

*Mastering Resilience Skills
for Off-The-Charts Results*



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One of the stages a potential hero encounters on a journey is the “challenge phase.” And how people handle the challenge phase will determine if they ever reach “the gold”—the off-the-chart results.

In Greek mythology, the resilient spirit is what Jason needed when he encountered the dreadful half-man, half-bull creature called the Minotaur. It’s what James Lovell and the crew of Apollo 13 experienced in trying to bring their spacecraft home safely. If you lose a primary client, your best employee, your market share, your identity as the top sales executive, you enter a challenge stage. How deep and wide the stage is will vary with the event. Resilience skills will determine if you move through it or stay stuck.

More than ever, in organizational behavior, we know that professional and personal lives are intertwined. There are forces that create challenge phases for organizations, and there are forces that create challenge phases for individuals.

The Forces that Challenge Organizations

At the organizational level, there are four primary forces that can push an organization into the challenge phase:

1) Market pressure and competition

With a global economy, competition can arise in any sector. An organization must live in “future present.” This means responding to current market demands in such a way that you maintain customers while not jeopardizing the long-term health of the organization.

2) Demographics

The diversity of the workforce and an aging population require that products and services respond in kind.

3) Consumer choices

Customer service—although the phrase is bandied around frequently—is still a lost art. I am amazed at the arrogance of some companies that hold customers hostage to antiquated practices or—on the flip side—to technological streamlining that reduces the head count but destroys the relationship with the customer.

4) Competence and commitment of employees

The threat of cuts to vocational education programs, the reduction in training dollars and the head count cutbacks that often result in excessive workloads and demands are just some of the factors that can create a challenge phase in the competence and commitment levels of a workforce.

Competence is the ability to do the task at hand. If I can't get the help I need, if I don't have enough or the right kind of training, if there is no one in the organization to mentor me on the skills I need to succeed along a career path, I am not capable of off-the-chart performance. It is a challenge phase for the organization, and it is a personal challenge phase for the employee. Right now, I am dealing with an organization that has moved people into management positions but has provided neither the training nor the mentoring to be successful.

Commitment is the "want to"—the willingness to do what it takes to move through the challenge phase. Think about your work experience. I'll bet there was at least one company that you were excited about when you got the job and, in short order, were excited about leaving it! Unfortunately, we sometimes stay physically but check out mentally and emotionally.

Commitment is based on relationships and the heart of relationships is communication.

Of the twelve attitudes that the Gallup organization and Marcus Buckingham found in high-performing work groups, seven are the direct results of good communication between manager and employee. The rest are the results of organizational communication practices with employees.

Let me add another dimension that influences "willingness." Does the organization treat the employee as someone with a life outside the job? Work/life balance continues to be a critical issue for businesses to address because employees are no longer willing to rent themselves to the job just to survive to the weekend. We want both a life at work and a life at home.

Forces Impacting Individual Workers

There are also forces that can create challenge phases for individuals. Some of those forces are just part of the human condition. For example, a change in family structure due to death, adoption or divorce can put us in the challenge phase. Health issues, relocation moves, and the care of aging parents are but some of the life-altering events many will encounter.

Some of the forces that impact us as workers are:

1) Economic pressures

For most people, wages have not kept up with the cost of living, the cost of health care and the cost of housing. When faced with an economic challenge, resilience skills must also come into play if one is to move forward.

2) Security issues and issues of meaning

The paradox of 9/11 is that not only do we feel more vulnerable in our everyday lives but we also understand, at perhaps a deeper level, the quickness with which our lives can end. What I am seeing now in the workplace is a growing number of individuals thrust into challenge phases brought about because their work is not significant or meaningful.

3) Twenty-four/seven time pressures

Technology allows a worker to stay connected any time and any place. Couple this with an increased workload, and there's tremendous stress on the human system. Add to this the fact that the biggest segment of our population—a segment that is still in the workforce—is called the “Sandwich Generation.” This is a person that has a teenager on one side and aging parents on the other. Statistically, those aging parents will live longer, and you'll be straddling the dividing line between both worlds.

