

Resilience in Practice

There's lots of talk these days about developing resilience in individuals, teams and organisations. It's especially important in times of major change and great uncertainty such as the current COVID19 pandemic.

When we dig deeper however there isn't that much understanding about what it means to be resilient. It really is so much more than being told to "suck it up and get on with it", "learn to take things less personally" or "just toughen up".

As a term resilience is borrowed from the world of engineering, where it refers to a structure's ability to withstand shocks and resume its original shape. Of course, we can't read that across directly to living and breathing human beings, but it's an analogy we can work with until someone invents a better one.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, and the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health variously describe personal resilience as:

- "A sense of adaptation, recovery and bounce-back despite adversity or change"
- "A dynamic process that involves a personal negotiation through life that fluctuates across time, life stage and context."
- "Multi-dimensional and variable across time and circumstance".
- "A product of a person's personality in combination with environmental influences such as family, peers and social environment".

Complicated stuff. So what do you do with that?

We like simplicity wherever possible, so we think of Resilience Development as a 3-legged stool. It's based on Diane Coutu's brilliant article¹, where she describes resilient people and organisations as having 3 characteristics:

- a staunch acceptance of reality.
- a deep belief, often buttressed by strongly held values, that life is meaningful.
- an uncanny ability to improvise.

Without all 3 legs in place, in balance and equally strong, the stool falls over.

In the next paper in the series we'll explore the first of the legs.

Quick spoiler – the headline will be **Face the Brutal Facts**.

If you would like to explore your personal or organisational resilience further please feel free to get in touch either by direct message or use the link below to schedule a time to speak.

<https://rogergreene.10to8.com>

Roger Greene, Tricordant www.tricordant.com

¹ Diane Coutu, How Resilience Works, HBR. May 2002.

Face the Brutal Facts

We like simplicity wherever possible, so we think of Resilience Development as a 3-legged stool. It's based on Diane Coutu's work¹, where she describes resilient people as possessing 3 characteristics:

- a staunch acceptance of reality.
- a deep belief, often buttressed by strongly held values, that life is meaningful.
- an uncanny ability to improvise.

The first of the 3 legs is **to face the brutal facts**. To use a much employed but poorly understood phrase: "It is what it is". But how do we do that when everything around us cries out to change it, avoid it, ignore it, deny it or just plough on?

In his evergreen book *Good to Great*² Jim Collins talks about his encounter with Admiral Jim Stockdale, the highest-ranking US Military Officer in the Hanoi POW camp at the height of the Vietnam War. He was tortured more than 20 times during his 8-year imprisonment. He lived out the war with no rights and no release date. He shouldered the burden of his command and did everything he could to create the conditions for his fellow prisoners to survive unbroken.

He instituted rules to help people deal with torture – a stepwise system that allowed prisoners to say certain things after so many minutes of torture so the torture would stop. He created an elaborate communications system of tapping codes between prisoners to reduce their sense of isolation during imposed silences.

The big surprise however for Collins when he interviewed Stockdale came when he asked the question "Who didn't make it out?" Stockdale replied "Oh, that's easy. The optimists".

Double-take time! Really? The optimists? How so?

"... they were the ones who said, "We're going to be out by Christmas". And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. And they'd say, "We're going to be out by Easter". And Easter would come, and Easter would go... And they died of a broken heart".

The learning that Collins calls the Stockdale Paradox is: "You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end – which you can never afford to lose - with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever that might be".

And herein lies the first crucial aspect of resilience. Face the brutal facts. They are what they are.

The COVID19 pandemic has changed the world around us. In the first wave we thought it would be over by the summer and we could hold on. We could park working on organisation development or design, or team development and coaching, or strategy and improvement work until the storm had blown over.

¹ Diane Coutu, *How Resilience Works*, HBR. May 2002.

² Random House 2001



It didn't blow over. And now we're all trying to get through the second storm, with the light of mass vaccination programmes at the end of the tunnel. And the optimists say: "we'll be out by spring 2021".

Let's face the brutal facts. We don't know what the future will look like next spring. So let's not get stuck in our uncertainty. It's time to unstick the organisational work you know needs doing and work on your organisational resilience.

The next step is to move on to the second leg of the stool – anchoring yourself and your work to meaning. We'll explore that one in the next in the series.

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Making Meaning

Let's start with a reminder of Diane Coutu's 3 characteristics of Resilience¹:

- a staunch acceptance of reality.
- a deep belief, often buttressed by strongly held values, that life is meaningful.
- an uncanny ability to improvise.

The first leg of our 3-legged stool is to **face the brutal facts**.

The second leg for personal and organisational resilience is a deep belief, often buttressed by strongly held values, that life is meaningful. It's all about **making meaning** (whatever the brutal facts).

Remember the Stockdale Paradox:

"You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end – which you can never afford to lose- with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever that might be".

