

Wellbeing and Performance

20 Tips to strengthen your Resilience at work

Resilience is the capacity to cope with and become stronger as a result of experiencing and dealing with difficult events. Strengthening resilience combines building inner strength with applying personal strength to challenging situations.

What follows are 20 tips that help to strengthen personal resilience and improve our ability to successfully apply resilience in difficult situations.

Resilience is primarily about attitude towards events.

Our attitude is hugely influenced by our understanding of what an event means, and how we calculate what the outcome might be for us. The understanding and calculation is largely based on our confidence in knowing how to deal with the situation.

The 20 tips help build confidence.

Tip 1 – write down important thoughts and ideas

Writing – it is clear that writing down thoughts, ideas, feelings, emotions, plans and grandiose schemes helps you to achieve what you want. You should write more than a reflective diary of past events but write what you want from a situation in the present and future. If you do this you stand a better chance of achieving it. The thinking process in writing involves evaluating what you write, in particular when you read what you have written. It helps you to think, assess and form an attitude that accepts, modifies or rejects what you have written. This translates into helping you evaluate events that you experience.

Your attitude towards yourself, therefore, is to become disciplined in writing things down!

Tip 2 – always imagine everything positively

Imagination – your imagination is enormously powerful. Your tendency maybe to imagine the worst, sometimes known as catastrophising, as this provides you rehearsal time if something terrible actually happens. Catastrophising is common, and is fine so long as the conclusion is something positive – preventing the catastrophe, for example. If your imagination is positive and constantly imagines a positive outcome, this transmits itself into a positive stimulus for the mind to work on. It tends to result in a better outcome for you.

Your attitude towards yourself, therefore, is to use your imagination to produce positive actions and behaviours.

Tip 3 – talk to yourself out loud and positively

Positive reinforcement – you respond best to positive reinforcement, normally someone else saying something positive about you. In the absence of this, self talk has a dramatic impact on how you feel about yourself and the actions you take. Sometimes this is called self affirmation. It is a method that helps develop motivation, and is key to influencing thoughts, feelings and behaviours. However, guard against saying negative things to yourself as it will get back to you and you'll want to know who made those negative comments about you!

Your attitude to yourself, therefore, is to embrace the idea of talking to yourself.

Tip 4 – take the long view – envisage the future

Take the long view – those of you who know what you want from life (see Tip 6) have a purpose. A long term purpose enables you to 'ride over' adverse events as you are focused on achieving the long view, and can find it easier not to be deflected from the journey you have set yourself. Envisioning the future in a positive way provides motivation and focus when all around you is in chaos.

Your attitude towards yourself, therefore, is to take the long view.

Tip 5 – reinforce a new habit or behaviour as frequently as you can

Reinforce new habits – when you wish to adopt new habits that strengthen your resilience you need to reinforce them several times, the least being twice. This is known as triple loop learning where a new idea is introduced, and then is reinforced in practical ways at least twice before you begin to adopt the new idea. After that you should continue to reinforce the new habit, which will become, eventually, your habit!

Your attitude towards yourself, therefore, is to be determined to acquire habits that strengthen your resilience.

Tip 6 – work out a long term idea of what you want from life

Have a clear vision – you need to have a reasonably clear idea of what you are trying to achieve in your life, and have written this down somewhere. You are likely to review the vision from time to time, particularly when events seek to divert effort away from achieving it. The vision itself might be blurred; it should not be time constrained, but it should be feasible to achieve. Getting there may involve several plan B's. Don't be put off by the idea of not achieving what you want – it's the journey towards the vision that's important. Once you've achieved what you want, you'll have to have another vision to keep you resilient.

Your attitude to yourself, therefore, is to work out what you want from life, and go for it.

Tip 7 – work out the key values that drive your choices and decisions

Identify key values - resilient people with high levels of determination have the capacity to achieve things that others tend not to be able to do. Determination is essentially self driven, although can be triggered by a reaction to an event, and requires considerable focus on a goal, task or vision. For you to achieve high levels of determination you will also need to possess high self-awareness - knowing yourself very well; high self-advocacy - being able to articulate your

wishes effectively; and high self-efficacy - a belief in being able to achieve almost anything you wish to achieve.

You will find that once you have identified your core values (maybe 3 core values) you will understand how these have driven your life so far. They may explain why you have stuck to doing something others simply have not understood, like mortgaging your home to invest in wellbeing and performance support in the workplace, against all the odds. You will find that your core values and drivers provide you with the determination to see anything through to a conclusion.

Your attitude to yourself, therefore, is to find those core values and drivers, and to use them in taking decisions and making choices about what you want to do.

Tip 8 – build up your human capital

Human Capital - human capital is who you are - a combination of skills, knowledge and experience that can be described under four main ideas:

Cultural capital – knowing, understanding and appreciating music, dance, drama, films, art and other forms of social culture to an extent that you feel fulfilled by your knowledge and experiences.