This requires great resilience on the employee's part to handle all the demands. You can be on the job but you still carry both of these responsibilities with you. Organizations nowadays need tremendous flexibility in how they manage workloads. A person doesn't come to work and put his bed-ridden mother and fourteen-year-old daughter in the bottom drawer with his sack lunch and forget about them. For an employee to get on with life at work, he might also need help with the work of life. And I mean more than employee assistance programs; I mean help with resilience skills.

A lack of trust.

To move through the challenge phase, organizations and the individuals who make up these organizations need support. When poet John Donne wrote, “No man is an island,” he said it all. We want to know who and what we can count on. In too many corners of our lives, we have lost that which we trusted.

Consider this: organizations we thought we could trust no longer appear trustworthy. Icons of industry are now straw figures before balance sheets, outrageous retirement packages or golden parachute maneuvers. The stock market gyrates wildly with unpredictable, heart-burning results. Children are abducted from front yards. There's a network of terrorists webbed throughout the world. We have religious institutions that cashed out on duplicity. Even the weather is untrustworthy. Between global warming and El Nino, we can't even depend upon the weather anymore!

So what can we trust? What can we hold sacred and count as a bedrock that will let us move forward? In the challenge phase, individuals and managers must become absolutely congruent in walk and talk, in transparency and integrity.

Resilience and the Challenge Phase

When I became interested in this idea of resilience, I did what anyone would do. I went to the dictionary. In 1824, Webster defined it as “the capability of a strained body to recover its size and shape after deformation caused especially by compressive stress.”

That definition works for explaining metal but not for the mettle of the human system. Consider this: the compressive stress to an organizational body can be the result of bloating mergers. Mergers have reached manic proportions and layoffs distort the workloads and customer care. If this is the case, the resilient organization must carefully think what size and shape will serve it for the long haul. At the risk of insulting Webster, I define resilience as “the capacity to cultivate strengths to positively meet the challenges of living; the ability to GROW THRU adversity while maintaining personal and corporate integrity and to advance in wisdom and maturity through the process.” This is the only definition that will advance us along the hero's journey.

One of the resilience skills is to step back when you have tried everything you know to do and proclaim, "This too shall pass!"

If I know it is a “phase,” I can hang in there a little longer. However, notice what I emphasized: “when you have tried everything you know to do.” This is the last action not the first. There are severe penalties for ignoring the challenge phase. In addition to remaining stuck, without forward momentum, an organization can experience the following:

1) Increased costs

Being in a challenge phase and not addressing it through communication and relationships puts enormous strain on human beings. Stress-related illness costs U.S. businesses \$181 billion annually or \$475 million per day! There’s also the obvious cost of losing marketing shares because customers are not well served by head-in-the-sand organizations and overworked people. IBM refused to listen to marketplace trends as well as its own employees, and we almost lost this venerable company when it hit the challenge phase.

2) Loss of employee productivity

If employees hit the skids with competence and/or commitment issues, if work seems worthless rather than worthwhile, if management and employee communication is minimal, then productivity slides.

3) Loss of good employees

If you hear any of the following expressions within a company, that organization is ignoring the challenge phase:

- “I can’t handle this anymore.”
- “This is not a great place to be.”
- “I am no longer having any fun.”
- “No one is giving me the help that I need when I’m in this challenge stage.”
- “I’m out of here.”

The cost related to not retaining good employees is huge. In December 2002, the Bureau of Labor released its normally conservative statistics. They forecasted that by the end of this decade—in eight years—we will be short 4.8 million workers. With that type of projected shortage, it makes great sense to keep good people. Remember, too, that when an employee leaves, there are costs connected with replacement: advertisement, search firms, interview costs, sign-on bonuses, moving allowances, the time spent interviewing and work put on hold because there’s no one to do it. There’s overload on the team. You can lose customers, contracts, business.

