



Understanding resilience

IES Perspectives on HR 2014

Sally Wilson, Research Fellow, Catherine Rickard,
Research Fellow, Penny Tamkin, Associate Director

Introduction

Resilience helps people bounce back from adversity and stress and is generally seen as an asset that benefits the individual as well as the organisation they work for. Despite this, few employers know how to help their staff become more resilient. There are a number of resilience-building training and development products available but it can be difficult to know what to look for and how individual staff and the wider workplace could benefit. A basic understanding of what is meant by resilience and related terminology can help when navigating relevant advertising literature and other HR information sources.

Why is resilience needed?

Some degree of resilience is necessary in any workplace environment regardless of the type of job challenges encountered. Stressors such as deadlines, work volume or organisational change all trigger coping mechanisms of some kind. Situations at home may add further pressure. Particular roles bring their own set of specific demands, for example, managerial roles which require decision making under pressure or those in call-centre offices dealing with customers who may be hostile. Resilience is also essential for those in jobs that require dealing with critical and potentially distressing situations, such as military personnel or members of an ambulance crew.

Without the necessary skills and support to cope successfully when under stress, employees may perform poorly or, in a worst-case scenario, become unwell. For staff who 'struggle on' while failing to cope well, engagement with their employer may be compromised and they may decide to leave the organisation.

What is resilience?

Many people assume resilience is just about coping but research evidence suggests a more complicated picture; there are many ways of coping with stress, with some more healthy than others. Other factors that contribute to resilience include self-confidence, optimism and a having a strong sense of purpose. Having good judgement about when to seek support from managers and colleagues (and when not to) is also important.

Different factors may come into play depending on the person or the situation. In order to illustrate this fully, the following key components of resilience, as identified in relevant IES research, are described below:

- problem-focused coping
- emotion-focused coping

- self-confidence
- optimism
- sense of purpose
- support seeking.

Problem-focused and emotion-focused coping

Resilience is more than just the ability to cope under pressure; many definitions emphasise the importance of 'positive coping' in resilience, since there are good and bad ways of coping. For example negative coping styles which consist of avoiding or 'burying' a problem, or having excessive dependence on others to solve problems for them are not helpful.

When discussing positive coping, some researchers make a distinction between problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. The first refers to dealing with characteristics of the situation, while the second involves dealing with the feelings provoked by the situation, ie the emotional effects of stress. Dealing with emotions may be the only realistic option when the situation is outside the person's control (for example when an emergency response worker is unable to save a patient). Problem-focused coping is helped by having a good job-related knowledge base: for example when high workload is an issue, knowing what is urgent and which tasks can wait can help a worker prioritise effectively and feel less overwhelmed.

Self-confidence

Self-confidence comes from a sense of being in control and a person's belief in their own ability to meet the demands of a situation. It is linked to feelings of competence, effectiveness in coping with stressful situations and strong self-esteem.

Self-confidence is supported at work by equipping people with the skills they need to do their job and ensuring they are prepared for whatever challenges they may encounter. Providing positive and constructive feedback also supports self-confidence. Experience can build self-confidence and when employees have faced past challenges successfully their sense of being in control is increased. It is particularly important to nurture self-confidence in less experienced or younger staff who have had fewer opportunities to become confident through experience.

Optimism

Optimism or positive thinking often underpins a resilient response. Research has shown that optimists tend to attribute the causes of negative events to temporary,

changeable, and specific factors and this is said to offer a buffer against feelings of helplessness. The importance of humour (where appropriate) in supporting a positive outlook has also been highlighted, particularly when working under tough conditions.

Research in developmental psychology has shown that experiencing positive emotions helps to broaden people's thinking about the range of possible responses to a situation, because the situation then lacks the threat and urgency to escape: in other words, negative emotions can cloud thinking. Some people have a naturally optimistic personality but those with a less sunny outlook on life can be helped to view situations more positively and more creatively.

Ideally, a balanced approach is needed. While positive thinking is usually an asset, some researchers have urged caution against relying solely on optimism and have argued that having too much can get in the way of realistic thinking and pragmatism.

Sense of purpose

Having no strong sense of why they are doing something may affect someone's ability to confront and carry out difficult task. All staff should have a good understanding of organisational objectives and the 'big picture' relevance of their role. This can be particularly important for managers when making decisions under pressure or implementing a plan that isn't popular (for example, making redundancies to support wider organisational change).

A belief that their role makes a positive difference to others' lives (either within the organisation or to the wider public) can also contribute to an employee's sense of purpose and shore up their resilience. When people lose a sense of connection between their own values and those of their employer, it can be difficult to see a challenging task through to the end without feelings of resentment or conflict.

Some people draw a sense of purpose in tough times from religion. Spiritual beliefs that help people stay strong clearly need to be respected, whether these are derived from an organised religion or not.

Support-seeking

Good judgement about when to seek support from managers and colleagues (and when not to) is a key factor in individual resilience. Employees need to know who can help them and in which circumstances to approach them. When a task becomes too big or too difficult for an individual to handle, too much pride in being self-sufficient can be a potential weakness and potentially impact negatively on the individual and the organisation.

Support-seeking represents an aspect of resilience where there is a two-way relationship between the person and their work environment. While it is the responsibility of an individual to alert managers or colleagues to situations they cannot cope with independently it is also the responsibility of the employer to make sure that support is available and accessible. A culture where problems are shared should be encouraged; employers need to show that while they value resilience, they do not expect employees to manage distress arising from a difficult work and/or home situation without support.

Can anyone become resilient?

While people vary hugely in their responses to stress, the good news is that virtually anyone can become resilient. It is a myth that the population can be divided into those who are 'resilient types' and those who are not. People are more psychologically complex than that, as demonstrated by the components of resilience described above.

