Strengthening Personal Resilience – a programme to improve performance

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July 2012
Strengthening Personal Resilience

Introduction

Stress is a sensation that affects our concentration and ability to perform effectively.

Personal resilience is the ability to manage oneself to prevent the impact of stress from causing under performance in the face of threatening events to personal survival.

Managing oneself is about maintaining personal control and preventing oneself from experiencing the adverse sensations of stress.

Survival, in this context, may amount to maintaining or improving the prospects for personal success and happiness. Feeling successful and happy occurs in the absence of stress and has a positive impact on personal performance.

Various surveys show that about 30% of the workforce, at any given moment, experience the sensation of stress and are, therefore, not feeling well and not experiencing success and happiness. They are, also, under performing.

Stress is an inhibitor to performance. People feeling stressed are thinking more about the cause of their feeling than about their work. When this happens at work, they under perform.

People who work but cannot concentrate, due to events having an adverse impact on them, are people who experience psychological presenteeism. People experiencing psychological presenteeism under perform.

Psychological presenteeism costs an estimated 1.5 times the combined cost of sickness absence and staff turnover attributable to stress. This represents a massive under performance in organisations.

Strengthening personal resilience is one element of a strategy preventing psychological presenteeism. The others are building a healthy and resilient organisation, adopting adaptive leadership principles and eliminating manager created impediments to performance. All four elements form a strategy for the prevention of psychological presenteeism, improvement of wellbeing and optimising performance.

The processes involved in eliminating psychological presenteeism also provoke high level performance.

This paper describes one approach to helping to reduce psychological presenteeism and improving performance. The paper describes the reasons we require resilience, the definitions of resilience, the psychological processes involved in resilience, and an approach to strengthening personal resilience.
The problems

The importance of the workforce

It may be common sense but not common practice for the workforce to be at the centre of corporate strategy. Too frequently, it appears, Board members have interests other than the psychological wellbeing of the workforce.

The workforce is the centre of any organisation, and critical to its success. The benefits of engaging with a resilient workforce include the ability for the organisation to be flexible and adaptable, and respond rapidly to internal and external pressures, at the same time as reducing costs associated with stress. Reducing costs at the same time as increasing performance should be at the top of the organisation’s agenda. The problem for people who understand this is gaining the attention and interest of top management, who, for reasons difficult to understand, find it hard to focus on the psychological needs of the workforce.

There are four areas where top management could become engaged with the workforce and provoke high performance:

1) **Creating and sustaining a healthy organisation.** This provides the context within which individuals are encouraged to excel. Other benefits include their ability to respond very quickly to the need for change without hindering performance.

2) **Introducing and applying Adaptive Leadership and management.** This is based on the principle of shared responsibility, and is a method that promotes commitment and trust between the workforce, their work and the organisation. The style fits perfectly with a healthy organisation.
3) **Ensuring the workforce is resilient against threats to their and the organisation’s survival.** Personal resilience is about having a robust attitude towards adverse events. Attitude is heavily influenced by context. A healthy organisation as a context for the workforce produces a resilient workforce.

4) **Ensuring that the workforce has a healthy lifestyle at work.** Healthy lifestyle at work means ensuring the workforce has access to energy creating nutrition, has the facility for exercise, and that the physical environment is fit for purpose, with impediments to high performance being removed.

These four areas are presented below in diagram form. They each make a significant and essential contribution to the wellbeing and performance of the workforce.
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**Stress**
With 30% of those at work experiencing the feelings of stress at any given moment, stress is a major cause of under performance.

Stress is at the ‘wrong’ end of a continuum that includes:

- **pressure** (a stimulant, which helps us concentrate on our work, so long as we maintain personal control);
- **tension** (also a stimulant, which helps us to concentrate on our work, but can lead to anxiety if the tension continues and we lose personal control);
- **strain** (an impairment as our concentration is weak and we think more about the cause of the strain than our work) – and
- **stress** (which is a condition so serious that we tend to be incapacitated, and, if we are unable to reduce the stress, it can lead to serious physical ill health).

Most people who feel ‘stressed’ are more likely to feel tension and strain.

Stress inhibits personal performance. We don’t like stress and we try hard to get rid of it. We do, however, have an elastic tolerance of stress until it makes us sufficiently ill that we need to escape the situation. The difficulty for managers is that, whilst people may look as though they are managing a stressful situation they may be under performing because of the situation and their struggle to control themselves in it. The symptoms of stress only become obvious to colleagues when the impact of stress has started to embed itself into the affected person, and this is often too late for a quick recovery.

Being resilient is a way of ensuring that events that might cause stress don’t have a negative impact on us.