4) Family cost

With heavy workloads, insufficient resources, downsizing to the bone—that is, not just trimming the fat—there’s a personal toll. Besides the physical toll, there’s a connected mental toll that can result in depression, anger and a diminished sense of self worth. This can have a profound impact on a family. Research shows that increased levels of spouse and child abuse are related to job tension.

Assessing if you are in the challenge stage and in need of resilience skills and tools

I have created a series of statements with responses ranging on a scale from one to four. To use this resilience checkup, step back and get a viewing point—not a viewpoint but a viewing point. In other words, imagine yourself looking down on the organization. From this expanded vantage point, honestly answer this small survey. That will give some notion of the resilience level of the organization (Exhibit 1). The same thing is true for the individual (Exhibit 2). It will give you some idea of how you as an individual function in the area of resilience.

Exhibit 1**THE RESILIENT ORGANIZATION CHECKUP**

Using the following scale, put a numerical value by each statement.

Numerical Scale: 1. Never 2. A few times 3. Frequently 4. Without a doubt

1. Employees readily talk about how much they like working here. _____
2. Management is known for asking employees their opinions. _____
3. Management is known for listening to employees' opinions. _____
4. Training is available for all employees on a regular basis. _____
5. Managers are acknowledged for helping employees advance in skill level. _____
6. The organization has flexible work hours. _____
7. People are treated as "whole people" with lives outside work. _____
8. Management is willing to try new things. _____
9. Management readily shares current information about the health of the company. _____
10. Managers have superb communication skills. _____
11. The organization walks its talk. _____
12. Managers encourage innovation and creativity. _____
13. We trust senior management to act in the best interest of all stakeholders. _____
14. We are told bad news as well as good news. _____
15. Our company's product/service is meaningful and valuable in the marketplace. _____
16. We are known for carefully listening to the marketplace, the customers, trends and the competition. _____

Score:

52-64: What a Rock! It's an organization of heroes!

42-51: Good resilience intentions. See what areas might need improvement.

32-41: Ummm... The organization needs help. In what areas can you get the fastest, most visible results? Build from there.

15-31: Remember the dinosaurs? They did not bounce back.

Exhibit 2**THE RESILIENT SPIRIT CHECKUP**

Using the following scale, put a numerical value by each statement.

Numerical Scale: 1. Never 2. A few times 3. Frequently 4. Without a doubt

1. I believe in my ability to influence my attitude. _____
2. I've handled challenges before, and I can do it again. _____
3. I can look at a problem from many angles. _____
4. I have work that is meaningful. _____
5. I have a strong support network. _____
6. I exercise on a regular basis. _____
7. I clearly communicate my ideas. _____
8. I am appreciated for what I do. _____
9. People say I have a good sense of humor. _____
10. I can see more than one option in a given situation. _____
11. I am generally an optimistic person. _____
12. By my own definition, I believe in a "Higher Power." _____
13. I easily express gratitude. _____
14. I ask for help when I need it. _____
15. I am willing to try new things, to risk. _____

Score:

52-60: What a Rock! You're on a hero's journey!

42-51: Good resilience intentions. See what areas might need improvement

32-41: Ummm... Time to get some help. In what areas can you get the fastest, most visible results? Build from there.

15-31: Remember the dinosaurs? They did not bounce back.

I separate the organization and the individual because I don't think you can say to one or the other, "Here, you fix it" and expect that will take care of it. We live in a universe of parallel processing. I'm always fascinated when managers think that their job is to "motivate the employees." I think a manager has a responsibility to develop personal communication behaviors, leadership skills and industry expertise in order to create an environment that has the chance to attract and keeps performers. I also think all employees have a self-leadership responsibility to develop themselves, to sharpen communication behaviors, to take charge of their destinies and spheres of influence. It's a walk done side by side.

Tough times like these require tough, resilient leaders. By "tough" I don't mean hard-spirited. I mean being willing to make decisions that benefit the organization and individuals long term, not just to generate two cents more on the dollar this month and get Wall Street off your case.

