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How high can you bounce?

Rita Marcella

I was intrigued and a little surprised recently to be told by a colleague that I was resilient.

It wasn't a label that I would necessarily have ever thought of or aspired to for myself. But it set me thinking about the nature of resilience, why it might be a good quality to possess and how it might be important not only for individuals but also for organisations today.

How might we define resilience? The OED tells us that it is: (i) the ability of a substance or object to spring back into shape, elasticity: and (ii) the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties, toughness.

It is a quality most often called upon and recognised as valuable in times of adversity and has positive connotations of rallying and sticking to one's core strengths that abound in the popular myths about resilience. For example Robert the Bruce, at the lowest point in his fortunes, exiled in a cave and the spider from which he learned that however many knocks you receive you never give up, you keep on trying.

The legend illustrates the quality admired by Woodrow Wilson when he said "the difference between a strong man and a weak one is that the former does not give up after a defeat", for defeats cannot be avoided: it is rather how the resilient individual or organisation responds that demonstrates their strength. A similar notion pervades to many quotes to list, such as that of Confucius "our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we do."

Rising stronger after a fall demonstrates resilience, the elasticity of being able to give but equally to spring back. It is not that you are undented, there may be damage, but at core you are undaunted, undeterred and potentially more resolute than before.

It is equally a truism (but nonetheless true) that we, individuals and organisations, can learn more from failure than success. It is hard to distinguish with certainty the factors that lead to success: it is often much easier to isolate those factors that led to failure. When receiving feedback on performance, we may bask in the glow of the accolades we have received; but we will learn vastly more from a careful analysis of the things that we did badly.

But to learn from failure you must have an open mind and be resilient in the sense of undaunted by the negativity – and sometimes the casual cruelty of the ways in which that negativity might be expressed. I always say to students you should want your tutor to be savage in their critique because from that you will genuinely learn and grow.

So the learning to be achieved from failure are much greater than from too easy a success. This is a model that tends to be accepted in the US where for an entrepreneur to have failed is not seen as a failing so long as they demonstrated resilience in learning from that experience and going on to later success.

An interesting article in Open Forum, describes the early failures of some highly notable business giants, including:

- Bill Gates, whose first venture Traf-O-Data failed before he went on to found Microsoft;
- Colonel Saunders whose secret chicken recipe was rejected over 1,000 times before a restaurant accepted it and who founded KFC (quite inspiringly) when he was 65 years old;
- Henry Ford whose first two auto manufacture companies failed and ultimately became the third richest man in the world;
- Soichiro Honda, who went on to found Honda, was rejected for a job by Toyota.

Literature and the arts too are littered with individuals, such as JK Rowling and Walt Disney, who refused to give up and were resilient in the face of rejection.

And it's not just about building on early failures, failure can occur at any time.

There's a lot of advice out there on how to lead through failure such as Braca's piece which draws upon sports for insight. His primary conclusion is that you (the organisation) has to own the failure "in order to recover from failure leaders have to be at forefront in taking responsibility". You have to own the mistakes, accept them and move on honestly. It's about seeing the failure as a wake up call and moving forward undaunted but wiser. As Alexander Pope put it: "no one should be ashamed to admit they were wrong, which is but saying in other words, that they are wiser today, than they were yesterday".

Perhaps one of the most inspiring stories of how to be resilient in the face of failure comes from Steve Jobs, who had this to say about being fired from Apple in 1985:

"I didn't see it then, but it turned out that getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. The heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again, less sure about everything. It freed me to enter one of the most creative periods of my life."

For sometimes what seems at first to be an injury doesn't impair us fundamentally, but actually enables to do more. Resilience lies in recognising that to be the case and being open to the new opportunities that we might embrace.

In psychology resilience is recognised as something to be encouraged in order to help people overcome trauma and deal with crises. Winch sets out in Psychology Today an essential guide to recovery.

We must first recognise the psychological invisible wounds that trauma and failure inflict, which might otherwise be devastating, for these tend to make things seem impossible, insuperable goals, more difficult than they really are. We may as a result become risk averse, fearful, helpless, demotivated and overly self critical. Anyone who has been a victim or who has suffered in a crisis might recognise these feelings. Winch tells us to revive our optimism, re-engage with our definitions of success and our creativity.

These may be reactions that characterise the resilient that it is natural to them to respond in this way. However, psychologists have also identified ways of building resilience even when this does not come naturally. These apply more to people than organisations but it's not hard to see how they might be translated to an organisational context. The APA provide a list of 10 ways to build your resilience including:

- Making connections – with supportive others;
- Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems – looking to what might be better in the future
- Accept that change is part of living – as in the serenity prayer “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference”
- Develop and move towards realistic goals – daily steps
- Take decisive action where you can to reduce harm
- Look for what you can learn about yourself from the experience
- Nurture a positive self image – remind yourself of the things that you do well
- Maintain a sense of perspective – by looking objectively at the situation
- Maintain optimism
- Look after yourself physically

These I personally recognise as excellent ways of recovering resiliently from difficult situations: this is not to say that they are all easy to achieve but they are effective and we can engage in them individually or as a group, as an organisation or indeed as a nation if needs be.

Finally I’d like to close with two very powerful quotes that for me really sums up the mindset of the resilient: “resilience is accepting your new reality, even if it’s less good than the one you had before” (Elizabeth Edwards); and “I don’t measure a man’s success by how far he climbs, but how high he bounces when he hits bottom” (George Patton).