

# Are you resilient?

**Manage stress in the workplace?  
Many companies no longer even attempt to.  
The new corporate goal is to help employees  
develop their coping skills and ability  
to thrive even in the toughest times.**

BY RACHELE KANIGEL

Remember a few years ago when touchy-feely stress-management workshops were all the rage? Well, say goodbye to group massages and soothing New Age music. The new buzzword in business boardrooms these days is “resilience.”

In an age of corporate downsizing, mega-mergers, and lightening-quick technological change, employers are realizing that they can’t even attempt to manage stress. Work is stressful and the pressure isn’t going to slip away with the chanting of a mantra. Rather, the idea now is to seek out and develop a new kind of worker—one with the ability to weather adversity.

“In today’s workplace everyone feels pressured to get more work done with fewer people, in less time, with less budget, and in new ways,” says Al Siebert, a psychologist and director of The Resiliency Center in Portland, Oregon who offers resiliency-training programs around the country. “Organizations need people who are resilient, people who can adapt quickly, change directions, bounce back.”

“Resilience” first showed up in the corporate lexicon in the late 1990s with the release of Paul C. Stoltz’s 1997 book *Adversity Quotient: Turning Obstacles into Opportunities* (John Wiley & Sons). Playing off of psychologist and author Daniel Coleman’s concept of emotional intelligence, Stoltz, a corporate consultant, theorized that a person’s success in the world is based largely on his ability to cope with adversity.

According to his research, people with a high “adversity quotient, make more money, are more innovative, and are better problem solvers than those less adept at handling misfortune. In his new book, *Adversity Quotient @ Work: Make Everyday Challenges the Key to Your Success* (William Morrow, 2000), Stoltz applies this concept directly to the workplace, showing readers how to develop resilience – or AQ, in his parlance – in themselves and in their workforces.

**People can build resiliency through encounters with “just-manageable” difficulties.**

## Who bounces back—and why?

Psychologists and organizational-development experts have picked up on the trend, offering resiliency-training seminars and workshops to schools, corporations, and law-enforcement agencies. Stoltz’s consulting firm, PEAK Learning, Inc., claims to have spread his message in speeches before more than 250,000 people. Employers as diverse as the Atlantic Richfield Company, the United States Navy, and the Argonne National Laboratory have hired resiliency trainers to make their employees more flexible and better able to adapt to change.

So what is resilience? Ask five researchers and you’ll get five different answers. But essentially, resilience is the ability to thrive in the face of adversity. Larry Mallak, a professor of industrial engineering at Western Michigan University, who studies and teaches organizational management, says resilience is “more than just coping; that’s keeping your head above water. Being resilient means being able to walk out of the water.” Resilient workers, Mallak says, “are able to satisfy customers’ needs on the spot, act quickly in times of crisis, and take advantage of opportunities that might otherwise be missed.”

It may sound like just the latest trend in pop psychology, but social scientists have long been intrigued by what enables some people to thrive in the face of adversity while others buckle under the pressure. In the

1950s, psychologist Richard S. Lazarus began developing the Transactional Model of Stress, based on the idea that a person's reaction to a difficult predicament is determined in large part by how they appraise the situation and whether they feel confident in facing it.

Though there may be some genetic components to resilience (so far, no one has found a gene that either helps or hinders its development), experts agree that for the most part it's a learned trait, based on people's life experiences. Richard H. Price, an organizational psychologist at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research and psychology department, says people build resiliency through encounters with what he calls "just-manageable" difficulties.

"People can be overwhelmed when faced with impossible adversity," he says. "That does not improve their resilience. But if they are confronted with a set of challenging experiences over time that are just manageable, they can build a set of coping skills."

Siebert, author of the 1996 book *The Survivor Personality: Why Some People Are Stronger, Smarter and More Skillful at handling Life's Difficulties ... And How You Can Be, Too* (Perigee Books/Berkeley Publishing Group), agrees, likening these life experiences to the incremental stress exercises that law enforcement and military training organizations use to build physical and emotional endurance in recruits. As a paratrooper, Siebert learned first to fall and roll into a pile of sand, then to jump off a raised platform, and finally, to leap from a 34-foot tower before he was ready to leap out of a plane. Each time he overcame an obstacle, Siebert says, he gained a sense of confidence and mastery. People who are able to learn from ever-greater challenges like these are more likely to become resilient than those who are coddled or those who face enormous obstacles right from the get-go.

