Strengthening Personal Resilience

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Summary

Organisations and individuals face a number of risks and threats at work, which challenge their psychological wellbeing. In addition, they are exposed to the consequences of the economic climate. This can have a ripple effect on the workforce, individuals and their families. Building resilience will contribute to keeping the workforce motivated, engaged, committed and maintaining performance through periods of uncertainty and change, both inside and outside the organisation.

Resilience is about attitudes towards (individually interpreted) adverse events and poor behaviours. Attitudes arise from the degree to which the person maintains personal mental control in the face of events and behaviours. Positive attitudes are more likely to occur within positive cultural environments. The same event or behaviour occurring in a positive cultural environment will provoke a different response compared to a negative cultural environment, depending on the interpretation of how the event or behaviour will affect the future success and happiness (self-interest) of the individual, and whether the individual thinks it's 'worthwhile' being resilient. The most resilient person will find their resilience has limitations according to the cultural environment they find themselves and whether being resilient will produce benefits of value to the individual.

A significant proportion of personal resilience is based on self-efficacy and self–esteem, both of which are attributes that are built up over time and reinforced on a regular basis. Their utility are culturally contingent, with a positive culture reinforcing self–efficacy and self-esteem, whilst a negative one doing the opposite, unless the aim of the individual is to change the negative culture.

Of all the possible measures to prevent stress, and psychopresenteeism (people being present at work in body but not in mind), strengthening resilience has probably the least impact, yet is the most common approach to prevention. However, when combined with the implementation of features that prevent adverse events and poor behaviours from occurring in the first place, personal resilience has a significant impact in the prevention of stress

Resilience is a process, not a personality trait. It is a choice, heavily influenced by the interpretation made by the person of the culture in which the individual experiences the adverse event or behaviour. In effect, the person calling on their resilience is asking him or herself the question 'Is it worth rising up to the challenge this event or behaviour creates? Is it worth it for me to address this challenge so that I can continue to be engaged with my work and/or my organisation?'

Where personality has an influence on attitudes is in the predisposition of the person towards certain activities. People drawn to the Armed Services are likely to be predisposed to combat. People drawn to accountancy are likely to be predisposed towards detailed figure work. Their respective tolerance of adverse events and behaviours are likely to be more elastic than in people not disposed towards these activities. However if the cultural environment is extremely challenging, predisposition towards the tasks to be performed will become negated.

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There are various contributions that can be made to strengthening personal resilience:

1. Personal experience – people who have experienced a broad range of events and behaviours, and have managed them in the past, are more likely to understand how to manage them in the future.
2. Skills – people who have acquired technical skills and feel competent are more able to remain in control of them-self in technically challenging situations because they feel confident they possess the relevant skills to deal with the challenges that arise.
3. Skills – people with the emotional intelligence, self awareness, interaction and adaptive skills are more likely to feel sufficiently confident to face up to and cope with challenges in relation to behaviour in others
4. Contingency and redundancy planning – people who are sufficiently aware and have vision are more likely to be able to form and attitude towards anticipated events and behaviours and to have already worked out their plan B of what to do.

Resilience is a key aspect of Psychological Wellbeing and Performance. It focuses on personal stress prevention techniques, approaches and behaviours. The workforce, as a whole, may develop into a corporately resilient workforce, with the additional benefits of better staff retention, low sickness absence, low psychopresenteeism and low staff turnover rates. The benefit dividend includes the prospect of achieving peak performance if other elements are, also, in place, such as the achievement of output behaviours such as commitment, trust, social engagement, kinship, motivation and concentration.

The most frequent cause of stress is ourselves. Unless and until all members of the workforce, in particular those holding accountable positions, understand, embed and display behaviours that prevent psychological distress in others, no amount of personal resilience will reduce the prevalence of stress, although it may mitigate its impact.

