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*Coaching Strategies for
Developing Executive Resilience*

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Coaching Strategies for Developing Executive Resilience

Karlin Sloan

The “new normal” of rapid, unceasing change requires corporate executives to express a new level of resilience. Executive coaches are called upon help leaders to thrive in chaos, bounce back from crisis and challenge, and develop resilience in others. For this purpose, the author offers a simple model and concrete steps for eliciting resident strengths and stretching into new areas of competence that assist executives to lead a more adaptive, change-ready organization. Based on a 2009 research study on more than 40 Fortune 500 companies, resilience attributes are becoming increasingly important priorities for top-level executive development.¹

WHAT IS RESILIENCE AND WHY DO WE NEED IT?

Resilience, according to Merriam Webster, is the ability to bounce back from change or challenge. The world as we know it has shifted. In response to multiple crisis points—economic meltdown, environmental resource depletion, ongoing war and terrorist threats, as well as shifting sands of new regulations and 24/7 connectivity—our corporate leaders need to focus on helping themselves and their organizations to be resilient and ready for the “new normal” of rapid change.

As organizations adapt to this rapid, unceasing change, coaching is being directed toward developing the attributes that allow individuals and organizations to thrive inside of what may look like chaos. In addition to assisting leaders to enhance their performance, the context of coaching is shifting to develop specific attributes of change readiness; these are resilience attributes.

The idea of resilience has existed throughout human history – all mythical heroes and heroines must meet challenges and overcome them. But how long have we been applying what we know about the specific attributes of resilience?

In the 1970s Emmy Werner (1982) was one of the early scientists to use the word *resilience* in specific longitudinal research. She began the modern study of resilience by looking at a cohort of 698 children from Kauai, Hawaii. At the time Kauai was quite poor, and many of the children in the study grew up with alcoholic or mentally ill parents. Many of the parents were also out of work and financially stressed. She found that there was a repeated pattern of

¹Karlin Sloan & Company conducted research in 2009 that contributed to findings on the need for resilience attributes. More than 40 companies participated, including AstraZeneca, Cadbury, Exelon Corporation, Facebook, Harley-Davidson, ITW, Kraft Foods, Liberty Mutual, Old Mutual Asset Management, Putnam Investments, Radio Flyer, Rush University Medical Center, Seventh Generation, Target, and US Cellular.

factors for those children (one-third of them) who did not exhibit destructive behaviors in their later years. These positive factors were that someone believed in them; they had external community support; and they had specific personal attributes.

In 1980 Block & Block devoted themselves to studying specific, individual differentiators for resilience. They demonstrated that ego-control, self-esteem, and ego-resiliency are all related to adaptation to change. For example, children who are abused or mistreated can still have high self-esteem. They may process risky situations differently from those with low self-esteem by attributing different reasons for what they experience (e.g., my teacher had a bad day versus I am bad and therefore my teacher hates me).

Additional research in the 1980s led to the delineation of three sets of factors implicated in the development of resilience: (1) attributes of the children themselves, (2) aspects of their families, and (3) characteristics of their wider social environments (Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992). In 2002 Reivich and Shatté identified four fundamental uses for resilience:

1. Overcome obstacles of childhood.
2. Steer through everyday adversities.
3. Bounce back from a major setback.
4. Reach out to achieve what you are capable of.

When we consider organizational leadership, these specific uses for resilience become very important, specifically steering through everyday adversities, bouncing back from major setbacks, and reaching out to achieve what you are capable of. All of these are relevant areas of focus for executive coaching.

According to all of the resilience research from Emmy Werner's studies, optimism is one of the key attributes required to bounce back from change or challenge. Martin Seligman (1991), widely thought of as the "father of positive psychology," coined the term *learned optimism*. It is the habit of attributing one's failures to causes that are external (not personal), variable (not permanent), and specific (limited to a specific situation). For example, an optimistic person attributes his/her failures to external causes (the environment or other people), to variable causes which are not likely to happen again, and to specific causes that will not affect his/her success in other endeavors. This *explanatory style* is associated with better performances (academic, athletic, or work productivity), greater satisfaction in interpersonal relationships, better coping, less vulnerability to depression, and better physical health.