There are two elements to the elimination of stress at work –

- **the prevention of adverse events that cause a negative impact** (creating and sustaining a healthy organisation, applying Adaptive Leadership principles and implementing a Lifestyle@Work programme) and
- **strengthening individual resilience** to reduce the impact of adverse events on personal performance

The two approaches combined together result in a high performing, healthy, resilient and effective workforce and organisation.
Control
Managing stress is about managing to keep control over ourselves in the face of threats to our survival.

Personal control is a critical element of preventing events from causing strain and stress in the individual.

Personal control is a sensation we feel when we feel ‘comfortable’ in a situation; we feel that whatever happens we feel we can handle the situation and our survival is maintained.

Resilience kicks in when we think we might lose personal control in the face of an event. It is the maintenance of control that strengthening resilience is all about. Once control is lost and stress takes hold, other interventions, such as therapy, or withdrawal from the situation, become relevant. Resilience is about ensuring that personal control is not lost.

There are three areas of focus for control:

Control over oneself
The control over oneself is rooted in self awareness.

Someone who is self aware opens themselves up to the potential for understanding other people, and why they do the things they do. Understanding others in this way maintains personal control when faced with unusual events; other peoples’ responses and behaviours can be more readily understood from the perspective of knowing oneself. A degree of prediction of what others will do helps in maintaining personal control in potentially ambiguous situations.

Control over oneself in the face of potentially threatening events.
This control is rooted in organising oneself in chaotic situations.

Someone who has the ability to organise themselves in chaotic situations also has the ability to be flexible and adaptable. Flexible and adaptable people use techniques to respond to a broad range of events, in ways that prevent the events triggering strain and stress.

Control over oneself in the face of potentially threatening interaction with other people.
This control is rooted in the ability to negotiate effectively with others.

Someone with the skills to interact with others that produces reciprocal behaviour, and can persuade others to do things they might otherwise not wish to do, without causing distress, has the ability to negotiate effectively in most situations. The starting point to make this happen is for one person in the interaction to satisfy the self interest of the other; this tends to result in reciprocal behaviour of the other to satisfy the self interest of the first person.

The combination of all three elements of control can produce the foundations for strengthening resilience for a broad range of situations.
Psychological presenteeism
Whenever we feel well, and experience the sensation of feeling successful and happy, we open up the possibilities of being able to concentrate effectively on tasks. We may have a buzz about us that provides us with energy, motivation and enthusiasm.

Concentration is critically important in performance. It doesn't matter what tasks we perform, if we lack concentration. we under perform and find ourselves repeating, hesitating and deviating from the task at hand.

We may, also, completely forget what we are supposed to do.

Once an event has placed us on alert, and we have understood what it means to us, we may experience pressure and tension. This will energise us to take action to face up to the threat and overcome it.

If we understood that the threat is too great or we judge that we cannot do anything about it, it will cause us strain and stress. Consequently we may not find sufficient energy to face up to the threat, and may, therefore, continue at work but subdued by the existence of the threat, lack concentration and under perform.

Once our concentration fades we become present but cannot perform effectively. This is known as psychological presenteeism.

Most people who eventually go off sick due to stress, go through a period of being at work but under performing.

A pattern of some people's experiences at work will involve joining an organisation full of enthusiasm and buzz, combined with the excitement, and possibly relief, at gaining a new job.

If the organisation provides a supporting and positive culture the prospects for a happy and successful life at work increases; for those who soon discover that the culture is less than positive and supportive, they become exposed to risks and threats that produce stress. If the worker experiences such threats and is strained as a result, eventually the person will want to escape. The period between becoming strained and leaving (either on sick leave or for another job) or recovering, is the period known as psychological presenteeism.
Describing resilience

There is a general view that resilient people who face up to and cope with adverse events accumulate a reservoir of experiences to draw on for the future. Whilst there is little doubt that past experiences contribute to overcoming future ones, this is not always the case.

Some describe resilience as the ability to ‘bounce back’, the implication of which is that we have dipped downwards and have found some inner strength to climb back up again to where we were before the event that knocked us down. Much depends on the intensity of the experience as to whether we strengthen our attitude or weaken and then avoid a similar event in the future. We may have overcome the experience of being knocked down and bounced back, but we don’t want to experience anything similar again in the future. Some have described this in relation to a serious health challenge where the outcome is an attitude to ‘live life to the full’ because of the unknown life expectancy that made time more precious. The same people would not wish to experience a similar health scare; however, if one were to arise, they would be better equipped to deal with it having coped with a similar scare before.

