

The Resilient Leader

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In the face of change and crisis, the resource we need most is our resilience.

Budget cuts, program closures, pink slips, workforce reductions, school closures, changes in teacher and administrator evaluation processes, and accountability. These issues came up during a recent webinar for leaders in education who signed in to talk about failure, loss, and the need for resilience. With the world economy in dire straits, educators have never faced more changes and challenges day-to-day. As a result, thoughtful leaders in education are eager to learn how to be more resilient.

This interest in resilience could not be better placed; effective leaders of sustainable change are highly resilient. Imagine what it would mean if all our schools had effective leaders as they confront the current climate. What if most school leaders were happy and believed they were doing meaningful work, even during times of loss and change within schools?

Happiness and resilience are related. On an ongoing web-based inventory, my colleague Doug Reeves and I ask leaders to rate themselves on a scale of 1 to 10 on both personal happiness and the extent to which they find their work meaningful. We then ask them to rate themselves on various qualities related to leadership. Leaders who rate themselves as a 9 or 10 in happiness and meaning also score in the "incredibly resilient" range on the inventory twice as often as do leaders who rate themselves as a 1 or 2 on happiness and meaning.¹

What Is Resilience?

Resilience is often described as a personal quality that predisposes individuals to bounce back in the face of loss. Resilient leaders, however, do more than bounce back—they bounce forward. With speed and elegance, resilient leaders take action that responds to new and ever-changing realities, even as they maintain the essential operations of the organizations they lead (Reeves & Allison, 2009, 2010). Not only do resilient leaders quickly get their mojo back, but because they understand that the status quo is unsustainable, they also use it to move mountains.

Good leaders lead with open eyes. Some leaders are so risk averse that they put on blinders to avoid seeing the truth of precarious situations. Others are so pessimistic about any turn of fortune that they ignore opportunities for growth. But a leader who pays attention to relevant data recognizes both opportunities and harbingers of disaster. Such a leader monitors signals of flagging resilience in his or her organization and shores resilience up. Here are five signals that indicate that a school's resilience is at risk (Allison & Reeves, 2011).

Resilience Risk 1: Top leaders stop learning.

When things are going well, change is the last thing some school leaders want to do, so they skimp on learning. When things aren't going well, some leaders make the dangerous mistake of believing they can't afford to invest in professional development. Whenever top leaders quit learning, it usually means one thing: They believe they know everything they need to know. Organizations, however, are in a constant state of change. Responding to change always requires learning.

Resilience Risk 2: People blame everything on the budget.

Some organizations make poor decisions when cash flow is strong, which sets the stage for blame and despair when budgets shrink. They use soft money—that is, onetime funding—to fund important positions and programs (which are then cut when funds run out) and give money to certain people's pet projects (citing "politics" as the rationale). They fail to monitor the added value of the initiatives they commit to and therefore don't make important revisions that would keep those initiatives relevant and nonnegotiable in hard times. Mike McLaughlin, superintendent of John Swett Unified School District in California, reminds leaders that they convey values and priorities with every decision: "Bear in mind that whatever you cut during a budget crunch, you'll have to prove is worth adding back when your budget is flush."

During times of economic fluctuation, nonresilient leaders make cuts across the board without regard for the organization's mission or values. Presenting themselves as victims of the economy, they cut corners on important initiatives. This creates vulnerabilities in the system, which often undermine success.

Resilience Risk 3: Leaders ignore critical indicators.

Leaders need to know how every initiative is performing. Key metrics provide essential feedback about how to refine and revise the work of the organization. In addition, leading indicators in schools—such as the percentage of graduates, the percentage of students who are proficient in expository writing, and the percentage of students who go on to postsecondary learning—forecast future trends and reveal weak areas. Strong leaders use these data to invite discussion and planning—hallmarks of resilience.

Resilience Risk 4: Too many initiatives drain people.

"Busyness" is the number one excuse people give for not getting to the most important work of the organization. Ironically, time spent putting out too many fires today undermines high-leverage action and therefore creates crisis situations tomorrow.

In an article in the *Harvard Business Review*, Bruch and Menges (April 2010) refer to the "acceleration trap." Organizations caught in this trap load their system with too many different activities, often adopting new initiatives without discarding old ones; thus, they overload people and give them no break. The bottom line: a sense of powerlessness. Leaders who complain about being overwhelmed need to claim their priorities and let go of initiatives that don't fit those priorities. Leaders who bounce back possess a sense of self-efficacy rather than powerlessness.