These are tough decisions. There are things that managers can do to help an organization be resilient. At the same time, if an organization is smart, it will also offer employees the opportunity to develop their own personal resilience skills.

What Can Managers Do

The first skill to master in creating a resilient organization and helping it move through the challenge stage is to hold "learning conversations."

Learning conversation refers to any form of inquiry that focuses on questions that advance the possibility for new thinking, innovation, breakthrough insights and deeper understanding.

These conversations are jump-started by the following questions:

- "Where do we think we are now?"
- "What do others say of us?"
- "How would you define the challenge facing us (the department, the team, the organization)?"

Based on the responses, managers might then ask:

- "What is worthwhile to achieve?"
- "What are we going to have to do to accomplish that?"
- "Who needs and who wants to be involved in making that happen?"

That last question is very important: "Who needs and who wants to be involved?" I don't think managers at this stage can coerce effort. There are people you're going to need, and there are people who want to be involved. The latter come because they are engaged in the outcome. An engagement is an invitation.

Invite people who have the need and/or the desire to be involved. Managers often try to entice people who are black holes in the organization. These are the folks whose behaviors and attitudes speak these words: "Been there, done that. Don't count on me." That's not to say a manager can't go to someone and explain why his or her participation in a learning conversation is

valuable. But at this point, we're looking for results. We're looking to garner some forward momentum that by its very nature and visibility gives hope and direction to the rest of the organization.

Commitment issues are at play where there is competence but no "want to." Remember, commitment is related to relationship and communication. There's "stuff" going on that needs to be honestly addressed. But when an organization is facing a challenge situation and a manager has limited time, I think it's better to work with people who are turned on by the challenge and ready to come to grips with "the great shuddering." As a manager, I don't want to spend all of my time trying to get everybody on board. I'm going to work with the people who have the "want to" and who say, "How will we accomplish this?" In Malcolm Gladwell's marvelous book, *The Tipping Point*, he makes the point that it takes a relatively small percentage of people with the right makeup and the right message to make change happen. But it all begins with the learning conversation.

The next set of management skills can be outlined by using the word "RESILIENT" as an acronym.

R - Rethink scenarios.

In short, the manager is creating scenes that extend the range of responses to the challenge phase. Scenarios can be crafted from these questions: "What's possible, given where we are now? What's probable? What would we prefer?" The most powerful question is, "What would we prefer to have happen?" The greatest value is to aim action at what the organization would prefer rather than just accept the probable.

E - Explore options.

Challenge those sacred cows. Ask what would happen if you blew everything up and started fresh. It puts everything on the table—absolutely everything—from the practical to the impractical, from the profound to the profane. This should be done in conversation, not in truncated e-mail.

S - Show up.

Be physically present. The research is now telling us employees believe management cares for them and is more trustworthy when they can be physically seen! There is power in getting away from the computer, the chair, and taking your body and soul to all parts of the organization.

Here's an example. I'm on a plane that has hit a challenge phase while en route to New Orleans. Not only are we hit by a freak snowstorm in Denver but now the plane is rolling all over the sky with horrid thunderstorms. The pilot keeps us constantly informed as to our progress and maneuvers, finally proclaiming, "I am an old pilot, not a bold pilot, and we are not going to New Orleans." All the passengers begin to cheer.

Then we land at a closed airport in Alabama, and the pilot announces, "I am going to talk to ground operations. I want you all to sit in this plane, and I will be back." He puts on his hat and walks through the plane, touching people on the shoulder as he walks by.

That pilot, by his constant auditory presence and, later, his physical presence, had everyone on the plane cheering for him. I'm sure there were quite a number of people like me who literally lost thousands of dollars because we did not show up in New Orleans when we were supposed to. But it didn't matter. I felt resilient because the pilot was. It was the power of physical presence, the power of his voice and his person that, in a crisis, a challenge situation, brought people along. That's what I mean by showing up.

I - Initiate.

