

5 Ways to Boost Your Resilience at Work

By Rich Fernandez

Currently, a quarter of all employees view their jobs as the number one stressor in their lives, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The World Health Organization describes stress as the “global health epidemic of the 21st century.” Many of us now work in constantly connected, always-on, highly demanding work cultures where stress and the risk of burnout are widespread. Since the pace and intensity of contemporary work culture are not likely to change, it’s more important than ever to build resilience skills to effectively navigate your work life.

While working as a director of learning and organization development at Google, eBay and J.P. Morgan Chase, and in my current work as co-founder of the learning solutions company Wisdom Labs, I’ve seen over and over again that the most resilient individuals and teams aren’t the ones that don’t fail, but rather the ones that fail, learn and thrive because of it. Being challenged — sometimes severely — is part of what activates resilience as a skill set.

More than five decades of research point to the fact that resilience is built by attitudes, behaviors and social supports that can be adopted and cultivated by anyone. Factors that lead to resilience include optimism; the ability to stay balanced and manage strong or difficult emotions; a sense of safety and a strong social support system. The good news is that because there is a concrete set of behaviors and skills associated with resilience, you can learn to be more resilient.

Building resilience skills in the contemporary work context doesn’t happen in a vacuum, however. It’s important to understand and manage some of the factors that cause us to feel so overwhelmed and stressed at work. Our current work culture is a direct reflection of the increasing complexity and demands faced by businesses globally. In a study conducted by IBM Institute for Business Value in late 2015, a survey of 5,247 business executives from 21 industries in over 70 countries reported that the “scope, scale and speed” of their businesses were increasing at an accelerated rate, especially as the competitive landscape becomes increasingly disrupted by technology and radically different business models. The result is at times a frenetic way of working. Being hyper connected and responsive to work anytime, anywhere, can be extremely taxing. In a 2014 global survey of Human Capital Trends conducted by Deloitte, 57% of respondents said that their organizations are “weak” when it comes to helping leaders manage difficult schedules and helping employees manage information flow, and that there is an urgent need to address this challenge.

It’s clear that stress and burnout related to the increasing pace and intensity of work are on the rise globally. A survey of over 100,000 employees across Asia, Europe, Africa, North America, and South America found that employee depression, stress and anxiety accounted for 82.6% of all emotional health cases in Employee Assistance Programs in 2014, up from 55.2% in 2012. Also, a recent large-scale, longitudinal survey of over 1.5 million employees in 4,500 companies

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across 185 countries conducted as part of the Global Corporate Challenge found that approximately 75% of the workforce experienced moderate to high stress levels — and more specifically, that 36% of employees reported feeling highly or extremely stressed at work, with a further 39% reporting moderate levels of workplace stress. The current and rising levels of stress in the workplace should be cause for concern, as there is a direct and adverse relationship between negative stress, wellness and productivity.

One important distinction to note is that not all stress is created equal and there are even some types of stress that may also have a positive effect on our well-being and productivity. “Good stress,” or what is sometimes known as “eudaemonic stress,” (derived from the Greek word “eudaemonia,” or flourishing) indicates that some types of stress can make us healthier, motivate us to be our best, and help us perform at our peak. A useful way to think about it is that stress is distributed on a bell-shaped curve. Once past the peak or high performance apex where stress motivates us, we experience the unhealthy effects of stress which, if sustained over time, lead not only to burnout but also to chronic disease.

Stress that causes us to experience difficulty or unhealthy strain — “distress” — is a major cause for concern as it directly and adversely affects personal and business success. The Global Corporate Challenge study of over 1.5 million employees globally over a 12-year period found, for example, that while 63% of extremely stressed employees reported above-average productivity, this number rises significantly to 87% amongst those who say they are not at all stressed. In the same study, 77% of extremely stressed employees also reported above-average levels of fatigue, and early warning signs of longer-term burnout. In fact, burnout is a lagging indicator of chronic stress.

So how can we develop resilience and stay motivated in the face of chronic negative stress and constantly increasing demands, complexity and change? Here are some tips, based on some of the latest neuroscience, behavioral and organizational research:

Exercise mindfulness.

People in the business world are increasingly turning their attention to mental training practices associated with mindfulness — and for good reason. Social psychologists Laura Kiken and Natalie Shook, for example, have found that mindfulness predicts judgment accuracy and insight-related problem solving, and cognitive neuroscientists Peter Malinowski and Adam Moore found that mindfulness enhances cognitive flexibility. In dynamic work environments, organizational psychologists Erik Dane and Bradley Brummel found that mindfulness facilitates job performance, even after accounting for all three dimensions of work engagement – vigor, dedication and absorption. Preventive medicine researchers Kimberly Aitken and her colleagues have found that online mindfulness programs have been shown to be practical and effective in decreasing employee stress, while improving resiliency and work engagement, thereby enhancing overall employee well-being and organizational performance.