Another way of looking at resilience is through making contingency plans. These plans are based on examining the risks that we face and possible actions to prevent them becoming actual threats. For individuals, contingency planning may be done in the imagination. For example, a constant risk to car drivers is other car drivers and the process of driving. Using the imagination to practice avoiding crashing is contingency planning that makes people more resilient against accidents whilst driving.

Another form of contingency planning may be explained using the illustration of an aircraft. Most aircraft back up their main electronic systems by having triplicate systems that kick in when one goes down. So, the idea is that we have several back up arrangements to enable us to be more resilient. For people, this can only be the case when confronting known threats that require several forms of back up – such as child care and work, where parents may make arrangements with several people to back each other up in the face of failure of one.

Contingency planning may not always be possible. Staying with the aircraft example, the wings cannot be replicated; yet they are massively resilient against turbulence. This is achieved by design to be excessively flexible whilst being tough. Flexible robustness seems like a contradiction in terms, yet this is applicable to people. Those with strong self efficacy (a belief that you can do anything you wish) are more likely to be flexible and adaptable when faced with challenges.

Another way is to compare mental resilience with physical resilience by building immunity against illness, but in the mental resilience sense, against adverse events. Many resilience programmes for those at work follow this by helping staff maintain their health. Whilst physical health is influenced strongly by mental health, mental wellbeing, which is to do with feeling well, is less dependent on being healthy.
Resilience is the capacity to mobilise personal features to cope with and be strengthened by adverse events. Sometimes we experience events that shock us unless we have experienced them before or made mental contingency plans. The period of shock is a period when the mind and body protects itself and effectively shuts down, which may not be helpful in a situation where our survival relies on our ability to concentrate and act quickly. The processes of strengthening resilience, therefore, include providing tools, techniques and approaches to minimise the intensity of shock. Clearly, no amount of preparation can minimise all possibilities of shock, although learning to be helpless under extreme conditions can be effective in protecting the mind and maintaining the status quo.

The characteristics of a resilient person are shown above.

**Attitude**

Resilience boils down to individual attitude towards an event. Attitudes are formed from thoughts and feelings, and are heavily influenced by the context surrounding the event as well as the event itself.

Someone working in a resilient and healthy organisation with a positive working environment who has a ‘fall out’ with a colleague is more likely to have an attitude that tolerates the ‘fall out’, compared to the same ‘fall out’ between colleagues in a culture that is competitive and bullying. The former scenario is likely to produce no diminution of performance, whilst the latter is likely to diminish performance as the participants might be thinking more about the interaction and seeking revenge (to regain control) than thinking about their work. The nature of the ‘fall out’ might be a critique from one colleague to another – in the former scenario this might be construed as positive as constructive criticism is encouraged and routine, whilst in the latter scenario it might be perceived as a threat to survival. In the former scenario the individual continues to maintain control, whilst in the latter personal control is lost and effort may be applied to regain it. That effort diverts concentration away from work, and the individual, therefore, under performs.

Resilience is about forming an attitude towards an event. Attitude is a decision making process that leads to an outcome that enables us to manage our responses to an event without experiencing distress, without losing control and whilst maintaining performance.

The working culture within which events take place may generate a pre-disposition in us to form robust attitudes that maintain or improve performance. A poor working culture may produce the opposite, a pre-disposition towards events that impairs performance because we perceive the events as threatening.

**Characteristics of a resilient individual**

- Enthusiasm for life and work
- Capacity to see the future and “go for it”.
- Capacity to cope with threatening events with experiencing disabling distress.
- Attitude towards life and work that is positive, full of energy and determination.
- Capacity to see the options, and to adapt effectively to meet and overcome challenges.
Resilience is a process

Resilience is the consequence of how we think and feel about an event. It involves formulating an attitude towards an event.

Our thoughts may be heavily influenced by how we feel. Confronting the same event before and after drinking alcohol, for example, may produce different thoughts and feelings based on our mood at the time.

Mood is akin to emotions with less intensity. Mood can get in the way of, or be helpful in heightening, concentration. Mood tends to influence our perception of events and, therefore, our approach to managing an event.

Emotions may, also, influence our responses to events, and can give rise to the ‘knee jerk’ reactions. This has risks, in that the ‘knee jerk’ reaction seldom provides the opportunity for us to think about the event prior to responding to it. This reduces our capacity to mobilise our resilient personal features.

There may be elements of personality that help individuals acquire resilient processes faster than others, but, as resilience is a process that forms attitudes, with so many variables influencing attitude, it isn’t a personality trait.

An element of personality that may influence resilience is flexibility and adaptability. Those with greater flexibility may find adverse events less threatening as they will seek ways to face up to the event with less risk of psychological distress. However, it is possible to learn to be flexible and adaptable.