Personal resilience forms part of The WellBeing and Performance Agenda in which Adaptive Culture, Adaptive Leadership and Adaptive Working Environment constitute Corporate Resilience, and Adaptive Resilient Person (in the agenda framework) constitute the Resilient Person. The framework is presented below:
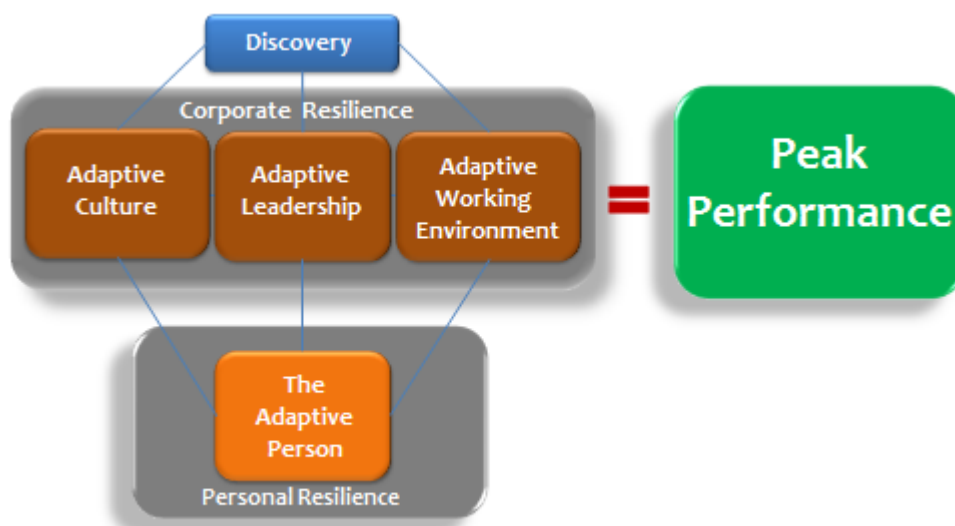
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The overall aim is to prevent the events and behaviours that trigger distress in others from occurring in the first place, and to substitute adverse events with those that trigger and provoke psychological wellbeing and the capacity to concentrate, thereby achieving peak performance. This often requires presenting potentially difficult events in ways that appeal to individuals as challenges that they are willing and able to overcome successfully. For example, change is a necessity for organisations to survive and prosper, but is often cited as causing significant levels of stress. It is manner in which change is managed that causes the distress, not the change itself.

Introduction

The prevalence of stress at work appears to have changed little over the past decade, whilst the incidence of psychopresenteeism appears to have risen. The cost of mental health issues at work is now £70 billion per annum in the UK. (OECD 2014)

The economic recession has had an impact by squeezing the amount of money available to businesses and services, making the workforce feel uncertain about the future, with fewer choices of employment. Uncertainty is a principal cause of psychological distress.

In the main, managers appear to be helpless in the face of this kind of pressure, and have done little to help the workforce by, for example, making the workplace a fabulous place to work so that the workplace becomes the oasis for those seeking sanctuary from ordinary domestic life.

Instead managers have left the workforce alone, leaving it to its own devices.

In this context has emerged an interest in resilience – personal resilience.

What is resilience?

Resilience is the capacity to face up to challenges that may threaten us, in a manner than enables us to deal with the challenge without it having a detrimental impact on us.

Resilience is about maintaining mental control over ourselves so that we can form an attitude towards the challenge. A robust attitude tends to result in facing up to the challenge, finding ways to address the challenge and coping with it without any detrimental impact on us. A robust attitude might also be demonstrated in waiting for the right moment to face up to the challenge.

A less robust attitude might produce a different response, one that does have a detrimental impact on the individual.

Retaining mental control and forming attitudes are hugely influenced by context and culture. Context and culture can easily engulf the individual in positive and negative ways. A challenge in a positive context and culture is more likely to trigger a robust attitude in the individual, by comparison to the same challenge in a negative context and culture, where the individual feels there is little or no emotional or practical support.

The message to organisations is that the cultural environment has a great impact on the psychological wellbeing of the individual, and that when individuals are faced with challenges, they are more likely to rise up to and cope with the challenge in a positive environment than a negative one. Organisations that rely on individual resilience to see their workforce through difficult times, stand less chance of this happening unless they address the cultural environment of the workplace, and make it a fabulous place to work.

Ideally, the organisation should be managed in a manner that prevents the individual from needing to call on their resilience, as the events and poor behaviours, that form the bulk of challenges, are prevented from occurring in the first place.

The process of becoming resilient

Resilience is about the individual. It is about individual capacity to maintain mental control in the face of potential or actual threats, and to form an attitude towards the challenge that determines the action the individual takes.

There are a number of elements that help individuals form an attitude. They include:

Self awareness
Psychological influences
Standards
Emotions
Capacity to be resilient.

Self awareness

People who know themselves well can understand others, and see in others what they see in themselves. The insight into oneself is important as it contributes to self esteem[1] and self efficacy[2], both cornerstones in forming attitudes.

There are several ways of approaching self awareness. In this context the approach is to catalogue experiences, skills including interactive skills, relationships and human capital – the extent to which we feel success and happiness about our economic, social, cultural and erotic self.

Psychological influences

There are some influences over which we have little control. They influence the way we do things and the ways we think.

We are conditioned to survive, and survival forms our ultimate self interest.

