

Measuring Employee Resilience

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Summary

Resilience — the capacity of a body to “spring back” to its original shape in the face of adversity or stress — is a key factor contributing to an individual's effectiveness in life and at work. This paper explores the growing importance of this concept in understanding personal and organizational effectiveness, summarizes the research behind resilience, and describes the development and use of the Resilience Quotient™ (RQ), an assessment tool that individuals and organizations can use to measure their resilience capacities. The authors conclude by inviting organizational development professionals and researchers to help further develop the RQ.

Introduction

As we enter the 21st century, it is clear that the rapid pace of change in society and in our workplaces has a profound effect upon those who are asked to undergo these changes. Some people seem to thrive on change — they seek out changing environments and often initiate change when things seem too stable. Others run in the opposite direction of the change. Instead of embracing change, these change-averse individuals may drag their feet, pray for a reprieve, or actively work to undercut the change initiative. Still others put on a brave face and muddle their way through the confusion, uncertainty, anxiety of a change — neither embracing it nor fleeing from it, but doing nothing overtly to either move it forward or block its progress.

What factors might explain an individual's response to either embrace, muddle through, or flee from and resist a given change? Researchers and practitioners have identified such factors as the level of trust in those who are leading the change, the degree of perceived opportunity or loss resulting from the change, the individual's past history with change efforts, the degree of influence or control over the impact and future course of the change, or disagreement over the need for the change or in the solutions offered to “solve” the problem driving the change (Bridges, 1991; Conner, 1992; Dunham, 1984; Russell, 1998, 2003, and 2005). Based upon the authors' research and practice in the field of organizational change, an additional factor that stands alone as a force and one that contributes to most of the others is that of resilience. An individual's internal resilience capacities, the authors believe, powerfully influence the response behaviors of those who are affected by a change. The authors' practice, grounded in more than twenty years of work with diverse organizations, suggests that people who are resilient tend to face change more proactively, making it work for them while those who lack resilience tend to at best *endure* the change and, at worst, actively avoid or resist it.

What Is Resilience?

The root of the word resilience is *resile*, which, in the original French and Latin means to “jump back or recoil.” This root translates into the modern concept of resilience as the ability of a body to recover from or adjust to misfortune or change. Within this context, resilience is also the capability of a strained body to recover its size and shape after being subjected to adversity or stress.

Contemporary applications of this concept to the human experience date from landmark research conducted by two development psychologists, Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith (2001). Werner and Smith tracked the progress of 698 children from birth to beyond their thirtieth

birthdays, seeking to identify why some children thrived while others withered when faced with significant familial and social hurdles. Their findings on resilience are echoed in comparable studies on youth under stress done by Bernard (1991), Rutter (1977), and Garmezy (1991).

Fortunately, the resilience of adults in work and non-work settings has also been the focus of research. Psychologists and researchers Reivich and Shatté (2002) and Brooks and Goldstein (2004) have examined resilience in adults dealing with stressful situations, each identifying the characteristics that enable someone to bounce back in the face of adversity and stress. Within the context of organizational change, Conner (1991) and Russell (1998, 2003) have built upon the work of Reivich, et. al. by identifying and developing an inventory of characteristics of resilient people that can be used by change leaders and HRD/OD professionals to help guide the strengthening of employee resilience (through training, mentoring, coaching, etc.) and help shape the design and implementation of change initiatives to maximize employee commitment.

The authors' work in the field of change resilience, grounded in the research of Werner and Smith, Bernard, Rutter, Garmezy, and the others referenced above has led to several key conclusions:

1. **Resilience is a mindset, a way of thinking, vs. a hard-wired and innate quality.** It is less about who we are and more about how we *think* about ourselves and how we *interpret* the world around us. This “mental model” of how we view ourselves and the world directly influences how we experience threats and challenges — viewing them as either devastating setbacks or as hidden opportunities, or something in between. This mindset, in turn, influences the set of behaviors we use — which can run the gamut from fight or flight, to passive acquiescence, to proactive engagement that attempts to take direct control of the change.
2. **Resilience is not a static quantity (that you either have or not).** It is a dynamic quality that changes in response to the environment. A person may be resilient at certain times and not at others due to the variable quality of their own resilience capacities and the degree and intensity of the stress or change that they are facing. Because the resilient mindset is a *moving* target, even people who tend to be highly resilient have their good days and their bad days.
3. **Resilience can be developed and strengthened.** Since we are dealing with a mindset vs. genetic characteristics or even one's core personality, someone's resilience can be enhanced and strengthened. While increasing one's resilience capacities is largely a personal effort by individuals, organizations can and should facilitate its growth through training, coaching, and mentoring.
4. **Resilience has a number of facets or dimensions.** Resilience is not a monolithic concept, but, instead, is comprised of eight interdependent and highly correlated cognitive dimensions. By assessing the relative strength of each of these eight dimensions, individuals acting alone or with the assistance of HRD/OD professionals can develop more targeted efforts to strengthen their personal resilience.

The Characteristics of Resilient People

The authors have identified eight dimensions of individual resilience. These facets evolve from their extensive practice in change management efforts and are reinforced in the research cited earlier. The core dimensions of resilience are:

1. **Self Assurance.** This dimension involves a high level of self-confidence and a belief that one can meet any challenge with hope and realistic optimism. Self-assurance also includes the understanding that, while the world is complex and challenging, one has the ability to find the opportunity and to succeed despite these challenges.

2. **Personal Vision.** Resilient people know what they believe in and have a clear idea of what they want to accomplish or create in their life. With a larger life-purpose pulling them forward, resilient people approach adversity and stress with a sense of opportunity and hope.
3. **Flexible and Adaptable.** The most resilient people are those who are keenly aware of and sensitive to the changes occurring in the world around them. With the help of this awareness, they are able to shift gears and direction if necessary to accommodate the new reality while remaining true to their life purpose/vision. Resilient people adapt to the environment as both a survival mechanism but also as a vehicle for enabling them to continue the pursuit of their personal goals.
4. **Organized.** In the face of chaos and uncertainty, resilient people find ways to create a level of order and structure that provides them the focus and stability they need. This can involve setting short-term goals, thinking through their actions before taking action, putting together “to-do” lists, and so forth.
5. **Problem Solver.** Resilient people have the ability to analyze problems, discover the root causes, and create lasting solutions. They are also effective at seeing the relationship of a problem to other problems within a larger system or network of deeply interdependent issues. This awareness of the bigger picture enables them to recognize the limits of their own influence and to expect (and not be blindsided by) the unexpected.
6. **Interpersonal Competence.** A key dimension of resilience is an individual's ability to understand and empathize with others. Resilient people demonstrate the competencies of emotional intelligence: a high level of self and social awareness and the ability to use this awareness to effectively management themselves and their relationships with others (see Golman, 1997).
7. **Socially Connected.** Closely related to interpersonal competence, this resilience dimension involves the quality of a person's personal and professional network of relationships. Resilient people tend to have a strong relationship network within which they share ideas, problems, solutions, frustrations, hopes, and so forth. In the face of adversity and stress, resilient people call upon this network for support, affirmation, and problem solving.
8. **Proactive.** Resilient people, rather than simply reacting to a change, actively engage it. They tend to have an internal locus of control (Rotter, 1966) where they believe that they have the capacity and the *responsibility* to determine their own destiny vs. feeling powerless in a given situation. Resilient people, as a result, focus on *expanding* their influence over a change through assertive behaviors and actions. This proactivity enables them to preserve their self-efficacy in the face of any change — even a traumatic one. Viktor Frankl's moving testament of life in the Auschwitz Nazi concentration camp speaks to the power of being proactive in the face of adversity (see Frankl, 1963).

Description of the Resilience Quotient Assessment

The Resilience Quotient (RQ) assessment consists of 32 statements to which the person responds using a 6-point scale. For each statement, the respondent is asked to identify their level of agreement on the scale. The 32 statements are organized within the RQ instrument according to the 8 resilience dimensions of the resilience model.