The forming of attitude, and taking action (or not) follows the steps above.
Context

Organisational culture can pre-dispose workers to be resilient

However, resilience is not the only influence on managing ourselves. Events take place in a context. At work, the context is the cultural environment of work, which includes the behaviours of people, in particular those who control the workplace, the managers. The cultural environment may, also, include the ‘way we do things around here’, which includes the symbols, appearance, rules, and general approach to work, such as being involved in teams.

This may have a spin off into the physical environment, which may also influence our capacity to manage ourselves. A culture that places the workforce low on the list of priorities might place office space higher up the list, possibly producing an approach to office space which may inhibit performance – open plan offices, for example, or lack of personal space, both of which may be driven by the need to economise rather than the need to improve performance.
Characteristics of a resilient organisation

- A buzz with high level performance
- A capacity to respond effectively to internal and external pressures faster and more effective than their competitors
- A capacity to renew themselves rapidly
- A capacity to determine their own destiny
- A capacity to be ambidextrous - deliver effective and efficient products and services at the same time as adapting to changes in their environment.

Context is everything. Events occur within a context and our interpretation of the event takes account of our understanding of the context.

A healthy and resilient organisation opens up the opportunity for the workforce to be resilient. This is because the characteristics of a healthy organisation are those that exhibit energy, buzz, responsiveness and adaptability, none of which is possible without similar characteristics in individuals who work in the organisation. However, individuals will not be able to exhibit the buzz and energy without the cultural context positively provoking such characteristics, encouraging them, and making the workforce feel this is expected from them.

The ingredients of a healthy and resilient organisation are set out in the diagram above. Applying these to the development of the organisation will result in stronger resilience amongst the workforce.
Threats

Any event, or impediment, that may threaten the maintenance of the status quo in our success and happiness may be perceived as a threat to our survival. Personal success and happiness is, of course, idiosyncratic, and depends on many factors. Feeling successful and happy, however, is critically important for our psychological wellbeing. If we feel well we perform better than if we feel ill.

Working out what may or may not be a threat is part of the process of resilience.

Events take place all the time, and for the most part we pay little attention to them as they are routine features of everyday life and pose little or no threat. Simply walking about the house, or shopping or reading the paper are all events. It is events we perceive might threaten us that places us on alert and starts the process of invoking within us our attention and then our capacities of resilient actions to prevent the threat from having an adverse impact on us.

We, also, have the capacity of being made aware of threats to others. In the main, we tend to leave these threats to be tackled by the other person, but there are situations where threats to others become threats to us – threats to members of our family and threats to our team mates may be illustrations. Parents of young children, particularly toddlers, are especially vigilant about possible threats surrounding the child. Army patrols in a conflict are reliant on team mates to be especially vigilant on their behalf to ensure their survival. In these cases there is a real threat of sudden death or incapacity unless there is vigilance on other peoples’ behalf.

Events that trigger a potentially stressful response are those we should be preventing in the first place. However, it is virtually impossible to prevent all events that have the potential for triggering a stress response in people, because everyone is different. One person’s response to an event might stimulate his or her by invoking pressure within, whilst the same event to someone else might invoke strain. One response will be that pressure intensifies concentration; the other will be that strain diverts concentration. Concentration is essential for performance.
Evaluating events, formulating attitude and possible outcomes

Formulating an attitude towards events
We experience events all the time. Most go unrecognised because we have experienced them before and they pose no threat. Occasionally, however, an event occurs that places us on alert. When this happens our attention to the event is heightened and we commence a process of evaluation to try and understand what the event means and what kind of attitude we should have towards the event.

The process of evaluation involves three ingredients:

1. What is happening?
2. What does the situation mean to me?
3. What will be my attitude?
4. What will be the outcome?

Throughout the process of evaluation we keep in mind our capacity and ability to maintain personal control in the face of the event. Maintaining personal control has a major impact on our attitude towards an event. The feeling of needing to avoid psychological distress when under threat lies at the core of our evaluation. Our attitude towards an event will be shaped by our personal perception of the trigger point for personal distress, and what action is required to avoid setting off the trigger.
The influence of context in the evaluation of an event is critical. We are, normally, unable to influence the event itself, only our reaction to it. If we perceive that the context for the event outweighs our capacity to respond positively to it, we may do nothing and accept that what happens to us is inevitable.

1. **What is happening?**

Self awareness enables us to understand others more easily. Strengthening resilience involves us understanding our own personal characteristics as well as characteristics found in most people.

There are a series of characteristics that may be applicable generally. They include:

- The need to survive results in self interest being a major motivator for action.
- We act according to our understanding of the context we are in.
- We are prone to false attributions when making judgements about other people without knowing them.