Empowerment is fine, yet in a challenge situation, a manager can best help people see possibilities by initiating some action; not huge actions but rather something that employees recognize as valuable forward progress.

L - Listen.

Listening is an extraordinarily complex ability that we are not born with. Rather, it's a skill that can be taught and nurtured. We listen on two levels—content and intent. Content is what you say; intent is the why. The more I understand the why behind what is said, the more I can ask the right kinds of questions and the deeper our conversation and, therefore, our relationship become.

I - Innovate.

Try new things, and give them enough time to percolate. Too many organizations suffer from "idea du jour." In short order, they decide a new idea doesn't work and then start on something else. To prevent idea du jour, determine with your team the criteria that will be used to assess the idea and the time frame. Everyone will then know why an idea changes.

E - Encourage small wins.

When people are under stress and tension, they need encouragement throughout the process, not just at the end. Remember when your toddler was starting to walk. You did not wait until the child came all the way across the room to you before you said, "Wonderful, daughter!" She took one step and fell smack down on her face, and you picked that baby up, loved her and said, "Daddy is so proud of you! Try it again, sweetie." We're no different. When we are trying new behaviors, when we are trying new processes, managers need to acknowledge small wins. You might say, "You got this much done. Bravo! Now, let's see if you can take the next step." There's a saying, "A pat on the back and a kick in the rear end are pretty close as far as the geography of the body, but they're miles apart in results." We all need some form of approval.

N - Nurture a nimble infrastructure.

Think of this as “the way we do things around here.” Either the organization is so complex and unwieldy that no one can get a quick response or an organization has cut itself so far that people are too overwhelmed to act. Work becomes an anchor that drags people down and prevents nimbleness.

T -Take action. Think long-term. “Thanks” (express it).

Okay, I spelled “RESILIENT” with three “T”s, but each of these is a critical skill, and they are all self-explanatory. Managers just need to practice them. Let me stress the last “T”—“Thanks.” If I were in an organization that was going through a tremendous amount of change and in a challenge phase, I’d really want people to know how much I appreciate their staying power. “Thank you” is a valuable tool.

Skills an individual can develop

Let’s stick with the “RESILIENT” acronym.

R - Reframe the event.

“Reframing” is a term used by Martin Seligman in his book, *Learned Optimism*. It means to literally change the conversation in your head. Instead of saying, “This man is a jerk, and I’ll never be able to work with him,” reframe it. Take the activating event and ask yourself, “What is a more powerful statement that I could say to myself?” For example, you might say, “It’s always powerful to learn. I have an opportunity to figure out how to work with someone that no one can stand.” Seligman’s extensive research showed that people could be taught to reframe. This key resilience skill means learning to see a situation with new eyes.

E – Exercise-- physically and mentally.

This is a practical skill. When we feel the world is crazy and we don’t have coping skills, the fastest way to get in control is to use our bodies. Exercise is a tremendous vehicle for literally blowing off steam as well as for letting us feel some kind of results. Exercise enhances the endorphins within our system, and endorphins promote healing. It doesn’t matter whether it’s taking a walk or riding a bicycle, there’s something about physical movement that actually allows us to calm down and to feel more in control.

S - Something ventured; something gained.

Try something new. Ask yourself, “When this happens, what is my normal way of responding? If this is my normal way of responding, what is a new way in which I could respond?” It is a biological truth that the organism with the greatest number of responses to any given situation, to any given catalyst, is the organism that survives. The more I can come up with different responses—rather than doing the same things the same way—the better the chances are I can survive. That’s what resilience is all about—surviving and moving to the next level.

I - Interrogate the past.

All of us have gone through situations or events in which, at the time, we thought we couldn't make it. But we did make it. We need to remember the things we've gone through. What strengths did you have that allowed you to get through them? You still have those very same strengths now. The problem is that we forget we have them.

L - Laugh.

I don't know how we get through difficult situations without laughter. There was a home for sale in Los Angeles—it had been damaged by one of the earthquakes—where the sign read, "For sale. Some assembly required." Now there's a resilient spirit. If I literally have fun with what's going on, make it silly, make it stupid, sit and laugh, I can say, "Okay, now what's really important here?" Laughter is powerful.

