Where does the need for resilience end and the need to adapt begin?

Ruth Simpson

Consider the shocks and resulting uncertainty across the economic and political spheres over the last decade: the recession, Brexit, Trump, to name a few. Then ask yourself, how much technology that you use every day of your life today didn't you use or wasn't even invented ten years ago? Perhaps it's no wonder that there has been so much call for work on resilience. How can we cope with such change and uncertainty? My question, however, is whether we are focusing on resilience at the expense of what we really need to do, and indeed often do unconsciously, which is adapt.

This article addresses this question through some examples of my client work over the last ten years, exploring how resilience and adaptability differ and what that could mean for coaches, leaders, teams and their organisations.

In an article in this journal in 2011 (Simpson, R ""Building Adaptability"" The OCM Journal 2011) I shared my research into the attributes that allow people to adapt and suggested that where the end result of flexibility and resilience is a return to the same state, the end result of adaptation is to a changed state. By way of an example, consider the way you manage your diary, if you have a paper-based process and you lose your diary, you could source another and replace the data. This could demonstrate resilience as you experienced disruption,

invested in a solution and returned to the original state i.e. operating a paper-based process. If, however, as a result of the loss you choose to start managing your diary online, this will require a change as you invest in resources – energy, time and money – to adapt to a new process of managing your diary which will be a different online process.

To add to the complexity in this area, there are also two types of adaptation to consider, as defined by Eric Fromm (2001) and Heifetz et al (Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, 2009, p. 19). They define static adaptation and technical challenges, which involve learning a new skill or behaviour that does not require any shift in beliefs or character traits, as different from a second type, dynamic
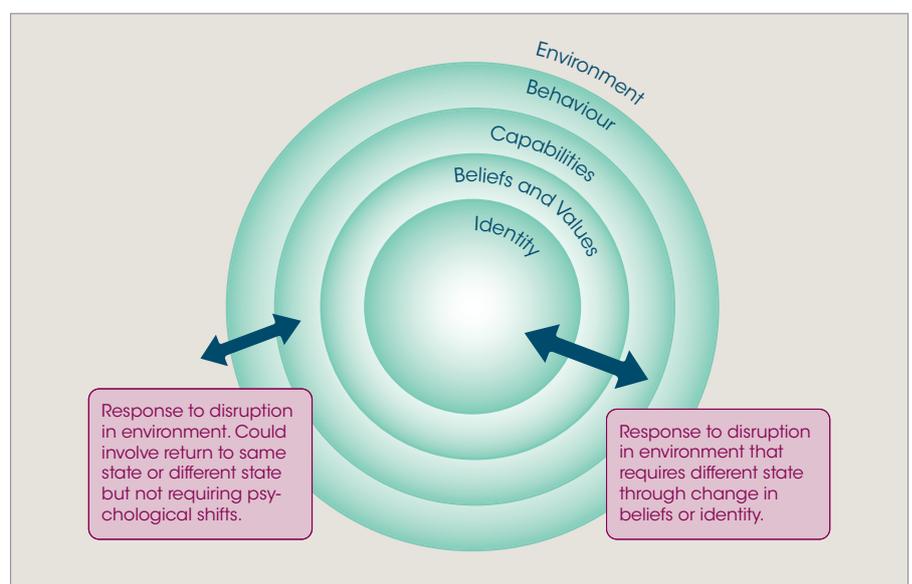
adaptation and adaptive challenges which can only be addressed through psychological shifts. In order words, adapting could be about doing things differently and thinking differently.

This aligns with the work of Robert Dilts (1990) who identified a relationship between beliefs and behaviour and how in order to affect a change at one level work needs to be done at a higher level to drive that change. It also introduces the idea that how we see ourselves and our sense of identity could be relevant as that could influence a change at the level of belief. See below a representation of the different types of adaptation and the levels at which work is required to change them.

With this understanding of the difference between the need to be resilient or adapt, as coaches we can help our clients gain clarity around what is required in the circumstances they find themselves. Where coaching is, on one level, all about things being different for clients, in some cases I have found it's less about being different and more about reframing their current situation. For example, the MD in a global manufacturer of horse feed was

Environment
Behaviour
Capabilities
Beliefs and Values
Identity

Response to disruption in environment. Could involve return to same state or different state but not requiring psychological shifts.

Response to disruption in environment that requires different state through change in beliefs or identity.

finding managing a report in the US a challenge until we reframed the situation as being a gift to enable him to develop his leadership skills. This unlocked tools and techniques he had successfully applied in other situations to improve their relationship. My client returned to his original state in that there was no shift in beliefs or character traits; his energy, however, was applied to being flexible and applying skills he already had in different ways.

Over a period of five years I worked with a number of clients in a technical services company. The environment was complex and seemed to be constantly in a state of flux. On many occasions clients would arrive for meetings with a desire to 'offload': to use the time and space coaching offered them to reflect upon and make sense of what was happening for them. This seemed to help them find clarity and unlock the resources they needed to cope with the situations they found themselves in. As an example of resilience, they dealt with the challenges they were facing and returned to an original state, albeit re-energised. This could be seen as having a similar effect to developing presence and mindful practices.

Examples of working with clients to adapt include the boss of a client at a multinational FMCG company who was looking for him to become more hopeful and less earnest. We began by exploring how he saw himself and the ideas he had about the leader he hoped to become. This led on to work around his values and beliefs and it highlighted the beliefs that were driving

more serious, habitual and unconscious behaviours. In this case his energy was applied to reflecting on what he thought and felt as well as how he acted. This expanded awareness, coupled with the desire to make a change and fuelled by his leadership vision, emboldened him to try doing things differently. He paid attention to how and when the behaviours were triggered, applied different approaches and challenged some of his deeply held beliefs to become the source of possibility and hope he needed and wanted to be.

Returning to the technical services organisation, one client was transitioning from being a contractor to the Head of Department, which meant leading some of his former peers. As in the example above, how he saw himself was key to adapting from being a contractor to becoming a leader. Work to develop confidence in himself and his abilities was coupled with learning to respond as opposed to react to situations. Techniques such as mindfulness and tools to explore his emotional intelligence supported his development.

Without a doubt we could happily indulge in a variety discussions and debates about the differences between resilience and adaptability. On a pragmatic level, I'm suggesting that at least having an understanding of the difference between the two could help clients, coaches and organisations to facilitate effective responses to the current VUCA environment. With this understanding comes a question: what does each situation call for? Is it a return to the original state or should there be a change and, if so, how significant does the difference need to be? Is it a question of coping, reframing and/or redoing what has been done before, or is it about doing, thinking or being different? The use of tools, techniques and learning new skills support resilience and technical adaptation. Meanwhile coaching is well placed to support and enable any shifts in identity and beliefs that underpin dynamic adaptation. The next question and area of research for me now is how can organisations support and optimise their coaching efforts to enable people to adapt?

Ruth Simpson, Executive Coach-mentor, The OCM

contact: ruth@animi.org.uk