Sonja Lyubomirsky built on Seligman's work in her positive psychology research. Her work (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2007) suggests that 50% of our happiness is biologically set, 10% is determined by our life circumstances and 40% are determined

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by our intentional activities. We know from her work that we can indeed influence our ability to be resilient.

From 2004 to 2010, Alan Graham, PhD, and this author have been compiling research on resilience (personal attributes, family attributes, and characteristics of the wider environment) and combined that with the latest understanding in positive psychology and explanatory style to create the Resilience at Work Questionnaire™. This work led us to identify resilience factors as three basic relationships we have to our world: to ourselves, to others, and to our environment, and the five sub-attributes that can be found within each factor. Within this article we will use this specific framework to address the development of resilience attributes.

A MODEL FOR RESILIENCE

According to Kathy Marshall of the National Resilience Resource Center at the University of Minnesota, “...significant, lasting change begins inside individuals and emanates outward, not the other way around. Systems change when groups of people together tap their resilience and change from the inside out.” In order to get our leaders, teams, and organizations to function at their peak, and to address the issues we’re facing right now, it’s up to all of us to take a look at our own ability to bounce back from adversity, to overcome and work through challenges, and to use those times to learn, grow, and break through to better ways of being.

In reviewing much of the literature on resilience, researchers have understood resilience in how people relate to others, the self, and to environment. Interpersonally, a resilient individual generally feels appreciated by others, is able to ask for help and give help to others, can work collaboratively with others, and displays empathy.

Internally, a resilient individual is confident in his/her ability to problem solve, make decisions, and communicate. These individuals are future minded and are comfortable using positive emotions. Resilient individuals are self-aware and are able to manage their moods, thoughts, and attitudes. When called to action, resilient individuals are able to view mistakes and hardships as challenges to confront, are able to set realistic goals, and are internally driven, proactive, and purpose filled.

From their review of the research, Graham and Sloan (2004) developed a new model of resilience (the Resilience at Work Model™) with three relationship arenas needed by executives: relationship to self, relationship to others, and relationship to environment. They have used it in organizations across the United States and Europe via the Resilience at Work Questionnaire™.²

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² The Resilience at Work Questionnaire™ and its companion book, *Lemonade: The Leaders Guide to Resilience at Work* by Alan Graham, Ph.D., Kevin Cuthbert, and Karlin Sloan, are available online.

RELATIONSHIP TO SELF

The first step in leadership resilience is a positive relationship to oneself - from belief in our capacity to make a difference in our world to taking good physical and emotional care of ourselves. When we are confident in our ability to address whatever comes our way, we are more likely to succeed. Belief is half the battle.

Our relationship to self is based on the stories we choose to focus on to affirm our identity and our beliefs. Do we tell ourselves stories of our failures, foibles, problems, and woes? Or do we select those stories in which we are the star, we exemplify our values, triumph over odds, or succeed? Those leaders who have a positive relationship to themselves are more likely to tell themselves stories that reinforce their strengths and empower them to lead with confidence.

Here are the resilience attributes that comprise our Relationship to Self:

Table 1. Resilience attributes and relationship to self

Resilience Attribute	Description
Confident	Being confident in our ability to cope with the world. Believing in our abilities, skills, or attributes and our capacity to succeed in what we set out to do.
Optimistic	Looking on the more favorable side of events or conditions and expecting more favorable outcomes. Believing in a positive future.
Positive	Cultivating positive emotions to find the good in life and not dwell on the negative. The ability to hold onto positive emotions despite challenges.
Self-aware	Having the ability to reflect on what we think and how we feel. This includes having an understanding of how we are perceived by others.
Self-managing	Exhibiting self-care and managing our own energy and emotions. This includes adapting our behaviors to socially appropriate norms, and exhibiting self control. Those who self-manage are able to persevere over time.

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When coaching executives about their relationship to self, three issues tend to arise:

1. Focus on the negative or areas that need improvement to the exclusion of the positive (sabotaging confidence and positivity).

2. Focus on the past and the present, rarely stepping into a vision of the future without carrying forward negative experiences from the past (sabotaging future-mindedness and positivity).
3. Focus on others, neglecting self-care and self-reflection (sabotaging self-awareness and self-management).