## **BUILD YOUR AQ**

Here are 10 tips for improving your adversity quotient.

- 1. Be a Detective.** As difficult situations arise, immediately pinpoint at least one facet of the situation you can influence, if not control.
- 2. Be a Lawyer.** Silently or vocally question people who say, "Well, there's nothing we can do about it." Find specific ways to prove them wrong. Prove your case with real evidence.
- 3. Be a Judge.** If you feel you lack control over a given situation, try to be impartial in your assessment. Base your judgment only on facts.
- 4. Be a Pioneer.** Be the first to take ownership of difficult situations, whether or not you were the cause. Pick your moment and step into the wilderness of responsibility by declaring your accountability and intended action.
- 5. Be an Opportunist.** Ask yourself what will definitely happen as a result of a given situation within the next 24 to 48 hours. Pick those outcomes for which you feel most compelled to take ownership and action.
- 6. Be a Firefighter.** When adversity strikes, immediately contain the blaze by acting with urgency to prevent it from affecting other areas of your life. Hose down emotional brushfires as they pop up.

**7. Be a Surgeon.** As difficulties arise, prevent them from bleeding into other areas of your business, relationships, and life by surgically clamping the damaged artery and operating on or even removing damaged tissue.

**8. Be a Visionary.** No matter how severe a setback may be, imagine life after it has passed. Force yourself to rise above and see beyond the adversity. Paint a mental picture of how life is different now that adversity is history.

**9. Be an Accountant.** Create a balance sheet, indicating on one side the likely result of adversity over which you have no control, feel no ownership, and which is far-reaching and long-lasting. On the other side, put the implications of adversity over which you feel a certain amount of control, strong ownership, and which you see as limited and short-lived. Apply your analysis to the situation at hand or as difficulties arise.

**10. Be a Catalyst.** Take even the smallest constructive action to regain control, to take ownership, or to limit the reach or endurance of the adversity, and you will immediately begin to see it shrink.

(Adapted from Adversity Quotient@ Work, Paul Stolz)

## **If it doesn't kill you ...**

Much of what's now known about resilience stems from a 40-year longitudinal study of native Hawaiians that began in 1954. Researchers Emmy E. Werner, from the University of California at Davis, and Ruth S. Smith, a clinical psychologist working on the island of Kauai, followed nearly 700 subjects from birth through middle age. Many of them grew up in families riven by poverty, alcoholism, domestic violence, disease, and mental illness. You'd think the kids who came from the most troubled homes would grow up to have significant problems—and many of them did. But about one in 10 managed to develop into what the researchers described in their 1982 book *Vulnerable But Invincible: A Study of Resilient Children* as “competent and autonomous young adults who ‘worked well, played well, loved well, and expected well.’ ”

What helped these kids rise above their circumstances? Werner and Smith identified four qualities that many of the successful survivors shared: an active approach to problem solving; a tendency to perceive their experiences, even traumatic ones, in a positive light; an ability to gain positive attention from others; and a strong reliance on faith that encouraged them to maintain a positive outlook. One of the things that may have helped develop these qualities was strong social support; the most resilient subjects all had close relationships with a caring adult—if not a parent then a neighbor, friend, or relative—or strong ties to a social group.

## **The power of the “three Cs”**

In the mid-1970s through the mid-'80s, psychologists Salvatore Maddi and Suzanne Kobasa, then at the University of Chicago, helped refine the understanding of resilience with a 12-year study of 450 Illinois Bell Telephone managers going through the trauma of industry deregulation. “We knew there was going to be tremendous upheaval and we wanted to see what would happen to people,” says Maddi. He and his colleagues did annual psychological and medical tests on the employees for six years before the breakup of the telephone company, and followed them for six years after. “Two-thirds of the group fell apart,” says Maddi, founder and director of The Hardiness Institute in Newport Beach, California. “They had [suffered from] heart attacks, depression, anxiety, alcoholism, divorce. The other third not only survived but actually thrived.”