Faith that they would prevail in the end was the anchor for Jim Stockdale in his 8 years as a POW in Hanoi. His determination to create the conditions to increase the number of prisoners who would survive unbroken was his mission.

How can leaders create the conditions to enable our workforce and organisations to survive the current reality? Currently it's about surviving the pandemic and getting through to the spring next year. But whatever the current crisis we are facing there will always be something else along, so how do we keep focus and momentum?

The answer lies in making meaning. To quote Diane Coutu again: "This dynamic of meaning making is, most researchers agree, the way resilient people build bridges from present-day hardships to a fuller, better constructed future".

And it works at all levels from the personal to the organisational.

Some big and sometimes uncomfortable questions to ask ourselves and our colleagues:

- What makes my/our work meaningful?
- What are my/our values that won't change despite the brutal reality we face?
- Am I/are we focussing on doing what is right or what is easiest in the circumstances?
- What value do I/we give to each other?
- What value do I/we give our clients/patients/customers?

If nothing else, the experience of the pandemic has given most people the opportunity to pause and reflect on what is meaningful in life and work. And while the blog is short, we hope you'll take some extra time to start reflecting on these big questions.

¹ Diane Coutu, How Resilience Works, HBR. May 2002.



Without answering them you won't achieve genuine resilience.

And then you can move on to the third leg of the stool – improvisation. We'll explore that one in the next in the series.

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Ritualised Ingenuity

Let's start with a reminder of Diane Coutu's 3 characteristics of Resilience¹:

- a staunch acceptance of reality.
- a deep belief, often buttressed by strongly held values, that life is meaningful.
- an uncanny ability to improvise.

The first leg of our 3-legged stool is to **face the brutal facts**.

The second leg is **making meaning** (whatever the brutal facts).

And now for the third leg of the stool – Diane Coutu calls it **ritualised ingenuity**, and we think that sums it up perfectly.

We've used the Stockdale Paradox in these blogs as a real-life story to exemplify and ground the theory. So let's stay with that story, as recounted by Jim Collins in Good to Great.

Admiral Jim Stockdale was tortured more than 20 times during his 8-year imprisonment in Hanoi. He lived out the war with no rights and no release date. He shouldered the burden of his command and did everything he could to create the conditions for his fellow prisoners to survive unbroken.

How did he use ingenuity and improvisation to help others to survive? Here are some examples:

- He instituted rules to help people deal with torture – a stepwise system that allowed prisoners to say certain things after so many minutes of torture so the torturers would stop in the belief, they had gained knowledge. This gave his fellow prisoners milestones *to survive toward*.
- He created an elaborate communications system of tapping codes between prisoners to reduce their sense of isolation during imposed silences.
- He exchanged secret intelligence information with his wife through their letters, knowing their discovery would mean more torture.

Now this is all pretty dramatic stuff in times of brutal and inhumane warfare, but just think for a moment about the immense ingenuity and improvisation needed in organisations and people to keep the show on the road during the pandemic. Not only improvisation but innovation too.

Who could have imagined in January 2020:

- That virtual appointments would become the norm with GPs and Specialists in the NHS by the spring of 2020?
- That elite sports companies like Formula 1 racing teams would have been churning out ventilators for the NHS to save lives in the spring of 2020?
- That multiple COVID19 vaccines could be licensed for use in less than a year against an historical average of 10-12 years?

¹ Diane Coutu, How Resilience Works, HBR. May 2002.



The human capacity for ingenuity and improvisation in the face of adversity is immense. Dramatic and transformational improvements in processes have been accompanied by the acceleration of innovation over the last 12 months in organisations and businesses worldwide.

Ritualised ingenuity is the third leg of the stool for personal and organisational resilience. It's not just something "others" do.

The challenge is to ask how can we create the conditions for continuing ingenuity and improvisation in the face of adversity and when the going gets tough?

And remember. Without all 3 legs in place, in balance and equally strong, the Resilience stool falls over.

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The Triple Whammy

Through this series, we've been talking about the 3 legs of the Resilience stool:

- Face the brutal facts.
- Make meaning.
- Ritualise ingenuity.

Notice they are all verbs – they are doing words, not just saying words. They are behaviours.

What does it look like when all 3 behaviours come together?

The Hancock Bank case study¹ in the USA provides an inspiring example.

Hurricane Katrina in 2005 is considered the costliest storm in US history. The case study shows how the bank faced the brutal facts with mission clarity (making meaning), training and appropriately devolved decision-making (ritualised ingenuity) in their response to the disaster.

Hancock Bank had 160 branches. Hurricane Katrina destroyed the Bank's HQ in Mississippi, and with it all 160 branches' computer operations, technology hub, cheque-processing, loan servicing and all critical elements of its banking operation across 4 states.

Face the brutal facts

They were prepared for brutal things, however rare, to happen.

Whenever there was a storm in the Gulf Hancock Bank sent teams to Atlanta and Chicago with duplicate copies of their electronic account files, where they were to be uploaded onto rented mainframes to keep their operations running in an emergency.

