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What Does It Actually Take to Build Resilience?

**Consulting Solutions - Yvonne Kinney**

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There's a reason why resilience has emerged as a highly sought-after skill in today's job market. **As we discussed previously**, high levels of resilience are linked to higher employee productivity, job satisfaction, and engagement—in addition to reduced absenteeism. Resilience is broadly understood as an individual's ability to recover from setbacks, adapt to challenges, and continue moving forward (Southwick et al., 2014).

Although some leaders approach resilience as an inborn trait, it's anything but that. Resilience is a quality that is developed over time, shaped by the experiences and challenges that people have lived through, as well as the intentional practices they've developed as a result (Southwick et al., 2014). It is therefore possible for anyone to develop resilience; however, it can't just be taught in a classroom or absorbed through osmosis. Building resilience involves training the mind to react to stress in an intentionally proactive manner, which allows you to transform setbacks into opportunities for growth.

Four key steps in this process include building a growth mindset, strengthening emotional awareness, developing problem-solving skills, and practicing gratitude and positivity.

Building a Growth Mindset

A growth mindset is the foundation of resilience, defined as the belief that abilities and intelligence aren't fixed but can instead be cultivated through dedication and hard work. When employees have a growth mindset, they are more likely to view failures as opportunities for learning and growth (Dweck, 2006).

Instead of focusing on perfection, employees with a growth mindset learn to celebrate progress and embrace stretch assignments that push their limits.

Three ways to encourage a growth mindset as a leader are:

- Approach challenges as learning experiences and present employees with opportunities to step outside their comfort zones. This could look like tapping a newer associate to present at the client strategy meeting over a more senior employee, with lots of encouragement and guidance throughout the process.
- Focus on progress over perfection by acknowledging small wins and improvements and reinforce employees' incremental learning and growth.
- Use **positive self-talk and reframing techniques** rooted in positive psychology and emotional intelligence (EQ) to frame setbacks constructively.

Strengthening Emotional Awareness

Emotional awareness is a foundational component of emotional intelligence, also called self-awareness; it involves recognizing and understanding one's emotions and how they impact your thoughts and behaviors. Emotional awareness allows employees to respond thoughtfully and intentionally in stressful situations, instead of impulsively (Goleman, 1995).

When employees are in tune with their emotions, they are able to handle stressful situations with greater composure, which can help reduce workplace conflicts and foster a healthier environment.

Leaders can help foster emotional awareness among team members by:

- **Using the PAUSE Method:** After meetings or key interactions, take a moment to reflect on what went well and what didn't. This "post-mortem" approach allows leaders to analyze emotional triggers and outcomes, helping both their teams and themselves understand how to manage similar situations in the future.
- **Modeling Emotional Regulation in Real Situations:** Instead of abstract mindfulness, demonstrate practical ways to handle emotions under pressure. For instance, take a deep breath or pause before responding to a challenging question. By showing calm under stress, leaders teach team members that taking a moment to reflect can lead to healthier responses, thus building resilience.
- **Sharing Simple Reflection Techniques:** Encourage employees to take a few minutes after intense situations to jot down their thoughts on what impacted their reactions. This can be done through brief notes or mental check-ins, fostering a habit of self-awareness that doesn't require formal journaling while still offering valuable insights.

Developing Problem-Solving Skills



Resilient people have excellent problem-solving skills, defined as the ability to approach challenges with confidence and creativity (Neenan, 2009). Strong problem-solvers are proactive and view obstacles as puzzles to solve instead of insurmountable barriers (Neenan, 2009).

Employees that develop problem-solving skills handle challenges head-on while avoiding the sense of helplessness that often looms during difficult situations.

You can work with employees to develop problem-solving skills by:

- Breaking down complex problems into a series of small, manageable steps to minimize overwhelm.
- Practicing brainstorming and encouraging employees to explore multiple solutions, with the understanding that there are no “dumb ideas.” By fostering an environment where it’s safe to think outside the box, you encourage a proactive, solution-oriented mindset.
- Reflecting on your team’s past successes to reinforce confidence and remind employees of lessons you’ve learned collectively from previous trials and achievements.

Practicing Gratitude and Positivity

A practice of gratitude and positivity helps shift one’s mindset and build emotional resilience (Fredrickson, 2001). With a more positive outlook, employees are able to reframe challenges, helping reduce stress and foster mental well-being (Fredrickson, 2001).

In particular, gratitude has been shown to foster a supportive workplace environment where employees feel appreciated.

You can work to foster gratitude among your team through:

- Encouraging employees to take note of positive encounters, meetings, and projects that went well. Advise them to reflect on how these positive experiences can be duplicated in future situations.
- Reframing negative situations by identifying the silver lining or a valuable lesson. For example, “I am grateful for the additional space and time to find and engage new clients that align with our business values, despite having lost a client today.”
- Surrounding yourself with positive influences and creating a work environment that encourages positivity through supportive interactions and shared goals.

Even More Strategies for Developing Resilience

Beyond these core practices, there are additional steps leaders can take to bolster their own resilience and that of employees:

- **Build Strong Social Connections:** Being surrounded by supportive friends, colleagues, and families can help employees weather difficult times (Cohen & Wills, 1985).
- **Practice Self-Care and Healthy Boundaries:** Maintaining one's physical health and setting boundaries both play an important role in an individual's mental resilience. Encourage employees to prioritize self-care and maintain a work-life balance (McEwen, 1998).

Building Resilience Is an Ongoing Process

Building resilience involves learning to cope and thrive amid challenges instead of eliminating stress completely. Resilience building as an organization is a continuous journey that requires patience, practice, and a commitment to growth.

By fostering resilience within your team, you're investing in a healthier, more adaptive workplace — one where employees are equipped to succeed in the face of adversity. For more detailed guidance on building resilient employees, [read our white paper](#).

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