High achievers tend to focus not on their strengths, successes, and wins, but on what they haven't done yet. It's a great way to sabotage leadership confidence, particularly during times of ambiguity and stress. This is when we have to re-train the brain to focus on what is working and to compensate for any weaknesses or challenges through the use of strengths.

Take Sam, an extremely successful executive and Information Technology leader. Sam is highly competent, masterful even, at his technical work. After receiving the results of a 360 feedback survey of his boss, peers, direct reports, and customers, he was in a state of fear and upset over what others were saying about his performance. Although he was respected for his technical knowledge, he was perceived as not having empathy or understanding for his team. His peers evaluated him very highly, as did his boss, but his direct reports rated him with low scores on all of his leadership competencies except "planning".

Instead of seeing the feedback as a helpful developmental tool from which to plan a new approach, Sam was deflated. It seemed that the negative comments tripped a wire in Sam's mind—something that started a negative loop where Sam began looking at himself from a negative perspective and started doubting his abilities. It was as if Sam had forgotten everything he knew about himself because of this challenging (but not unforeseen) feedback. He felt sensitive, vulnerable, angry, and as if he had failed.

Before Sam could focus on how to address the issues he had to tackle, he needed to re-set and remember his own strengths. In fact, the reframe was that this specific feedback was not condemnation, but an opportunity to look at his strengths and how he might use those strengths to develop better, more positive relationships with his team. We created a plan to look first at the positive feedback and help Sam to reflect on himself in a balanced way. All of a sudden the picture changed for Sam. He had not focused on any of the feedback that showed how positively he was perceived by his boss and peers. If he had positive relationships in those areas, it implied he must have transferrable skills he could use with his team. Next we looked at how he could build a positive vision of the future and envision a positive future state for his team. His boss, in particular, had commented on Sam's effective presentation and influence skills. We discussed how he might use those skills with his team to start a new way of working together.

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Sam's first step in self-management was to remember not to lash out at his team for their negative but honest feedback, but to talk to them in their next team meeting about the feedback he got and his positive vision for the future. He told them he was concerned that their morale was down and that as a leader, he had not built the kind of positive, trusting relationships he'd like to have. But today was a new beginning. That exercise was a reminder to Sam that he had great strengths. Through envisioning what he wanted, engaging those strengths, becoming more self-aware, and managing his emotional response, he was able to begin a new phase in his leadership journey, one where he developed a more positive approach to managing his team.

Sports psychologists have long used the concept of positive visualization to help professional athletes tell themselves a story of winning. A professional golfer may visualize his or her swing, see the ball sail towards the green, and gently make that hole-in-one shot. This kind of visualization trains the mind and the body to expect a positive result. It's about engaging with a positive future, tapping positive emotions, and building confidence. Coaches can introduce the technique of visualization or "mental rehearsal" to build relationship to self.

RELATIONSHIP TO OTHERS

The Dalai Lama, in his book *Ethics for a New Millennium*, observed,

Consider the following. We humans are social beings. We come into the world as a result of others' actions. We survive here in dependence on others. Whether we like it or not, there is hardly a moment when we do not benefit from others' activities.

The basic question in relationship to others is "do you feel loved, supported, and appreciated?" We all need others to survive, and the more positive relationships we have with others, the more buffered we are against hardships.

Plain and simple, we need each other. Without community we are nothing. There is a beautiful African philosophy called *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* reminds us that we are interconnected and interdependent. Bishop Desmond Tutu (1999) describes it with the words,

We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected, and what you do affects the whole world. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity.

That basic concept is behind one of the great transformations of our time—the overthrow of Apartheid in South Africa. What an example of how rapidly enormous social change can happen! One of the great lessons of *Ubuntu* is that leaders owe their status to the will of the people under them. This attitude is what has made so many leaders successful during crisis and deep change.

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Teams that don't remember this principle have trouble collaborating. Leaders who can't ask for help become the stereotypical micro-manager who can't rely on anyone. It's not that hard to get valuable assistance; just try making a request, and see how much people want to help when they are asked.