By looking back at the surveys done before the divestiture, Maddi found that the successful study subjects shared three qualities now known in the field as the three Cs of hardiness: a commitment to what they were doing, an enthusiasm for challenge, and a sense of control over their lives. “These were people who struggled to have influence, rather than being passive, and kept learning from their experiences, whether positive or negative.” Maddi says.

In a follow-up study, Maddi and colleague Deborah Khoshaha found that the hardest telephone company employees had all had tumultuous childhoods marked by divorce, frequent moves, illness or death in the family, and other stresses. However, these people had been designated by their families as the ones to succeed and they had accepted that role.

“They were taught to believe they could do better and they did.” says Maddi. “They hunkered down at school, they worked hard, they found mentors.”

Siebert has also looked extensively into what he calls “the survivor personality.” In 30 years of research on Vietnam vets, Holocaust survivors, gunshot victims, parents who lost children, and others who have weathered significant traumas, he found that the most successful survivors tended to have curious, playful, adaptive personality traits. Other common attributes included persistence, optimism, flexibility, and self-confidence. “They are like Alan Alda playing the character Hawkeye Pierce, M\*A\*S\*H,” Siebert says of the wartime doctor known for joking and concocting pranks even as the bombs dropped around him.

While the irreverent Hawkeye Pierce may not be everyone's idea of a model employee, researchers have found that people who score high on tests of resilience or hardiness have other attributes employers appreciate. Maddi and his colleagues found that they get sick less often and use fewer health benefits than less hardy colleagues. Other researchers observe that resilient employees tend to be less prone to burnout, stress, and other pitfalls of the workaday world.

## **Most researchers agree that resiliency is a learned trait.**

### **Hardy mind, healthy body?**

New research suggests that people who are psychologically hardy may have stronger immunity to disease. In a study published in the June 2001 *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, researchers at the University of Texas at Austin gave 21 healthy volunteers a hardiness survey that looked at their ability to cope with challenges and then tested their blood for responses to different disease agents such as the bacterium that causes tuberculosis. The hardy subjects had significantly stronger immune responses than those who scored low on the hardiness scale.

If developing resilience really makes employees better able to cope with stress, less prone to disease, and more able to cope with change, then it's no wonder businesses are flocking to resiliency trainers like Stoltz and Siebert. But can resilience really be learned?

There's a whole industry out there that says it can. Maddi's Hardiness Institute offers training workshops and seminars that teach the importance and augmentation of the three Cs—commitment rather than withdrawal (such as an employee who volunteers for a difficult project, rather than trying to get out of it), healthy control versus overbearance or passivity (such as a manager who can keep a meeting on track while at the same time promoting healthy discussion) and the perception of stress as a challenge rather than a threat. Trainers use tests, exercises, and small-group discussions to help people assess their levels of hardiness and improve their social and coping skills. "People who go through our training learn not to avoid problem but to address them by taking a broader perspective, deepening their understanding of them, and taking decisive action to solve the problem," Maddi says. "We also teach social-interaction skills, how to resolve conflict and replace conflict with a pattern of giving and getting assistance amid encouragement." Participants are also urged to take care of their minds and bodies through relaxation, nutrition, and exercise so that they can better withstand the stresses of daily life.

Anne Tessien, a life-balance and interpersonal communications coach with LeaderSource in Minneapolis, urges workshop participants to take responsibility for their reactions. Instead of avoiding the reality of mounting credit card debt, you might set up a budget or speak to a financial counselor. Rather than blaming other people for your problems, she says, you should see what part you play and do something about it. Rather than becoming angry at your boss when a proposal is rejected, for example, you might work on extra preparation so the next one is more likely to go through.

"Hardiness," says Maddi, "just about surviving trauma. It's about having a good life."

*Rachele Kanigel writes about health and psychology for such publications as Time, Health, and Reader's Digest.*

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### **Sources:**

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