We cannot survive on our own, so we have to interact. However, our interactions often cause distress in others (mainly because our self interest takes over). As we cannot survive on our own we constantly live in the context of organisations, or all types. In order to survive and achieve our self interest we act; we act according to our understanding of the organisation and situation we are in and how best to survive it.

We are prone to exaggerate.

We are good at false attributions – attributing to others our own idea of what they are like without knowing them.

Standards

We are influenced by standards. Standards come in many forms from the social standards of the day, professional standards, the law, parenting standards, school standards, beliefs and personal values.

Standards influence us by being a type of benchmark against which we make an assessment of our attitude in any given situation. For example, certain behaviours may be acceptable in one situation but not another;

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[1] Self esteem is a personal evaluation of one's own worth, and helps to form an attitude towards oneself.
[2] Self efficacy is a belief in oneself that you can achieve any task of goal you set for yourself.

certain forms of dress may be acceptable in one situation but not another. Our attitude towards the situation may be influenced by whether or not we 'agree' with the behaviour or dress code applicable to each situation.

Emotions

Emotional responses to challenges are unavoidable. However, they can interfere with the capacity for form a reasoned attitude towards the challenge, as they can divert the mind and take attention away from evaluating every aspect of a challenge, its context and what it means.

Capacity

The capacity to be resilient relates to the constraints being applied by the context and culture in which the challenges occur. For example, those working in a toxic environment may be unable to draw on their resilience because the constant 'drip drip' effect of the context and culture may make it simply impossible to find the inner strength to face up to the challenge.

On the other hand if the challenge is in the context and culture that is positive and supporting to individuals the capacity to be resilient is expanded, as individual attitude will be influenced by the positive context and culture.

Evaluating challenges

When we come to evaluate challenges and form an attitude towards them we are influenced by the elements above. They come into play at different stages in the evaluation process.

We evaluate challenges by trying to understand the challenge and make meaning from it in a way that enables us to decide what to do.

We see challenges in their context. Understanding the context is essential, as it helps to formulate attitude.

We have an emotional response to the challenge. Controlling the emotion to prevent a 'knee jerk' response is important, although emotions need to be expressed at some stage. A 'knee jerk' response may not be the most effective attitude in the circumstances.

We try to establish as much evidence about the challenge as possible. We seek objectivity to help formulate an attitude.

We assess the challenge in terms of appropriateness and timeliness – two idiosyncratic elements that we use to determine whether the challenge is something to pay attention to or now – important aspects of attitude.

We work out what will happen when faced with the challenge. We try to anticipate the outcome.

We draw on our experiences to see if we have overcome something similar in the past. We, also, draw on our skills to see if we have skills to address the challenge.

We work out if the challenge is fair – this plays to the psychological contract, an unwritten contract between people based on fairness.

We find out what others think of the challenge, as this is appropriate to the type of challenge, and take account of their opinion in determining our own attitude.

Outcomes from evaluation

There are several choices to be made following the evaluation of a challenge.

Taking action to address the challenge. This may include deliberately taking no action or deferring action to a more suitable time.

Inaction – as a consequence of fear or some other inhibiting condition that prevent the person from taking deliberate action. This may include learned helplessness – a response which occurs when the challenge is too great for the person to have any impact – he or she effectively hibernates from the situation, and seeks protection from within themselves.

Enforced action – this occurs when the capability of the person is so inhibited that he or she is forced into taking action or forced into taking no action if the situation is effectively catastrophic.

Strengthening personal resilience

Understanding what resilience is and how attitudes are formed helps in strengthening resilience.

Strengthening resilience can, also, be undertaken by understanding more about oneself, and adding skills that can help under certain circumstances.

Strengthening resilience is about strengthening generic resilience. Specific programmes can be developed to strengthen specific resilience, for example, in the Armed Services, where attitudes towards combat and team working may be specific items to strengthen.

The Resilience Development Framework has been designed to deliver a programme that addresses three elements of control:

- Control over oneself
- Control over responses to events
- Control over responses to other people

The framework is shown in the image below.
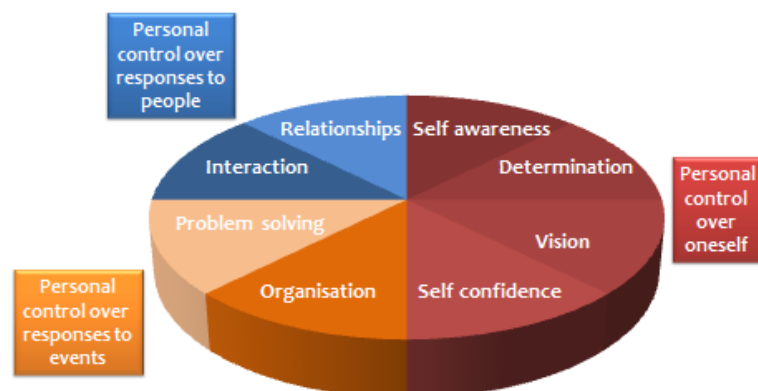
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Self awareness

This element focuses on understanding oneself, the experiences we have had, the skills we have acquired, and how we think about ourself. The better we understand ourself the more we understand others; they greater our confidence, and the stronger our attitudes become in the most promising situations.