The attributes that make up Relationship to Others are these:

Table 2. Resilience attributes and relationship to others

Resilience Attribute	Description
Appreciative	The ability to express gratitude and say thanks to others. The ability to receive thanks and appreciations from others.
Helpful	Providing support to those who need it. Caring for or assisting a friend or colleague builds confidence, community and trust.
Accepting	The ability to ask for and receive help from others.
Collaborative	Being a team player means sharing information and resources to achieve better results and helping collaborators become more engaged.
Empathic	The ability to put ourselves "in another's shoes" and view the world as they see it.

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Great leaders know that they need to build relationships and collaboration. Think of a leader you admire. Chances are they are excellent at building relationships and surrounding themselves with smart people they can trust.

When we are appreciative of others, our whole attitude shifts toward what's going right. This broadens and builds the positive. If what we focus on does indeed create our reality, then we need to focus more on what works, what's good, and what we're grateful for. Think of the most magnetic, engaging people you know. My guess is that they are not just ruminating about what's wrong and what needs to be fixed, but that they are optimistic, positive, or focus on what's good at least 60% of the time. They are able to connect to others and be present and aware of other people's feelings or thoughts. They are curious about others and see opportunity in relationships.

Coaching leaders around Relationship to Others requires a focus on what we might traditionally refer to as *emotional* or *social intelligence* (Gibbs, 1995). Emotional or social intelligence describes our capacity to identify, assess, and use our own emotions and those of others. Three key areas executives tend to find greater challenges include

- being unwilling to look “weak” by requesting necessary help;
- giving and receiving much-needed appreciation that both increases engagement and enhances collaboration; and
- sensing the morale of their team or greater organization and addressing negative emotions productively and with sensitivity.

Because many leaders are rewarded for their own heroic efforts and for their ability to help others, they can push down any natural tendencies to ask for what they need in order to succeed.

Julie, a successful procurement executive at a global confections company was well regarded as someone who got the job done. She was autonomous, expert, and results-oriented. As an asset to the organization, she was provided an executive coach to work with her specifically on her relationship to others. Recent 360 feedback showed that her team members felt neglected and unsure of her interest in their success. They saw Julie as a “lone wolf” who was not interested in collaboration.

Julie, who was feeling pressured and overworked, had no idea she was perceived this way. As an initial intervention, her coach worked with her on creating a 3:1 ratio of positive to negative commentary on the performance of her direct reports. This re-orienting toward the positive was a welcome change for Julie’s team, who began to feel appreciated by their boss. The next step was to encourage Julie to tap her team for assistance, and instead of overworking and overstressing, Julie began to learn to ask for help and rely on her team. The result was not just a more engaged and trusting team, but a greatly reduced workload for Julie with no downturn in productivity.

RELATIONSHIP TO ENVIRONMENT

How do you see your world? The way we frame our reality is everything. Do we see the glass half-full or half-empty? Are you a victim of circumstance or responsible for what happens to you? Are failures the end, or the beginning, of something new? Our external environment does not dictate our actions – and our relationship to that environment can be one of learning and growth, or one of victimization and disempowerment.

Leaders, in particular, need to be conscious of *how* they think, not just *what* they think. They need to turn mistakes into learning opportunities, and crisis into opportunity.

One of the great opportunities for developing our relationship to environment is to connect to something larger than ourselves, to enliven our sense of personal purpose. Marie Curie famously

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said, “Nothing in life is to be feared. It is only to be understood.” Our stance can be to cultivate curiosity and understanding, and to learn from and about our experiences in service of our greater purpose. Such an orientation can take us out of our small, petty frame, and help us transcend the personal to become larger, more thoughtful, and more focused.

Table 3. Resilience attributes and relationship to environment

Resilience Attribute	Description
Reframes	The ability to shift our perspective, and see “reality” in a new light. Seeing challenges as learning opportunities encourages reasonable risk-taking, and fostering personal and professional growth.
Goal-Oriented	Setting goals that gives us a compass to guide ourselves through life’s journey. By setting compelling, realistic, and inspiring goals, we have a better chance of reaching those goals.
Future-minded	The ability to envision new possibilities that get ourselves beyond the “here and now” and better able to put what is occurring in the present into better perspective.
Purposeful	The ability to test decisions to see if they are consistent with one’s values and beliefs.
Proactive	Being able to think ahead to prevent possible problems and take advantage of opportunities. Taking charge of events rather than experiencing life as a victim of circumstance.

