The Dark Side of Resilience

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Resilience is defined as the psychological capacity to adapt to stressful circumstances and bounce back from adverse events. It is a highly sought-after personality trait in the modern workplace. As Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant argue in their recent book — *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy* (2017) — **we can think of resilience as a sort of muscle that contracts during good times and expands during bad times.**

In that sense, **the best way to develop resilience is through hardship**, which philosophers have pointed out through the years: Seneca noted that "Difficulties strengthen the mind, as labor does the body." Nietzsche famously stated, "That which does not kill us makes us stronger." In a similar way, the U.S. Marine Corps employs the mantra "Pain is just weakness leaving the body" as part of its training.

But could too much resilience be a bad thing, just like too much muscle mass can be counterproductive — i.e., putting a strain on the heart? Large-scale scientific studies suggest that even adaptive competencies become maladaptive if taken to the extreme. As Rob Kaiser's research on leadership versatility indicates, **overused strengths become weaknesses.** Along these lines, it is easy to conceive of situations in which individuals could be *too resilient* for their own sake.

For example, extreme resilience could drive people to become overly persistent with unattainable goals. While we tend to celebrate individuals who aim high or dream big, it is usually more effective to adjust one's goals to more achievable levels — which means giving up on others. Indeed, scientific reviews show that most people waste an enormous amount of time persisting with unrealistic goals, a phenomenon

called the "false hope syndrome." Even when past behaviors clearly suggest that goals are unlikely to be attained, overconfidence and an unfounded degree of optimism can lead people to waste energy on pointless tasks.

Along the same line, **too much resilience could make people overly tolerant of adversity.** At work, this can translate into putting up with boring or demoralizing jobs — and particularly bad bosses — for longer than needed. In America, 75% of employees consider their direct line manager the worst part of their job, and 65% would take a pay cut if they could replace their boss with someone else.

Yet there is no indication that people act on these attitudes, with job length tenure remaining stable over the years despite ubiquitous access to career opportunities and the rise of passive recruitment introduced by the digital revolution. Whereas in the realm of dating, technology has made it easier for people to meet someone and begin a new relationship, in the world of work people seem resigned to their bleak state of affairs. Perhaps if they were *less* resilient, they would be more likely to improve their job circumstances, as many individuals do when they decide to ditch traditional employment to work for themselves. However, **people are much more willing to put up with a bad job — or a bad boss — than a bad relationship.**

In addition, too much resilience can get in the way of leadership effectiveness and, by extension, team and organizational effectiveness.

In a recent study, Adrian Furnham and colleagues showed that there are dramatic differences in people's ability to adapt to stressful jobs and workplace environments. In the face of seemingly hopeless circumstances, some people resemble a superhero cartoon character than runs through a brick wall: unemotional, fearless, and hyper-phlegmatic. To protect against psychological harm, they deploy quite aggressive coping mechanisms that artificially inflate their egos. Meanwhile, others have a set of underlying propensities that make them act a little differently when under stress and pressure. They become emotionally volatile and scared of rejection. And consequently, they move away from groups, put up walls to avoid being criticized, and openly admit faults as a way to guard against public shaming.

Even though the resilient "superhero leader" is usually perceived as better, there is a hidden dark side: It comes with the exact same traits that inhibit self-awareness and the ability to maintain a realistic self-concept, which are pivotal for developing one's career potential and leadership talents. For instance, multiple studies suggest that bold leaders are unaware of their limitations, overestimating their leadership abilities and performance. This results in not being able to adjust one's interpersonal approach to fit the context. In effect, such leaders are rigidly and delusionally resilient, closed off to information that could be imperative to fixing — or at least improving — behavioral weaknesses. **In short, when a leader's resilience is driven by self-enhancement, success comes at a high price: denial.**

Along with blinding leaders to improvement opportunities and detaching them from reality, leadership pipelines are corroded with resilient leaders who were nominated as having high potential but show no genuine talent for leadership. To explain this phenomenon, sociobiologists David Sloan Wilson and E.O. Wilson argue that within any group of people — whether a workplace team or presidential candidates — the person who wins, and is therefore named the group's leader, is generally very resilient or "gritty."

However, there is something more important going on in human affairs than internal politics, and competition *within* groups is less important than competition *between* groups — such as Apple going head-to-head with Microsoft on technological innovations, Coca-Cola trying to outmaneuver Pepsi's marketing campaigns, or in evolutionary terms, how our ancestors fought for territory against rival teams 10,000 years ago. As Robert Hogan notes, to get ahead of *other groups*, individuals must be able to get along with each other *within their own group* to form a team.

This always requires leadership, but the *right* leaders must be chosen. When it comes to deciding which leaders are going to rally the troops in the long-term, the most psychologically resilient individuals combine a miscellany of characteristics that come much closer to political savvy and an authoritarian leadership style than those needed to influence a team to work in harmony and focus its attention on outperforming rivals.

In other words, choosing resilient leaders is not enough: They must also have integrity and care more about the welfare of their teams than their own personal success.

In sum, there is no doubt that resilience is a useful and highly adaptive trait, especially in the face of traumatic events. However, when taken too far, resilience may focus individuals on impossible goals and make them unnecessarily tolerant of unpleasant or counterproductive circumstances. This reminds us of Voltaire's novel *Candide*, the sarcastic masterpiece from 1759 that exposes the absurd consequences of extreme optimism:

> "I have wanted to kill myself a hundred times, but somehow I am still in love with life. This ridiculous weakness is perhaps one of our more stupid melancholy propensities, for is there anything more stupid than to be eager to go on carrying a burden which one would gladly throw away, to loathe one's very being and yet to hold it fast, to fondle the snake that devours us until it has eaten our hearts away?"

Finally, while it may be reassuring for teams, organizations and countries to select leaders on the basis of their resilience — after all, who doesn't want to be protected by someone tough and strong? — such leaders are not necessarily good for the group, much like bacteria or parasites are more problematic when they are more resistant.

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