A manager who may appear confident may be poor at seeking support when this is the appropriate thing to do. Conversely a junior worker who appears to lack confidence might deal with a heavy workload well because they are good at coping with their emotions and have a strong sense of purpose. Resilience can also be situation-specific. Someone who can cope with a lot of pressure at work may be less good at dealing with domestic crises. Or an employee may find some aspects of their jobs more stressful than others (eg paperwork) because they feel that certain tasks are pointless and lack meaning.

Resilience is complex in the sense that some experiences in life (such as a difficult childhood) can make one person stronger but leave another very vulnerable. For this reason, it would be false to assume that someone who has experienced adversity in the past is less resilient than their colleagues; the experience of coming through a bad situation may have had the opposite effect and they may have found ways of dealing with life that others can learn from.

How can resilience be developed in staff?

Provision of resilience training can complement existing components of an organisations' approach to stress management. Commercial resilience trainers vary in their approach and focus, and some may focus on particular sectors where they have specific expertise. Ideally, training should be bespoke in nature to ensure the content is relevant to work issues that the participants commonly experience.

Most resilience training packages draw on Positive Psychology and the related therapeutic approach of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), and include principles such as maintaining a positive attitude in adversity and challenging negative thought

patterns. This is based on the assumption that correcting maladaptive thinking leads to positive changes in moods and behaviour.

Some resilience-building interventions aim to help participants to recognise signs of stress within themselves and pay greater attention to their emotions. 'Mindfulness' is typically applied to achieve this, an approach which involves focusing of attention and awareness on the present moment, based on concepts from Buddhist meditation.

Strengths-focused approaches are also beneficial since, as stated above, resilience is multifaceted and employees are typically stronger on some aspects than others. Programmes with this approach tend to cover the effectiveness of different coping styles in a lot of depth. This is particularly useful for showing employees that there is no single formula for being resilient and that weakness can be addressed by learning from others' strengths.

Organisations whose staff is routinely exposed to potentially distressing scenes usually provide 'trauma response' interventions on a reactive basis. The aim of this type of training is to minimise the likelihood of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) occurring in the aftermath of a critical event. These should not be confused with low-intensity training interventions referred to above, although similar approaches such as CBT are typically employed.

How can you tell if resilience training has worked?

Enhanced resilience has the potential to improve job performance, and may impact positively on absence and retention. Improved capacity for resilience in individuals is likely to benefit the organisation as a whole and have a knock-on effect on productivity. However, the evidence base as a whole, with respect to effectiveness of specific training programmes, is weak in terms of volume and quality. Practitioners do not generally conduct or publish impact studies of their training interventions: cost and client confidentiality are a hindrance to this. Also, since resilience can only be demonstrated in adversity it is a difficult quality to observe or measure.

Anecdotal reports suggest that strengths-based resilience training can be particularly effective in helping employees to appreciate the personal coping styles adopted by others within the workforce, and to value the different personality types among their team. This can be morale boosting, particularly for staff who may not have considered themselves as a 'resilient type'. Some training providers have developed instruments which allow participants to evaluate their own resilience-related strengths and identify areas for personal development: this offers the advantage of a personalised approach, which can help ensure that all participants feel they have received an intervention relevant to their own needs.

Claims that resilience-building programmes can prevent serious stress-related disorders occurring are controversial. An intensive resilience-building programme is currently being administered to all US army soldiers with the aim of reducing the prevalence of combat-related mental health conditions. At present the effectiveness of this training with respect to long-term health outcomes is unknown. However, if future research proves its effectiveness this may have implications for training and development methods in other armed forces and within relevant civilian sectors.

Finally

In developing an approach to resilience-building it is important to apply common sense and have realistic expectations of staff. Resilience training is not appropriate for people who are in acute distress or who may be unwell. There is also a need to consider what can be reasonably expected from hard-working employees balancing home and workplace pressures.

Resilience-building interventions can sit comfortably alongside other policies and training interventions to promote healthy working practices and styles of management. Also, employers can do a lot to support resilience without involving external parties, such as ensuring that employees are prepared for scenarios routinely encountered in their job and know who to approach when a situation merits either team, manager or specialist intervention. Employees should be made aware that while resilience is valued, there is no stigma or shame in admitting when they can no longer cope. Even resilient people can suffer from the effects of stress and trauma, and no one should strive to be invincible.

To find out more about the ideas in this article or how IES can help you please contact:

Sally Wilson, Research Fellow

T: 01273 763463 E: sally.wilson@employment-studies.co.uk

or Catherine Rickard, Research Fellow

T: 020 7104 2075 E: catherine.rickard@employment-studies.co.uk

or Penny Tamkin, Associate Director

T: 01273 763407 E: penny.tamkin@employment-studies.co.uk

IES Seminar: Understanding resilience: ensuring employee and organisational health in tough times

5 February 2014, London

with Sally Wilson

Resilience helps people bounce back from adversity and stress and is generally seen as a positive characteristic. But it can be difficult to define, as the way an individual responds to pressure will depend on their strengths and personal style. Also, it may not be clear to what degree employers can create resilient organisations.

We will explain what is meant by individual and organisational resilience and explore how employers can support staff to cope when times are tough. We will also discuss the findings of research on resilience-building and discuss how resilience training sits alongside the responsibility of employers to promote healthy working practices and styles of management.

To find out more and book a place visit www.employment-studies.co.uk/network/events



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Institute for Employment Studies
Sovereign House, Church Street, Brighton BN1 1UJ, UK
askies@employment-studies.co.uk
www.employment-studies.co.uk
01273 763400

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