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All executive coaches work with the challenge of executives who have challenges stepping away from what needs to be addressed in the moment. Coaching leaders on relationship to environment requires that the coach be willing to challenge the coachee to shift perspective, and to take time for the long-term view rather than just the short-term. This type of coaching requires the executive to step away from day-to-day deliverables, and to consider *how* they think about their work, not just *what* they think. We need to challenge them to step away from the immediate and envision the long-term possibilities and consequences inherent in the new realities they are coping with.

Challenges that executives experience in their relationship to environment include

- the tendency to focus on immediate, short-term wins to the exclusion of anything else, rather than shifting to a more purposeful, future-minded view of what is going on around them;

- getting into “reactive” mode and solving problems, rather than thinking of innovative new ways of doing things, or being proactive; and
- staying in a rut, and seeing things from only one perspective.

Some of the greatest executive coaching is focused on helping leaders to inspire their organization to truly live their mission and purpose, not just in the brands they sell but in the very way they do business. Coaches who can help their clients get back to these mission-critical basics can inspire positive impact and performance improvement.

Marco is the leader of a large creative team in a global packaged goods company. As a young designer, Marco enjoyed his contributions to the organization and felt like he was using his talents to make the world a more beautiful place. As a senior executive, however, he had started to feel removed from his purpose and passion. When his coach began working with him, he was reactive, agitated, and unhappy with his life overall. His team members commented on his “grouchy” behavior, which was not just getting in the way at work. He was also having trouble at home. He was working long hours and avoiding going home to his family.

His coach had a challenge on her hands. Marco was unhappy with the coaching itself. He was given the opportunity to work with a coach by his boss, but to Marco it seemed like a mandate, and he assumed he was forced into the coaching program. The first step for the coach was to help Marco identify his strengths and challenges in resilience. His relationship to environment – specifically his ability to reframe his circumstances – was his greatest challenge. The coach, Anne, started the engagement discussing the three arenas of Self, Other, and Environment, and had Marco do a self-assessment. Marco started to see that his point-of-view was sabotaging his success. His unhappiness was in no small part due to the fact that he had lost his sense of meaning and purpose.

Anne asked Marco if he could create something visual to express his purpose as a leader. This simple assignment lit a fire for Marco that he hadn’t had in years. He started applying his innate design sensibility to inspire his team and create a presentation about leadership and management for his organization. He was able to talk about his own purpose in life, then bring that purpose into his existing work. Not only did that shift the grouchy behavior with his team; he became a more enthusiastic and innovative leader.

LEADING A RESILIENT ORGANIZATION: WHAT IS POSSIBLE?

Coaching by its very nature increases the resilience of executives and their organizations. For every executive who is coached, many others are impacted positively. When we focus specifically on

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resilience, we can use executive coaching interventions as a way to enhance and engage the qualities of leadership necessary for a new era in which we don't know what's around the corner. This would be a time when we are able to take any new reality and make the most of it.

What is possible when we value and focus on these much-needed attributes? If we can orient ourselves to adaptation, flexibility, and longer-term thinking, we can avoid the pitfalls of the kind of quarterly earnings obsession that have plagued our organizations and ultimately hurt our economy. We can learn to find what is positive and possible, and operate our organizations based on long-term value. We have the capacity as corporate citizens to take this time of upheaval and create organizations of meaning and purpose, organizations that contribute to the betterment of colleagues, customers, and community.

As coaches, we can identify the attributes that help executives bounce back from change and challenge. We can help them develop what they are missing and use what they are already good at. We can assist our executive coachees to slow down, develop awareness of self and others, shift their perspective to the long-term as well as the short-term, and develop all of these attributes that assist in coping with rapid change and challenge.

RESOURCE

Kathy Marshall at the National Resilience Resource Center: <http://www.research.umn.edu/spotlight/marshall.html>

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