Determination

This is about finding out personal values, as they drive us, and influence our attitudes to challenges.

Vision

People who know what they want often get it. This is about finding out what you want from life. It strengthens our resolve and tends to dilute the impact of challenges in the short term as the person strives for something more personally important in the long term.

Self confidence

This is about being able to control anxiety. Once the skills are acquired, self confidence is increased.

Organisation

This element provides skills to cope with chaos.

Problem solving

This provides exercises in different types of problem. Those able to tackle problems seek to find ways of resolving challenges. Good problem solvers have robust attitudes towards challenges.

Interaction

This element provides skills in persuasion. Those who know how to handle people in different circumstances have more robust attitudes towards people who show questionable behaviour.

Relationships

This element helps to identify relationships that are important and strong. It, also, deals with establishing mutual expectations, a common challenge in the workplace.

Conclusion

Personal resilience is about being able to deal with challenges without them causing distress to the individual.

Understanding resilience and how it might be strengthened is often behind efforts to strengthen the resilience of the workforce in difficult and challenging times.

However, personal resilience will only help so far. If the context and culture of the organisation is not supportive and helpful to individuals, there is a limit to which personal resilience will have a positive effect in preventing stress.

Strengthening personal resilience should be seen in the wider context of the WellBeing and Performance Agenda, which helps organisations make the workplace a fabulous place to work.

The WellBeing and Performance Agenda provides the advice on how to improve culture, develop leadership and provide a working environment to achieve peak performance. With these elements in place, individuals in the workforce will not need to call on their personal resilience except for extreme challenges.

Professor Derek Mowbray

BA., MSc., MSc(Econ)., PhD., DipPsych., CPsychol., CSci., AFBPsS., FIHM.

Derek Mowbray is a Chartered Psychologist and Chartered Scientist, with a doctorate in the psychology of leadership. Dr. Mowbray is a visiting Professor at Northumbria University and was appointed Visiting Professor at the University of Gloucestershire in 2013.

Derek Mowbray specialises in the primary prevention of psychological distress at work, with a focus on promoting wellbeing and performance. He provides consultancy and facilitation in four areas:

- Building and sustaining healthy organisations
- Promoting and adopting adaptive leadership and management principles
- Boosting personal and corporate resilience
- Resolving lifestyle@work issues – impediments to wellbeing and performance

Derek focuses on organisation culture, the behaviour of leaders and managers in relation to their employees, personal and corporate resilience and on issues of lifestyle@work that impede performance, such as poorly designed policies and procedures or lack of opportunity for exercise and obtaining energy boosting food.

By helping managers to develop the behaviours that encourage commitment and trust, staff engagement and levels of personal performance are strengthened and improved; staff retention increased; absence and presenteeism levels will be reduced along with their huge associated costs.

In 2011 his management standards for A Healthy Organisation were published and are now widely used across all sectors. In early 2012 his Manager's Code for Health and Social Care was launched by Dame Carol Black on behalf of the Institute of Healthcare Management.

Derek Mowbray's clients are from all sectors and all shapes and sizes and from throughout the UK and Ireland. In 2011 his Resilience Programme was rolled out in the USA and in Switzerland as well as throughout the UK.

Derek is a regular contributor to HSE, CIPD, HSJ, and LinkedIn communities, and has made national presentations at conferences for the International Stress Management Association, NHS Employers, the HSJ World Class Workforce, Health and Wellbeing at Work, The Royal College of General Practitioners, The British Psychological Society and the CIPD.

Derek Mowbray is the founder of The Wellbeing and Performance Group, a group of services that includes OrganisationHealth and The Management Advisory Service.

Professor Derek Mowbray facilitates 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/development-programmes/resilience-training.html

Professor Mowbray's Guide to Personal Resilience is available from http://www.mas.org.uk/publications/personal-resilience-guide.html *along with other Guides around the Wellbeing and Performance Agenda.*

Our Resilience Assessment Questionnaire is available for use under licence – to view the short version of it, go to the Questionnaires section of our website. For access to the full version, email Barbara.leigh@mas.org.uk.

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