies are also behaviours demonstrated by people who are effective in this area. Resilient individuals tend to manage pressure effectively, maintaining a positive focus, acting assertively and making sure that benefits are gained from all situations.*

Positive Indicators:

- Focuses on performance outcomes despite uncertain or difficult circumstances
- Encourages others to take a positive approach to change
- Uses experience or knowledge to manage and mitigate against risks
- Takes on challenges with a 'can-do' attitude
- Maintains a positive attitude during times of uncertainty
- Concentrates only on things they can control or influence
- Reviews successes to understand the factors that contributed to them
- Acts quickly to capitalise on opportunities for business growth or improvements
- Remains calm during stressful or challenging situations
- Seeks to improve their own performance by both soliciting and acting on feedback
- Projects a credible, positive self-image.

Contra-indicators:

- Dwells on setbacks or things that have gone wrong
- Allows short term or minor failures to obscure longer-term goals
- Reduces efforts in the face of disappointment or rejection
- Rarely takes opportunities to build confidence by celebrating success.

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References and further reading:

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