Economic capital – building and maintaining personal economic resources that fulfil your sense of self worth. This doesn't mean being comparatively wealthy; it means achieving the economic resources of all types that you feel is sufficient to make you feel great.

Social capital – building and maintaining relationships that are significant and strong, and help you towards personal success.

Erotic capital – building and maintaining the capacity to be attractive to others; to draw others to you and help you control the responses that others have to you.

Work out what you need to do to become satisfied with how you've built and maintained your Human Capital.

Your attitude to yourself, therefore, is to deliberately build your human capital so that you feel fulfilled in all aspects of your life.

Tip 9 – establish a personal brand and show it off

Design brand 'you' – what is it that you want to expose to others as representing who you are? If you're a psychologist do you want to dress in a particular way, talk in hushed tones, always asking and hardly ever answering questions? A personal brand is like a corporate brand – it's about getting across to others as succinctly as possible what you stand for.

Your attitude towards yourself, therefore, needs to be one of 'showing off' to the world what you want to world to see you as standing for.

Tip 10 – engage the attention of others without causing distress to them or to yourself

Be interested in others - you need to explore and respond to the other person's self-interest (as self-interest is a prime motivator) and feed that self-interest to encourage the other person to reciprocate and feed you with the things that satisfy your self interest. If you manage all this you are in control of yourself and the situation, and by being in control you build your resilience.

Your attitude, therefore, needs to be one of attentiveness to others at all times.

Interaction is about how you behave towards other people in order to persuade others to provide you with what you need. The only person you control is yourself, and yet, to survive and grow, you need to control the reactions of others to your behaviours towards them so that they help you. This is known as reciprocity. To interact effectively with others you need to understand everything that is going on in an interaction, almost reading the other person's mind so that you can adjust your behaviour to respond to how you think the other person is responding to you.

Tip 11 – build commitment, trust and engagement between yourself and others

Build commitment, trust and engagement with others - the behaviours that inspire commitment, trust and engagement in others include: attentiveness, encouragement, intellectual flexibility, reliability and the ability to resolve conflicts.

However, before you exhibit behaviour you think. If you can think in terms of the attributes that are known to promote commitment, trust and engagement you will almost automatically behave in those ways.

The attributes that produce behaviours that promote commitment, trust and engagement are: attentiveness, trustworthiness, wisdom, direction with committed ambition, intelligence with humour, creating and eliminating tension, addressing individual needs and nurturing.

Once these attributes are embedded into the mind, the behaviours will automatically follow.

Your attitude, therefore, is to always think and behave in ways that build commitment, trust and engagement when interacting with others.

Tip 12 – always ask a unique question

Engage with others - an approach to attentiveness and ensuring engagement with others is to ask a unique question of the other person. If the question is felt to be unique the other person automatically responds and the interaction commences. A unique question is nearly always about the other person, what he or she is wearing, where they have travelled from, or their weekend plans. Asking general questions doesn't convey attentiveness, and has limited power in engagement.

Your attitude, therefore, is to take a keen interest in people and to be inquisitive about each person individually.

Tip 13 – behave assertively when appropriate

Be assertive - assertive behaviour is the capacity to convey a clear message to someone else without causing any psychological distress. One way of practicing this is to create a context of appreciation of the person you are talking to before conveying your message. You may then say clearly, almost in a whisper, what you want to say. Having appreciated the merits of the other person as the context for the conversation, the message should always be about what you feel and what you want from the discussion. Never, ever, accuse the other person of anything in an assertive situation; they will simply disengage and argue, and you've lost everything as you will be out of control.

Your attitude, therefore, is to be very considerate of others when you want to convey a strong message about how you feel and what you would wish to see happen.

Tip 14 – establish strong relationships with those who are important to your success and happiness

Establish strong relationships - in order for us to survive and prosper we need to forge relationships that help us survive and grow. Relationships are many and varied that include acquaintances, friends, lovers, work colleagues, and a mixture, all of whom have a different quality to them in relation to their strength, importance and power, and each will appeal to a different aspect of our own need. Work out who, in each category of relationship, is important to your success, and then challenge yourself as to the strength of the relationship. If you feel an important relationship is weak, go to work on strengthening that relationship.

Your attitude, therefore, is to deliberately strengthen those relationships which are important to your personal success.

Tip 15 – establish at least one relationship with someone with whom you don't need to act.

Have a close relationship - as you all act, it is important to include amongst your relationships someone with whom you have no need to act. Such relationships exist to enable you to recharge and go forward to act in the world.

Resilient people have relationships that provide the appropriate reinforcement and support at the time it is required. Resilient people never judge anyone else; they give of themselves to each relationship and reap the rewards of reciprocated friendship.