Individually, we need to understand who we are and what skills, knowledge and experience we possess. Understanding this helps us develop our self worth, self esteem both of which lead to self efficacy if we have a positive view of ourself.

There are five areas that contribute to who we are, and these are shown in the diagram.

Our interactive self is about our ability to successfully interact with others in ways that achieve what we want, and doesn’t cause anyone distress in the process.

Our experiences self is a reflection on the experiences we’ve had that we have successfully managed, and those that we didn’t manage successfully.

Our skills self is about the skills we have accumulated throughout our life to date, including the basic skills of physical survival, such as first aid.

Our relationships self is about forging relationships that contribute substantially to our success and happiness.
Our capital self is about our human capital assets that include economic, cultural, erotic and social assets. These contribute to our sense of success and happiness with the assets we have. This contributes to our sense of self worth.

2. What does this situation (event) mean?

Before we take any action when faced with an event, we use our understanding of ourself as a basis for evaluating the event itself. As discussed, all events take place within a context, and our evaluation takes account of the context as we understand it to be.

We, very rapidly, assess an event using some or all of the following:

Context – we assess the context in which the event takes place. If the context is a corporately resilient and healthy organisation our attitude towards the event will reflect the supportive environment. If it isn’t, our attitude will take this into account when deciding what to do.

Emotional evidence – we are strongly influenced by our immediate emotional response to the event

Objective evidence – we try to obtain as much factual information as we can.

Appropriateness/timeliness evidence – we judge the event against an idiosyncratic notion of whether the event should be happening at this time, and whether it is appropriate to be happening at this time.

Expectation/anticipation evidence – we assess what is likely to happen to us as a consequence of the event. This can help us to anticipate further events or actions as a consequence of the main event.
Experience evidence – we draw on previous experience most relevant to the event, and work out how to manage the event based on the previous experience of something similar.

Fairness/psychological contract evidence – we make a judgement concerning how fair and reasonable we believe the event to be, together with how fair and reasonable the impact is on us.

Social proof evidence– we take into account what others may think and feel about the event, and will frequently join forces with others in their interpretation of the event, and, possibly, the attitude and actions taken.

All these different evaluations team up together in our mind and help form an attitude towards the event.

3. What is my attitude (towards this event)?

Generally, our attitude towards a threatening event will be to:

Take action – an attitude that tells us to manage the impact of the event in a way that ensures survival by minimising the effect of stress on oneself. The action taken will be judged within the context of the event, and will reflect the individual ability to maintain personal control in facing up to the event. Taking action may be a consequence of a strategy of conviction used by an individual or organisation to introduce change.

Take no action – an attitude that tells us to manage the impact of the event by deciding to take no action. The evaluation of the event will produce an attitude that suggests that survival for oneself is more likely when no action is taken. Taking no action will, also, be influenced by the individual ability to maintain personal control in facing up to the event.

Take no action – learned helplessness – an attitude that tells us to manage the impact of the event by not forming an attitude towards it; let the event take its course without either taking action or deciding not to take action. In effect we stop thinking about the event, and abandon all effort to regain personal control. Under these circumstances, it becomes important for the impact of the event not to cause stress. Often, we drift into a kind of hibernation, disengaging with our surroundings and waiting for the event to be over. This is a means of protecting oneself against distress. We expect to regain personal control after the event has passed.

Enforced action – an attitude which accepts that others control the situation and there is nothing to be done but accept the consequences of the event. Instead of adopting a learned helplessness attitude, which results in hibernation, enforced action produces an attitude that action is required but, at the same time, disengages the individual from the organisation that is enforcing the action. Enforced action is likely to trigger psychological distress, and contribute to psychological presenteeism. Enforced action may be a consequence of a strategy of imposition used by an organisation or individual to introduce change.
4. What will be the outcome?
The outcome will seek to maintain personal control of the situation, as far as this is possible.

Whatever action is taken will be designed to overcome the event without experiencing any form of distress. The action may also seek to ensure personal success and happiness in overcoming the event.

The enforced action will produce a different outcome. Enforced action might produce an outcome where distress is experienced, causing dis-engagement and psychological presenteeism. If the circumstances are favourable, the individual may, then, decide to leave the situation.

If the situation is not favourable, the individual may decide to adopt a learned helplessness inaction, and ‘tread water’ until such time his or her attitude changes as circumstances and context changes.

Measuring resilience

The Resilience Assessment Questionnaire has been designed to identify a general attitude towards everyday events, combined with some questions relating to personal awareness.

The questionnaire has not been tested for reliability. It has strong face validity.