Even though they had never had to activate their plans before, their back up technology operations were operating within 3 days because they had tested and activated key aspects of their business continuity plans in the event of storms, and because the CEO trusted the teams to get the job done despite the distinct likelihood of not being able to communicate with them for several days.

But their resilience was not vested in the technology alone. What about re-opening their branches and serve their customers?

Their emergency plan scripted how they would re-open with available employees and facilities. But they had no electricity, no computers, no working ATMs and no security for basic banking. So the scripted plan didn't work.

Make meaning

They had to respond "in the moment" to the conditions they and their customers faced. Huddled around a car the Executives went back to the Bank's founding charter to find their mission and values.

¹ James Pat Smith, Gulfport Resilience Essay, Community and Regional Resilience Institute.



The charter gave the bank the mandate to serve people and take care of their communities. They would serve by keeping money safe and making it available when needed. The charter said nothing about profit.

The charter, combined with the core belief of their Chairman that banking would be impossible unless 99% of customers were honest, gave them a powerful moral platform for action.

Ritualised ingenuity

The Executives realised their customers needed immediate access to cash but had probably lost everything in the devastation of the hurricane and would have little if any ID or evidence of holding an account.

How did they improvise? They arranged for bank notes to be retrieved from wherever they could, they dried and ironed them where necessary.

They set up tables under tarpaulins and gave anyone, whether Hancock customers or not, up to \$200 if they simply wrote out their name, address and social security number on a scrap of paper.

On the day after the hurricane, they opened 10 branches without power or lights. After 3 days 30 branches were operating.

Hancock Bank used their ingenuity to do what was right, not just what was expedient, because they were guided by a clear ethical and moral compass.

What happened?

Their mission-driven response issued over \$42m in cash the week after the storm.

Get this - in the 5 months after the storm the bank opened 13,000 new accounts and they recovered all but \$200k from the \$42m they had loaned out. Overall bank deposits grew by \$1.5bn!

It's a beautiful example of all 3 legs of the Resilience stool in perfect balance.

- They faced the brutal facts – the reality they confronted and could reasonably plan for.
- They held on to their meaning – their charter gave them their purpose for existing and their Chair gave them the values to guide their actions.
- They improvised with what they had.

Without all 3 behaviours in place, in balance and equally strong, Hancock Bank would have fallen over.

Instead they emerged from the disaster with a the triple whammy of a massively expanded customer base, an enhanced reputation and a strengthened balance sheet.

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Creating Islands of Sanity

Over the last few weeks, we've been talking about the 3 legs of the Resilience stool:

- Face the brutal facts.
- Make meaning.
- Ritualise ingenuity.

And we gave you the story about the Hancock Bank in the USA to provide an inspiring case study that achieved the triple whammy of a massively expanded customer base, an enhanced reputation and a strengthened balance sheet.

Now we are going to talk about the role of leadership.

In her article from 2017¹, Margaret Wheatley writes about leaders in a VUCA world, characterised as Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous.

It's a world where "every day we experience disruption, swerves in direction, short-term decisions that undo the future, propaganda, slander, lies, blame, denial, violence".

We can add the technological revolution, the power of the algorithm and social media, cynicism around politics and government, loss of faith in business, pandemic spread and so much more...

You get the picture.

Tempted to throw up your hands and pack it all in? Or make the most sense of it that you possibly can?

The challenge Wheatley issues to leaders in this environment is:

- To use whatever power and influence they have to create **islands of sanity** that evoke and rely on our best human qualities to create, relate, and persevere.
- To choose consciously and courageously to reclaim leadership as a noble profession.
- To create possibility and humaneness amid increasing fear and turmoil.
- To ensure that the organization, community, or team stays open to information and uses that information to make realistic and intelligent responses.

Who do you choose to be for this time? Are you willing to use whatever power and influence you have to create islands of sanity that evoke and rely on our best human qualities to create, relate, and persevere?

Margaret Wheatley

Sorry to bang on about Hancock Bank but that's what their leadership did.

¹ Margaret Wheatley. Who do you choose to be? An invitation to the nobility of Leadership [Executive Forum, Summer 2007]



In among the devastation of Hurricane Katrina they gathered around a car bonnet and created the conditions for their employees to exercise their best human qualities to respond to a humanitarian disaster.

They got banknotes dried and ironed. They gave out money based on IOUs from tables under tarpaulins with no security for the cash they were issuing, within 24 hours of the Hurricane.

They created possibility and humaneness, serving the community as their founding charter said they should.

They reclaimed leadership as a noble profession in the most challenging of circumstances a bank could possibly face.

So what?

We think leadership is a noble profession.

Leadership is about creating the conditions for people to be the best they can be whatever the circumstances. To use Margaret Wheatley's phrase, it's about creating island of sanity in chaos and uncertainty.

Is that the kind of leader you choose to be?

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