Resilience Risk 5: Success goes uncelebrated.

During times of strife, it's easy to succumb to fear. When leaders fail to celebrate success, they lose the opportunity to learn lessons that could provide key breakthroughs that might alter current challenges. Resilient leaders celebrate even small wins—anything that shows more of what the leaders desire—to understand how the system creates such victories.

Sandy Thorstenson, superintendent of Whittier Union High School District near Los Angeles, found that by celebrating successes, district leaders discovered that some of the most effective strategies related to student success—for example, creating portals to student achievement data and giving teachers easy access to this information during professional learning community meetings—were quite inexpensive. Whittier then committed to celebrating student success more publicly and more often.

Practices of Resilient Leaders

Resilience, it turns out, is an inside job that begins with *choosing* to be resilient. So what are the personal practices of highly resilient leaders? In large part, resilience requires leaders to take care of business—and themselves—while taking action in new realities (Allison & Reeves, 2011).

Practice 1: Engage in personal renewal.

Resilient leaders who are happy and doing meaningful work make time for activities that revitalize them physically, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually. Personal renewal generates the energy leaders need to show up for demanding work.

On the job, resilient leaders take advantage of good coaching, which gives them interludes for reflection during the throes of a demanding day. Less resilient leaders counterintuitively forfeit coaching sessions because they're "too busy." They suffer through the day with what amounts to grim determination—an unsustainable state of mind (Reeves & Allison, 2009, 2010).

Practice 2: Watch your mouth.

Environmental activist Van Jones is credited with saying, "Martin Luther King didn't become famous by saying, 'I have a complaint.'" Principal Janine Hoke of Miller Intermediate School in Alief, Texas, puts it this way: "You have to be polite." Jones and Hoke have the same idea.

Resilient leaders use words carefully to create a positive emotional climate in which hope prevails and individuals feel inspired to create a better future (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). For example, instead of jumping in with quick answers, they ask, "What do you think?" Instead of explaining why things can't be done, they say, "Let's imagine the possibilities." These leaders learn from the past but resist nostalgic conversations that reinforce negative views about change.

Practice 3: Stay optimistic.

In the face of harsh realities and brutal truths, resilient leaders are optimistic but not naive. Optimistic leaders are quite aware, thank you very much, of undesirable trends—when they exist. However, these leaders find negative data compelling. Whereas pessimistic leaders react to harsh data about important initiatives by slowing down, quitting, or losing focus and energy, the same appalling information inspires optimistic leaders to action.

Practice 4: Quickly blunt the impact of setbacks.

During a school walk-through, Principal Hoke received feedback from her supervisor that student engagement was low. She immediately reprioritized her schedule to spend more time in classrooms to learn what teachers needed. Compare this response to those of less resilient leaders who become defensive or resort to finger pointing.

Practice 5: Cultivate networks before challenges hit.

Resilient leaders continually work to sustain buy-in from individuals who are inspired by what the leader's organization achieves and who will gladly provide support and resources. The time to nurture networks of support from fellow educators, community leaders, and pivotal families is before the organization begins facing threats like severe budget cutbacks or teacher shortages.

Practice 6: See patterns—and use insights for change.

Strong leaders are not in love with their own data or their own interpretation of any data. They invite multiple perspectives and absorb relevant information from all parts of the system. Resilient leaders draw on diverse perspectives to make well-informed decisions that ultimately create new realities in organizations. These decisions are almost always in response to challenges, such as "How will we reorganize the advanced placement program so more students have the opportunity to take challenging classes?" or "How will we partner with community and business organizations?" These decisions are defining moments for leaders, whose reputations hinge on their impact.

Resilience may be a highly personal characteristic, but as such, it's a quality that individuals can choose to develop. Perhaps we are each born with a starting point for resilience. Perhaps events in each of our lives strengthen or compromise our resilience over time. Whether we can ever know the antecedents to resilience in human beings, one thing is certain: Each of us can choose to take action—like the ones suggested in this article—every day, to become resilient leaders of resilient organizations. George Washington perfectly connected happiness and meaning when he said, "Happiness and moral duty are inseparably connected." Leaders who choose resilience over defeat not only gain energy to sustain change, but also gain happiness from doing meaningful work that makes a difference for students.

References

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