The questionnaire can be used before a programme to strengthen personal resilience, and sometime afterwards, to gauge the impact of a development programme. It is useful to individuals wishing to improve their general resilience by helping to strengthen their attitudes towards routine events. Attitudes are more robust when we know we can maintain personal control in situations.

Context specific assessments are available, which identify the specific events that are known to pose threats to the workforce. The assessment would then pose questions in relation to the different possible outcomes from attitudes towards specific events.

So, if an organisation is facing a merger with another, the context specific assessment would identify the specific events that pose threats to the workforce involved. Amongst these might be:

- Threats to job
- Threats to changing job
- Threats of working with a new team
- Threats to loss of identity
- Threats to location of job
- Threats of redundancy

Each of these may be assessed by individuals affected by the merger to ascertain their attitude towards these events, in advance of the events potentially taking place. The results could be
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used to help inform managers on how to manage the events in ways that reduces the risks of distress, thereby maintaining performance during the change process.

Producing a reliable measurement is challenging, as each event is assessed uniquely and the outcome determined by attitude at the time. A similar event occurring at different times may produce different attitudes because of context, personal mood and personal circumstances. However, measuring resilience provides individuals and managers with the opportunity of choosing to improve personal resilience using various approaches and techniques that follow later.

Strengthening resilience - Changing attitudes

Strengthening resilience requires us to modify our thinking about ourselves, events and others. This depends on our approach to reinforcing any changes we wish to make to our thinking.

There are some key influences on our mind that help us to change our thinking. They are:

1. **Positive self talk** – talking to ourselves out loud has a massive impact on the way we think.
2. **Imagination** – imagining how we will respond to events influences the brain to act in that way. Using the imagination positively by thinking through approaches to events guides the mind to act according to the imaginary rehearsal.
3. **Recording** – writing down notes and scribbles that reflect our thinking about things has a positive impact on the mind. Writing notes in the margin of a book, for example, tends to make the mind more alert to the content of that section of the book. Notes might act as summaries of content, and, in this respect, helps with individual evaluation of what has been written or said.
4. **Triple loop learning** – this relates to new ideas which the mind only takes a note of if reinforced for a minimum of three times. Reinforcement should be in a slightly different way to the way in which the new idea was first introduced. A different take on the same idea has a powerful reinforcement effect.
5. **Purposeful acts** – the mind likes to have targets to achieve before moving on to the next target. So, large changes, split into smaller targets, help the mind take action to complete the tasks involved.
Each of these influences need to be built into any development programme, and are required to help modify attitudes towards events.

**Strengthening personal resilience.**

In The Mowbray Model of Resilience Development, that follows, the approach is to focus on the areas of personal control that can prevent psychological distress occurring that can result in under performance.

These are, to repeat, -
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**Control over oneself**

The control over oneself is rooted in self awareness.

**Control over oneself in the face of potentially threatening events.**

This control is rooted in organising oneself in chaotic situations.

**Control over oneself in the face of potentially threatening interaction with other people.**

This control is rooted in the ability to negotiate effectively with others.

The model, below, identifies groups of actions that we can take to strengthen attitudes in general.

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**The Mowbray Model of Resilience Development**

[Diagram of the Mowbray Model of Resilience Development]
Groups of actions:

**Self awareness** – people who are self aware open themselves up to be more tolerant in their attitude to other people and their actions. This diminishes the impact that other people may have on oneself in a situation that otherwise might be perceived as threatening. People are the principal cause of psychological distress in others, sometimes directly such as being aggressive, more often indirectly, by creating events that cause distress, such as mismanaging change, or deciding on a computer system that doesn’t work.

Self awareness is, also, about building the foundations on which we derive our success and happiness. If we feel successful and happy we feel well and if we feel well we perform better. The ingredients for success and happiness are different for each of us, but there are some common themes, such as relationships, how people respond to us, how we interact with others and how confident we feel. Confidence has a link to our self belief we can do anything we turn our hand to, our self efficacy, and sometimes it is good for us to reflect how successful and confident we actually are. Confidence is, also, linked to our ability to control ourselves and our ability to control our anxieties. If we can control our anxieties we can do almost anything we wish.

Self awareness is, also, about being sensitive to everything around us. This is being mindful. It includes the components of emotional intelligence which focus on our sensitivity to other people, so that we adjust our behaviours to ensure we have engagement between ourselves and others in ways that produces a successful interaction – one that does not cause any psychological distress.

Expanding our self awareness, and adjusting our thoughts about ourselves, strengthens our attitudes towards others and the events that might arise from our interaction with others.

From a corporate resilience perspective, managers who are self aware will be less likely to take decisions that impede the performance of the workforce, such as agreeing to computer systems that don’t work, or behaving towards others that dis-engage them.