Administration of the RQ Assessment

The RQ assessment can be administered individually or in a group setting. Respondents are asked to read each statement carefully and then to check the box that best reflects their level of agreement with the statement.

Scoring and Plotting the RQ Assessment

After completing the RQ Assessment, the respondent transfers his or her selections to the RQ scoring sheet to calculate the overall RQ score as well as the individual RQ dimension scores. Once the individual RQ dimension scores are determined, the respondent then plots the eight RQ dimension scores on the RQ radar chart to gain a graphical depiction of his or her resilience capacities.

Interpreting the RQ Assessment Scores and the RQ Radar Chart

The maximum possible overall RQ score is 192, the lowest possible RQ score is 32. The maximum and minimum possible RQ scores for each of the 8 dimensions is 24 and 4 respectively. Interpreting the overall RQ assessment score is aided within the instrument with a descriptive narrative that guides respondents in analyzing their RQ results and in developing a personal plan for strengthening their resilience capacities.

Interpreting the RQ radar chart involves examining the overall size of the “wheel” (a wider wheel suggests greater resilience) and the “balance” or proportionality of the wheel. A wheel out of balance, for example, would be evident if the respondent's scores indicated low levels of resilience in one or more dimensions (such as *personal vision* or *interpersonal competence*) as compared to other dimensions.

Action Planning Using the Resilience Quotient

Based upon the overall RQ value and the individual RQ dimension scores and an examination of the size and shape of the RQ “wheel,” those who complete the RQ assessment will be able to identify areas to target to strengthen their resilience capacities. If the overall RQ value is strong, but individual RQ dimensions suggest potential resilience vulnerabilities, the dimension scores and radar chart help point the individual toward the potential growth area.

When developing a personal resilience improvement plan, respondents can benefit most from the instrument by examining the individual statements that comprise each of the RQ dimensions. These statements can suggest areas for personal growth and development as strategies for enhancing resilience in the respective RQ dimension.

Facilitating the Growth of Resilience Capacities

Organizational development and HRD professions can use the RQ results to guide both individuals and the organization toward enhancing resilience. This effort will be especially useful in anticipation of future stress or planned change initiatives. While growing or strengthening resilience is a gradual process (there are no fast paths to being resilient), identifying potential vulnerabilities with the RQ assessment is one important benefit of the tool. It can also be used to help people begin strengthening their resilience through focused attention and formal action planning.

For *personal* action planning, the OD/HRD professional can best facilitate the strengthening of employee resilience by integrating the RQ assessment into existing workshops on change and personal effectiveness or designing stand-alone workshops on growing resilience. A half-day workshop on the RQ assessment might include:

- An overview of resilience.
- Administering and scoring the RQ assessment.
- Sharing and discussing the RQ results in dyads or small groups.
- Identifying ideas for strengthening resilience using a small group process.
- Personal action planning

Compiling the RQ assessment scores from a group of people can also benefit individual teams or the larger organization. To facilitate team or *organizational* action planning based upon the RQ results, the OD/HRD professional will need to gather individual RQ scores of the team or organizational members and analyze the overall level of resilience of the team/organization. Care must be taken to ensure anonymity of the data collected. The authors recommend that individuals completing the RQ assessment be asked to complete two scoring sheets and to forward one copy of the scoring sheet to the OD/HRD professional.

By pooling and analyzing the data across multiple respondents for a team or the organization, OD/HRD professionals can gain insights into the resilience capacities of the group and also provide follow-along skill building, mentoring, coaching, and so forth to address potential group vulnerabilities.

Reliability of the RQ Assessment

The reliability of the RQ assessment was calculated by analyzing the variance across variables for internal consistency of the scale. This generated a Cronbach's alpha value of .90.

A Cronbach's alpha value was also generated for each of the RQ dimensions. These values are: *self-assurance* (.77), *personal vision* (.70), *flexible and adaptable* (.74), *organized* (.69), *problem solver* (.73), *interpersonal competence* (.60), *socially connected* (.56), and *proactive* (.60).

Further tests concerning the reliability and validity (using factor analysis) of the instrument are continuing.

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