Your attitude, therefore, is to seek out and nurture a relationship or two where you have no need to act.

Tip 16 – try to like problems, even if you find them difficult to solve.

Embrace problems - resilient people like to solve problems and rise to challenges, so long as they can resolve the problems and meet the challenges successfully. Problem solvers are more likely to embrace challenges than those who do not like problems, and have no talent for sorting out puzzles and challenges. Card games players are likely to be more interested in solving problems than others simply by virtue of their interest in thinking of the opponent and the moves that are being thought about. Problem solvers also like to delve into the causes of a problem as a means to seeking a solution.

You should try to like puzzles by browsing through the puzzles in daily newspapers and trying them out. Over time you will find you begin to get better at working puzzles out.

Your attitude to yourself, therefore, is to try out puzzles, and to keep going until they become easier, and you begin to enjoy them.

Tip 17 – structure each day to ensure the ‘rocks of the day’ are tackled in bite sized steps

Be organised - people who are well organised are able to cope with the chaos of daily life better than those who do not pay attention to organising themselves, preferring to rely on memory and luck. Being organised allows individuals to know where they are if their day is disrupted by unforeseen events.

You should plan your week and your day in ways that ensure you start work immediately when you arrive at your workplace, and reward completion of nasty tasks by next completing enjoyable ones. Always make room during the day to complete a bite sized chunk of a big task, one that will normally take several days, or weeks, to complete.

Your attitude towards your working day is, therefore, to organise it in ways that enables you to hit the ground running, completing ‘rocks of the day’ in bite sized steps, and do nasty tasks before easy ones.

Tip 18 – control your own anxiety when faced with being outside your ‘comfort zone’

Think positive - one way of doing this is to think of an event when you felt stressed – write down how you thought, felt and behaved at the time. Take a look at those thoughts and challenge them to see if they were logical, realistic or helpful. Now write down some more helpful thoughts about the event. You may need help from someone who will help you see things in a better light.

Controlling your own anxiety is an essential aspect of confidence. You can do this with breathing exercises, where you breath in to your diaphragm over, say 6 seconds, hold your breath for 12 seconds and breath out over 6 seconds. You will find this helps slow you down and provides you with control over your breathing. If you’re anxious you’ll find your breathing becomes quicker, and you need to slow it down.

Your attitude towards yourself, therefore, is to control your anxiety by regularly engaging in breathing exercises. Lowering your anxiety about anticipated events, for example, raises your confidence, and once you have experienced a new challenging event and come through it successfully, this (the success) adds to your esteem which adds to your resilience. You will know that you can experience a similar event again in the future without, necessarily, experiencing a similar degree of anxiety.

Tip 19 – try something different each day to build your confidence

Be self confident - self confidence, demonstrated in a subtle manner, is very attractive, and draws others to you, reinforcing your success with others and contributing significantly to your resilience. Be careful to ensure that your self confidence doesn't turn to arrogance as this has the effect of causing dis-engagement between people.

To build your confidence you should try and do a new and challenging task almost every day. A challenging task is one that you know you will feel slightly uncomfortable about, and one that you haven't done before. It may be something that confronts your shyness, for example.

Your attitude to yourself, therefore, is one of being 'game for anything'!

Tip 20 – make an appointment with yourself each month to do some resilience training on yourself

Monitor your resilience - in your calendar make regular appointments with yourself to review your progress and be disciplined in keeping these appointments! If you find your resilience is slipping, or you have struggled to deal in a resilient way with a particular event, go back over these tips and work out why.

Make an appointment with yourself to review these tips and your progress in strengthening your resilience. You should consider an appointment with yourself every month for half an hour.

Your attitude to yourself, therefore, is to be determined to strengthen your resilience, and to monitor your progress by reviewing it every month.

About the Wellbeing and Performance Group

Our mission – to ‘make the workplace a fabulous place to work’

Our purpose – to prevent stress; to facilitate peak performance; to strengthen corporate and personal resilience.

Our approach – to establish psychologically healthy workplaces through The WellBeing and Performance Agenda.

Our services – applied organisation health psychology; consultancy; organisation development; leadership development.

Our products – The Resilience Assessment Questionnaire (RAQ40); Adaptive Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ); The Cultural Assessment Questionnaire and many others, and

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About Derek Mowbray



Derek Mowbray, is a Chartered Psychologist and Chartered Scientist, with a doctorate in leadership. Dr Mowbray focuses on the behaviour of leaders and managers in relation to their employees, and helps them to develop the behaviours that encourage commitment, trust and staff engagement.

Derek’s techniques include problem focused coaching, cognitive coaching, group work and consultancy. Professor Mowbray combines the unique features of working on the big picture as a strategist as well as facilitating effective leader and manager performance.

He is a visiting Professor of Psychology at Northumbria University and Visiting Professor of Psychology at the University of Gloucestershire.

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