**Determination** – people who are determined to see things through to a conclusion open up the opportunity to be more resilient that those whose determination is weak. Determination is linked to motivation. Motivation is linked to survival, in that we are conditioned to survive. An attitude that is determined to achieve something or see something through to a conclusion is a resilient attitude that will provoke actions to find ways through or around problems or barriers in the way to the goal.

Where does our determination come from? It comes from what drives us as individuals. This isn’t to be confused with what we might be determined to do, that is a different element of this model. This is about what makes us go forward taking actions and doing things when others might regard the actions as, possibly, bizarre. For example, who in their right mind would mortgage their house to start a risky business in a recession? Plenty of people do. So what drives them to do it?

The answer lies in our core values, which are our core drivers. Core values are not the ‘nice to have’ values that are so often held up to be personal values, such as honesty and integrity, as
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these may run as background drivers for everyday interactions, but when push comes to shove, we are all prone to telling white lies, being economical with the truth and risking our integrity.

The core values that drive us need thinking about and teasing out, but once uncovered, help the individual to understand more fully why they do the things they do. This adds to self awareness, and helps explain reactions to others.

Those who know their core values need to think about aligning their daily life to their core values. They will find they become determined as a result.

From a corporate resilience perspective, aligning corporate values to personal values captures the energy that drives the workforce. This helps build a healthy organisation. Too often, corporate values are merely a list of ‘nice to haves’ that bear little resemblance to the personal values that drive the workforce and are often seen as rhetoric, and can, sometimes, produce a negative effect on the workforce.

Vision – people who know what they really want to do with their lives have a strong determination to achieve it. This adds to personal resilience. It, also, adds to psychological wellbeing as a personal mission is a central feature of wellbeing.

A vision doesn’t need to be in sharp focus, but can be; it doesn’t need to have a timetable, but can have; it doesn’t even need to be finite, but can be. Once a vision is achieved, a new one needs to be established.

Having a long term goal (anything from a year onwards) helps to iron out short term deviations, and enables individuals to manage short term threats better because their power to cause distress is diminished in the context of a longer term goal. Sometimes, however, the longer term goal is interrupted completely by a short term threat with long term consequences. Ill health that prevents the person from progressing with their vision, is an example of this. In this situation, the person will have worked out their vision, and, therefore, are in a position to re-think another vision that is more aligned to the present situation.

Those who regard setting goals and having a vision as a ‘hostage to fortune’, setting the person up for perpetual disappointment, should consider this – is it better to arrive somewhere in five years’ time that you have planned or to arrive somewhere you haven’t planned? For some, the unknown is exciting, but not for the majority. For all of us uncertainty is a stressor, and limiting the uncertainty reduces our risk of distress. For those who are excited by the unknown, the unknown could be their vision.

Organisation – people who have the tools, techniques and agreements in place to keep control of themselves in a chaotic environment have the attitude to be able to manage random events that might otherwise threaten their survival.

Random events require time to manage, and so understanding where our time goes each week helps to commence the process of adjusting our routine tasks to open up the possibility of making some time available for the random demands, and some planned activities, that are squeezed off the agenda. We have a finite amount of time available to us, but we have choices about how the time is used.
Strengthening Personal Resilience

There are some common routine events that hijack time, such as meetings, interruptions, emails. Common random events might include traffic jams. Each can be managed effectively through the use of agreements with others, such as arranging to be called to a meeting for a specified question to be answered, or using devices that arrange emails into categories to suit individual purposes, and devices to provide information about traffic conditions. Interruptions are, effectively, invitations to be interrupted, which can be accepted or not.

Possessing the tools and techniques and the capability to apply them in chaotic situations enhances the ability to maintain personal control in seemingly chaotic situations. This strengthens attitude towards such events which improves resilience in these situations.

Relationships – people who forge strong relationships with others that are important to personal success and happiness will have stronger resilience against adverse events generally than those who do not have such relationships.

Effective relationships help us achieve what we want as they provide us with the encouragement and support to take actions that are important for our success and happiness. As success and happiness are antidotes to psychological distress, these strong relationships help protect against the impact of threatening events.

Normally, relationships expand our own capacity to achieve things. We tend to see some relationships as part of our team, interacting together to achieve something. At work, teams made up of strong relationships between team members, are groups that have a very low risk of distress, and they provide us with the cultural context in which our attitude towards threatening events are more robust, as the team acts together to maintain the personal control of all its members.

Strong relationships are based on mutually explicit expectations. At work, this is the starting point for a successful relationship between managers and staff.

A strong relationship is one where each in the relationship derives a sense of success and happiness from the other.

