

FIVE SECRETS OF RESILIENT LEADERS BY BARBARA WILBY

In these uncertain economic times, one of the things leaders need is resilience. So it's worth asking what works to develop and maintain resilience. Here are the five key things that I have learned about resilience in more than a decade of working with business leaders.

Resilience I define as the power to bounce back from any event or situation. It is the bounce back factor. What is it that the best leaders do in order to do this?

1. Balanced perceptions

The best leaders balance their perceptions often. How we perceive a thing is really important. Our perceptions are like a camera in front of our eyes – they are the lens that we look through to the world around us. When something bad or challenging happens, chances are that lens is a negative lens. We perceive a challenge negatively.

That negative label is a reaction. Reactions distract. The energy that we spend reacting to something, if left unchecked, can distract from the job of leading. Put simply, if you've got a brain full of negative reactions to what is happening around you, you're less likely to think well and to see opportunities.

Balanced perceptions, on the other hand, create clarity and that clarity allows for focus and productivity. So how do we work with our perceptions to achieve balance?

It's simple. The key to achieving balanced perceptions is seeing both sides of something. Balanced perceptions occur when we see opportunities in the crisis, the potential upside in the downturn, and the good in the bad. Take time to review both sides of a situation. Equalise your perceptions. The more we see equally the positive and the negative of something, the less we react to it and the less it distracts us. It takes some work, but nothing worthwhile was accomplished without some work. The faster a gyroscope spins the steadier it stands. Likewise, the faster you see two sides as equal the steadier you are.

The key is in the equalising. Would you put out your company's accounts with more liabilities than assets in the statement of financial position? Having more negative than positive perceptions about what is happening blocks our ability to see opportunities and limits personal adaptability. At the moment, in these times, adaptability is king.

In these times of slowdown, there is creativity, entrepreneurs emerge, and leaders are motivated to become purposeful, productivity increases, consumers benefit from price cuts. These are a few of the many benefits of a downturn.

In the words of famous author Rudyard Kipling, "If you can meet with triumph and disaster and treat those two imposters just the same". Those words are the last words that the two finalists at the Wimbledon tennis championships see each year before they step onto the court to play the final. Enough said.

2. Inspired purpose (aka enthusiasm for something bigger than you)

There's a story about three stonemasons in a yard, each creating the stone blocks for the building on which they are working. A passer-by stops and says to one of the stonemasons, "What is it that you are building here?" The stonemason says, "I am making a brick". The man turns to the second stonemason, and asks him the same question, to which he replies, "I am building a wall". The third stonemason is asked the same question by the man. He replies, "I am creating a cathedral".

What are you doing? Why you, in the role you're in? What bigger purpose are you serving, beyond turning up each day, beyond the obvious commercial goals that you are there to deliver for the organisation and yourself?

If you ask yourself these questions, you pull your focus up out of the competing mass of daily priorities into a bigger mental perspective. If you see a bigger purpose to what you are doing and really focus on that purpose each day for a few moments, it is energising. The other benefit is that you become less affected by the ups and downs because you know that they are part of a bigger landscape, a necessary part of living a purpose as a leader. Create a purpose for your role that inspires you and focus on it daily. As the sage said, "When the whys are big enough the hows look after themselves".

3. You can't run the universe, so why try?

We are taught to manage, to control and take charge; all good stuff, and very necessary. It is tempting to think that we can control everything. Yet as I talk with people who lead organisations large and small, at every level there are things about which they feel powerful and able to determine, and situations and events where they feel powerless and out of control. The current market and economic situation highlights those things that are out of the leader's control. Events and market situations are bigger than us.

Ironically, the most powerful place is in allowing things to sometimes feel out of control, to know that you have done whatever you could and that the rest is part of a bigger play.

So if you can't run the universe, why try? As St Francis of Assisi said "...give me the strength to change what I can, give me the strength to resist what I cannot change and give me the wisdom to understand the difference between the two". By "resist" I think he meant the mental discipline to not focus on things you cannot change.

Knowing the things that you can change and working on those things is far more powerful than focussing on immovable objects.

4. Permission not to be perfect

I have yet to find a leader who doesn't have some concept or description tucked away in their mind about how they would be if they were the ideal leader. Ideals push us on, keep us striving to grow and develop. And ideals serve, but taken too far, focussed on too much, they outlive their usefulness.

In the process of leading, leaders do things, make choices, decisions. Some of them work, some of them don't. Nobody gets everything "right" and even the things that appear wrong at the time are seen with hindsight as the greatest teachers and bringers of opportunity.

The thing is to invest time and energy in the present and the future, not past "mistakes". Have the perspective of hindsight now, rather than later. All you have to do to have that perspective is to make a mental shift about how you perceive yourself. Give up expecting yourself to be the perfect leader,

whatever that is. Nobody has ever lived up to an ideal on a sustained basis but plenty have achieved much by keeping on with clear intention in the face of adversity.

As Martin Luther King said “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience but where he stands in times of challenge and controversy”.

5. Know that you have dealt with the same challenges before in some shape or form

As we grow through each new level, the current challenges seem scary and unfamiliar. Yet they are just a bigger version of what we have successfully faced and dealt with before. Resilient leaders know that each challenge they face, each period of uncertainty is something that they have faced before and pushed through in some form which seemed equally unknown at the time. Look for evidence of your past resilience and successes and that will give certainty in the current moment.

The devil is in the detail. There's an old saying that if you turn around and face the tidal wave, it seems a lot less scary than it did when you couldn't see it. The place to start facing the tidal wave is in your mind. Do yourself the favour of taking the time to explore mentally each aspect of the main 3-4 challenges you face currently and get clear on what those aspects are. What appears challenging? What is making you nervous? Then find where you have met that type of challenge before and have handled it effectively. Remember that the challenges you faced back then would have felt equally as challenging as do your challenges today.

Following these suggested approaches begins to create mastery of the mind, which is what is needed to lead organisations with certainty right now. Do these exercises also with your team, and find strength in uniting to face a 1 in a 100 year economic downturn and a 1 in a 100 year opportunity.