



ARE WE ASKING FOR TOO MUCH RESILIENCE FROM OUR PEOPLE?

by **Graham Clark,**
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Over time, as the concept of resilience has become more widely known, many organisations have placed more and more emphasis on having resilient staff. And that's a good idea in many ways. There is a lot of merit in encouraging people to solve issues themselves and to adopt a can-do attitude to challenge and adversity. People who believe that they can shape their own destiny and who love a challenge are generally more effective and more satisfied with their work than those who see their lives as shaped by external forces beyond their control. Developing this 'internal locus of control' is an important part of resilience training and coaching.

But there is a danger that in this search for ever more resilient employees, leaders and leadership professionals lose focus on what resilience truly is. Healthy resilience (an open mind and objectivity, combined with confidence in one's self and one's own abilities) could very easily give way to the development of a superficial, false form of resilience in an organisation – a kind of 'performance' of resilience. This is particularly the case if the organisation's culture values resilience without offering people support to develop it in its more healthy form.

Someone who shows 'performance resilience' seems tough and stoic in the face of adversity, but may not actually be coping with it effectively. We can all think of people we know who seem like resilient 'tough cookies' on the surface, but in fact are suffering with chronic stress and handling it in unhealthy ways. These people invest a lot of energy in 'impression management': keeping up the appearance of being resilient whilst, in reality, suffering for it and in danger of burnout. Or there are people who seem tough and able to cope with anything but who are unaware of the impact that they are having on others. They may feel fine themselves, but they are taking the pressure out on colleagues. So, an organisation which champions personal resilience above all else risks creating people who are "brittle": acting tough but suffering in silence. And, more insidiously, it risks creating and rewarding people who act in "toxic" ways: getting the job done by 'doing what it takes' but leaving a trail of destruction in their wake. Both types are harmful to the long-term health of any organisation and need help and guidance to manage themselves more effectively.

IS THE PROBLEM WITH PEOPLE OR THE SITUATION THEY'RE IN?

The reality is that it's always a bit of both. And perhaps the fact that there's currently so much focus on resilience indicates a deeper problem. After all, to play devil's advocate for a moment, it's much easier for senior leaders to tell people to be more resilient than it is to address systemic issues which are causing the workplace stress in the first place.

The worst-case scenario is that by focusing on personal resilience, unscrupulous and out of touch leaders are in effect telling people to 'suck it up' without taking responsibility for the conditions in which people work.

Senior-level leaders don't usually need help to become more resilient personally. But they do often need help to see the systemic issues that may be holding their people back. So, if you know a senior leader who feels his or her people aren't rising to the challenge, coaching can help them to understand the system that they are creating and to take seriously their responsibility for improving it.

If you want to invest in coaching to help leaders to gain resilience, coaching will also help them consider the systemic challenges that they are facing. Crucially, they need to develop a realistic view of what they can and can't change. As the old prayer says, we need to help them gain the "serenity to accept the things [they] cannot change, courage to change the things [they] can, and the wisdom to know the difference." (Reinhold Nibuhr).

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Reinhold Nibuhr



ORGANISATIONAL RESILIENCE - AND WHAT IT MEANS TO OUR COACHES

At The OCM, we help our client organisations build resilience throughout the system: resilient individuals working in a dynamic, appropriately flexible organisation.

There are two aspects to this:

1. With coaching support, leaders develop a healthier view of what personal resilience actually is. This means moving from the unhealthy 'tough cookie' view, to an open mind and objectivity, combined with confidence in one's self and one's own abilities. Tough cookies are to be helped, not revered.
2. Senior leaders and team leaders benefit from coaching which helps them reflect regularly on the system that they are creating and perpetuating, in particular those aspects which cause unproductive stress and unnecessary challenges. This requires leaders to have genuine, open conversations with people about what is getting in their way, and a willingness to act on what they find.

Great coaches advise, guide and challenge their clients to play their part in developing personal and organisational resilience. They also have a responsibility to challenge outdated and unhelpful views of what resilience means.

Contact Graham if you'd like to discuss resilience or your wider coaching and mentoring needs. Call **01869 338989** or email **graham.clark@theoocm.co.uk**