Interaction – people who can persuade others to do things they might otherwise not wish to do, and to do those things without causing distress, have an attitude that makes them comfortable when interacting with others. This improves personal resilience in the face of events that include people who may pose a threat to survival.

Successful interactive behaviour requires individuals to think about certain key influences on interaction – attentiveness being the most important.

Body language in interaction is, also, significant. Using the approach of attentiveness, for example, if body language indicates a dis-engagement between the parties, the interaction is less successful, and may fail entirely. On the other hand, if the body language supports the attentive interaction, this will provoke reciprocal behaviour from the other person, creating the opportunity for the interaction to be successful.
Strengthening Personal Resilience

The key attributes of a person who is normally successful in their interactions are:

- Attentiveness
- Trustworthiness
- Wisdom
- Assertiveness
- Intelligence with humour
- Passion
- Direction with committed ambition
- Address individual needs
- Nurturing

Those who think and have an attitude towards others that embrace these attributes will produce the behaviours that create a sense of success and happiness in others.

The headline behaviours that provoke a sense of success and happiness in others are:

- Attentiveness – demonstrating interest in the other person
- Intellectual flexibility – being able to think on your feet and respond effectively in interaction
- Reliability – being consistent in doing what you say you’ll do
- Conflict resolution – resolving conflicts immediately they arise.
- Encouragement – lending support to the other person by encouraging him or her in what they do.

Problem solving – people who solve problems have an attitude towards events that is resilient, knowing that addressing problems doesn’t pose a particular challenge.

Problem solving involves assessing the event and being careful to identify exactly what the problem might be that requires resolution. This involves logic, listening skills, lateral thinking and a process to evaluate the problem and possible solutions – an option appraisal approach.

Another aspect of problem solving is contingency planning. This relates to a need for a back-up plan in the event of a threat becoming real, and requiring action to continue to survive and maintain performance. Contingency planning is a process that requires a risk assessment of the potential threats individuals face. At its simplest, child care arrangements are a familiar and common challenge for parents at work, and where the arrangements in place require back up. Knowing the contingency arrangements are in place enables parents to focus on their work and not worry about the failure of the arrangements.

Working out contingency arrangements is a form of problem solving requiring an assessment and an analysis of options and their implications and consequences.

Self confidence – people who are confident have a strong self efficacy and resilience in the face of events that might threaten survival.

Building confidence normally accompanies exposure to different experiences and events, and being able to overcome these without suffering distress.
Confidence is impaired by anxiety; it is the control of anxiety that allows confidence to be built and developed.

Anxiety, also, results in personal control being lost, and controlling anxiety is essential for regaining personal control and restoring performance.

**How to become more resilient**

There are exercises that can be used to strengthen attitude towards events by:

- developing greater personal awareness, so that personal control is strengthened in relation to understanding oneself and others,
- using techniques to control personal responses to events in a chaotic context, and
- strengthening the processes of interacting with others so that control over responses from others is strengthened.

The combination of these exercises provides a rounded approach to strengthening attitudes, and, therefore, improving resilience.

Exercises, however, need to be repeated continuously for them to make a difference to the thinking needed to change behaviour.

A method of achieving this is to work with a small group of colleagues and/or friends, and for the group to repeat the exercises together, so that a team approach is developed.

Another ingredient for improving personal resilience is for corporate resilience to be developed. This will result in a healthy organisation that has an impact on the prevention of events occurring in the first place, and on the evaluation of events by individuals in the workforce.

The imperative to develop a healthy organisation is to improve overall performance by providing a context and culture that limits the need for employees to be resilient.
Conclusion

There are several serious problems facing organisations, the most serious of which is the level of psychological presenteeism caused by stress, which has a massive impact on performance.

To reduce the impact of stress on performance, organisations need to develop themselves as healthy organisations with Adaptive Leadership and a determination to eliminate the management created impediments to performance. This provides the context within which people work.

In addition, the workforce needs to strengthen its resilience against adverse events.

Personal resilience is a process not a personality trait. It is a process to formulate an attitude towards events that may threaten survival – threaten personal success and happiness. An individual with an attitude that enables him or her manage their response to an event, without impacting on performance, demonstrates resilience.

The process of building an attitude towards a threatening event involves evaluating the event within a context, and assessing the prospects of personal survival based on options to take action, take no action or adopt a learned helplessness stance.

For the workforce to change its attitude towards events, it needs to enter into a programme that reinforces resilience techniques over a period of time. Additionally, the organisation needs to change its culture to a “stress prevention culture”.

Professor Derek Mowbray facilitates his workshops on Strengthening Resilience for clients wishing to improve the performance of their organisation and workforce. For further information, visit our website at http://www.mas.org.uk/events-and-seminars.html