What would happen if we would create organizations in which we laugh? I think a wonderful model is Southwest Airlines. They have created such a culture, and they are also the most profitable airline flying today. I am convinced it has resilient people inside and is a resilient organization because its people know how to laugh.

I - Involve others.

Ask for help. Find people whose wisdom you can borrow. Seligman's new book documents that the people who seem to be the happiest are not the people who have the most money or the greatest success. They are the people who have a circle of family and friends whom they care about and who care about them. Being a loner does not increase the chances for resilience.

E - Engage in action.

What can you accept, adapt, avoid or amend? This is another way to reframe so you have some sense of control. Do you remember the Iran hostage crisis? One of the prisoners would say, when the guard entered his cell, "Would you please have a seat?" That prisoner later said of the experience, "I had no control over the full situation, but I could control my response in that cell."

N - Now.

The very use of the word "now" implies that up until this very instant, things were different. Often, we beat ourselves up for our failure to handle a situation, for our lack of finding a way out of the challenge stage. By paying attention to the conversation in our head, we reframe our past and give ourselves a running start in the present. Here are some examples: "Up until now, I wasn't able to do this, but now I can." "Up until now, this was a very difficult situation." "Up until now, I thought I had to do it this one way. Now I have another answer."

T - “Thanks” (express it, give it).

I have found that keeping a gratitude journal in times of challenge is very important. In fact, it’s a practice I maintain, regardless of the circumstance. If you will end each day by writing three things for which you are grateful, you gain in personal power and, ultimately, in resilience.

Final Thoughts on Resilience

What runs through all this is the word “**HOPE**.” Since you now know that acronyms are one of my training models, let me offer a final one.

You have to let your head talk, but you have to let your heart walk as well.

The “**H**” stands for *head* talk and *heart* walk. We’ve talked a lot about reframing. We’ve talked about managers rethinking scenarios. You have to let your head talk, but you have to let your heart walk as well. Emotion is just as important to creating strategic change as financial data. I need to let my heart accompany me on this journey.

The “**O**” stands for *optimism*. That’s the belief that I can get through this. We’ve talked about how reframing makes a difference with that. Optimism is what happens when a manager asks, “What is the preferred future rather than the probable one?”

The “**P**” stands for *purpose, passion* and *persistence*. If I know my purpose for being on this earth, and if I have things I care passionately about, then I can persist.

The “**E**” stands for *energy*. That’s what you see in the team that can exert tremendous energy in the last ten seconds of the game because they thrive on the challenge. Because they have the passion and persistence, they get the energy.

There’s actually another “**E**,” and that stands for *enjoyment*. Where can I find some joy in this situation? Your ability to be resilient includes finding some joy in small things. In the words of philosopher Howard Zinn, “To have hope one doesn’t need certainty, only possibility.” In an upside down world there are lots of possibilities for positive change and growth.

This is excerpted from "Off The Chart Results" © 2003 by Insight Publishing, Sevierville, TN.

Resource List

Books:

[Authentic Happiness](#) by Martin Seligman

[Good Company. Caring as Fiercely as You Compete](#) by Hal Rosenbluth and Diane McFerrin Peters

[Leadership When the Heat's On](#) by Danny Cox

[Learned Optimism](#) by Martin Seligman

[Managing at the Speed of Change](#) by Daryl O'Conner

[The Art of Resilience: 100 Paths to Wisdom and Strength in an Uncertain World](#) by Carol Orsborn

[The Change Monster: The Human Forces That Fuel or Foil Corporate Transformation and Change](#) by Jean Daniel Duck.

[The Customer Comes Second: Put Your People First and Watch 'em Kick Butt](#) by Hal Rosenbluth and Diane McFerrin Peters

[The Resilient Spirit](#) by Eileen McDargh

[Your Resiliency GPS](#) by Eileen McDargh