How can you or your team start bringing mindfulness into the rhythms and routines of your daily work? At Wisdom Labs, we’ve found that implementing multimodal learning and skill

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development solutions — including a combination of mobile learning, onsite training, webinars, and peer-to-peer learning networks promotes the greatest chance for mindfulness to become a core competency within an organization. Participants report statistically significant improvements in resilience, and say that mindfulness tools and content delivered in these ways are highly useful for managing stress, improving collaboration and enhancing well-being. Integrating mindfulness into core talent processes such as onboarding, manager training, performance conversations and leadership development is also critical, though most organizations are not yet at this stage of adoption. Finally, a number of books and apps also offer structured approaches to mindfulness, including the books *Fully Present: The Art, Science and Practice of Mindfulness* and *Mindfulness: An Eight Week Plan for Finding Peace in a Frantic World*. Useful apps include (but are not limited to): Headspace, Spire, Mental Workout, Calm, Whil and Simple Habit. Consider combining live, in-person or virtual training with apps for optimal behavior formation.

Compartmentalize your cognitive load.

We receive 11 million bits of information every second, but the executive, thinking centers of our brain can effectively process only 40 bits of information, according to Shawn Achor, co-founder of the Institute for Applied Positive Research and author of *The Happiness Advantage*. One practical way to think about this is that though we can't decrease the amount of information we receive (in our inboxes, for example), we can compartmentalize our cognitive tasks to optimize the way we process that information. Be deliberate about compartmentalizing different types of work activities such as emailing, strategy or brainstorming sessions, and business-as-usual meetings. Compartmentalizing work is useful when you consider that switching from one type of task to another makes it difficult to tune out distractions and reduces productivity by as much as 40%, according to recent research published by the American Psychological Association. Translation: to the extent that it is possible, avoid context switching. Create dedicated times in the day to do specific work-related activities and not others — a concept I described in a previous HBR post as “serial monotasking” — much the way you might create a dedicated time for physical exercise in the course of your day. This approach may be overly regimented for some, but it creates the optimal set of conditions for us to effectively process information and make quality decisions while decreasing cognitive load and strain.

Take detachment breaks.

Throughout the workday, it's important to pay attention to the peaks and valleys of energy and productivity that we all experience, what health psychologists call our ultradian (hourly) as opposed to our circadian (daily) rhythms. Mental focus, clarity and energy cycles are typically 90-120 minutes long, so it is useful to step away from our work for even a few minutes to reset energy and attention. Evidence for this approach can be seen in the work of Anders Ericsson, who found that virtuoso violin players had clearly demarked practice times lasting no more than 90 minutes, followed by breaks in between. Research suggests that balancing work activity with even a brief time for detaching from those activities can promote greater energy, mental clarity, creativity and focus, ultimately growing our capacity for resilience throughout the

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course of the workday. The long-term payoff is that we preserve energy and prevent burnout over the course of days, weeks and months.

Develop mental agility.

It is possible — without too much effort — to literally switch the neural networks with which we process the experience of stress in order to *respond to* rather than *react to* any difficult situation or person. This quality of mental agility hinges on the ability to mentally “decenter” stressors in order to effectively manage them. “Decentering” stress is not denying or suppressing the fact that we feel stressed — rather, it is the process of being able to pause, to observe the experience from a neutral standpoint, and then to try to solve the problem. When we are able to cognitively take a step back from our experience and label our thoughts and emotions, we are effectively pivoting attention from the narrative network in our brains to the more observational parts of our brains. Being mentally agile, and decentering stress when it occurs, enables the core resilience skill of “response flexibility,” which renowned psychologist Linda Graham describes as “the ability to pause, step back, reflect, shift perspectives, create options and choose wisely.” We often tell our children who are upset to “use your words,” for example, and it turns out that stopping and labeling emotions has the effect of activating the thinking center of our brains, rather than the emotional center — a valuable skill in demanding, high-performance workplaces everywhere.

Cultivate compassion.

One of the most overlooked aspects of the resilience skill set is the ability to cultivate compassion — both self-compassion and compassion for others. According to research cited by the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley, compassion increases positive emotions, creates positive work relationships, and increases cooperation and collaboration. Compassion training programs such as the one offered by Stanford University’s Center for Compassion, Altruism and Research in Education (CCARE) have demonstrated that compassion cultivation practices increase happiness and well-being and decrease stress. Compassion and business effectiveness are not mutually exclusive. Rather, individual, team and organizational success rely on a compassionate work culture.

Finally, it is now possible to conclude that a broad set of skills and behaviors that enable resilience in the workplace are a good return on investment. In a study published by PwC in 2014, initiatives and programs that fostered a resilient and mentally healthy workplace returned \$2.30 for every dollar spent — with the return coming in the form of lower health care costs, higher productivity, lower absenteeism and decreased turnover.

The ability to build resilience is a skill that will serve you well in an increasingly stressful work world. And companies stand to benefit from a more resilient workforce. Building an organizational culture that encourages and supports resilience training just makes good business sense.

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