

## **RESILIENCE: A POSITIVE DEVIATION AMID DIFFICULTY**

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With the accelerated pace of global development, fuelled by South Africa's socio-economic and political uncertainty, there are obvious knock-on business implications that increase business risks, not least of which includes dampening the mood for local investment. It is therefore not surprising to see many organisations downsizing, restructuring and even being forced to shrink their trading operations in the face of declining revenue and higher cost pressures. Since the 2007-2008 global financial market crisis, organisations are operating in turbulent markets and have to constantly adapt to increasing business uncertainty and changing circumstances. Whilst there may be numerous economic challenges the organisation's leadership must deal with in order to remain a sustainable and profitable concern, they also have to be acutely aware of the manner in which these severe economic stressors impacts their workforce.

Employees are not exempt from these socio-economic stressors as they are increasingly reminded by their employers of their precarious positions within organisations and that their employment is not guaranteed. In these circumstances, there is no doubt that employees are being placed under massive pressure given their unpredictable employment conditions. This leads to many personal challenges, some which may be perceived to be insurmountable. No longer does personal or business success automatically go to the swift, strong or smart individuals; instead, these 'rewards' are earned by the most adaptable, flexible and resilient of people and organisations. To be sustainable, employees (and indeed organisations) need to learn from their past experiences and evolve as complex adaptive systems.

'Success' appears to follow those organisations that accumulate more diverse experiences where their leadership spends time making sense of these experiences, and consequently becomes more resilient and develops more competencies to perform better. Leading organisations and people in these turbulent times require mindful leadership who have the capability to respond to the extraordinary challenges currently facing business and civil society. Good leaders need to be effective; their actions must be impactful, efficient and flexible.

### **What is going wrong?**

In the absence of ethical leadership imbued with positivity; negativity will take root, grow and even thrive. Regardless of what the organisational values are -- or what ethical statements are displayed on the walls of the organisation's reception area -- the real organisational culture will inevitably manifest in the behaviour of its employees. The manner in which employees relate, interact, communicate, handle conflict and disagree with each other serves as evidence for what is *really* happening in the organisation's culture. By simply observing, listening to and reflecting on the employees' communication, their interpersonal relationships and their group dynamics; one will quickly realise the true state of the organisation's 'health' and the degree to which the organisational values are being upheld and lived.

What people tend to talk about the most is what they tend to value the most. Naturally, if negativity, back biting, disregard, distrust and emotional outbursts are observed on a regular basis, it then becomes evident how the workforce is *actually* dealing with the socio-economic pressures and other organisational stresses under which it needs to perform.



Our understanding of how the workforce is dealing with the pressures of modern day business, and the struggle for economic survival, deepens when we observe the particular behaviour of individuals. Many cases of disciplinary action, alcohol and drug abuse, obesity, garnishee orders, divorce and depression typically manifest because of organisational (mis)behaviour which should have been addressed by the appropriate internal structures of the organisation long before it resulted in the disastrous after-effects. When individuals work, and live in constant uncertainty, worry, stress and fear, and they lack the support of supervisors, peers, family and friends; they become more susceptible to not only 'burnout'<sup>1</sup>, but sometimes also more detrimental illnesses. Employees with burnout feel cognitively, emotionally and physically exhausted, and in trying to cope with their overwhelming circumstances they also become socially detached.

### **Weathering the waves of change**

For employees to effectively cope with organisational change, work and family pressures, to be resilient, to do well and to thrive, during difficult times they need to be self-aware and self-manage their own health and wellness. They should know their inner capability, talents, character strengths, personal values and 'what makes them tick'. Without a significant measure of self-knowledge, employees tend to find meaning in *what they do* instead of in *who they are*. Likewise, they tend to invest a significant amount of time and energy to only develop their skills, instead of also developing their character strengths. In their hope to find success outside of themselves, or in a particular job or organisation, or even a different country, they become dependent on their circumstances and other people to foster happiness, wellness and success for themselves. Of course, when the economy is down, or when their hopes and dreams do not realise as they initially expected, they become despondent and disenchanted.

A healthy measure of self-insight, combined with virtuousness enables individuals to be responsible for their own progress. By knowing and understanding their inner capability, resilient employees<sup>2</sup> are more responsive, open, connected, motivated, and engaged at work. When they are self-aware, they are mindful of their own intentions. They self-manage their thoughts, emotions, attitudes and behaviour to add value to their own, and the lives of others. When resilient, employees tend to share their character strengths, passions, competencies and skills compassionately with others, and in so doing they intentionally have a positive impact in the lives of those that they influence. As leaders, these employees understand and respect the difference between manipulating and motivating their subordinates.

### **Conclusion**

As a source of organisational wellness, and in the context of employee resilience, it is imperative to understand the role that positive leadership plays. Positive leadership -- in parallel to the extent to which the culture, policies, and practices of the organisation promote employee resilience -- contributes favourably towards human capital development and organisational growth.

When employees are empowered to intentionally practice their character strengths, it generally has a positive knock-on effect within the organisation. Moreover, it also assists employees to persevere in the face of personal trials and adversities, thereby making them and ultimately the organisation they work for more resilient. Employees, who seek, promote, and utilise their inner capability and character strengths will be more inclined to thrive and less likely to withdraw or be mentally distant from their daily workplace duties. This may be attributed to the enjoyment, gratification and fulfilment that is experienced through their work which, when geared towards the development of their character strengths, will yield rewarding positive experiences that also cultivates organisational resilience.

CGF Research Institute's Workplace Wellness Consultant, Dr Dicky Els also regularly presents *Positive Coping* as an in-house wellness intervention. For more information, bookings or should you wish to participate



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## **ENDS (Words: 1,655)**

<sup>1</sup> Burnout is not a true mood disorder, but rather a psychological condition in which employees feel chronically sad, anxious, lonely, mentally distant and cynical which is accompanied by distress, a sense of reduced effectiveness, decreased motivation and the development of dysfunctional attitudes and behaviours at work. It is the result of consistent and unsuccessful attempts to resolve work (or personal) stressors. Work overload, inordinate time demands, role ambiguity and inadequate resources leads to burnout that over time results in ill health. Other factors that lead to high levels of stress and burnout include the lack of personal control, reduced decision making authority, dysfunctional team dynamics, poor job fit, a mismatch with the organisational values and constant experiences of negativity at work.

Generally, employees that suffer from burnout lack organisational commitment, and they are less capable of providing adequate client services, especially along dimensions of decision-making and involvement with clients. A number of challenges can be observed, such as a tendency to treat people mechanically, to be critical and cynical, and they are preoccupied with self-gratification. Burned-out employees are disengaged, and lack performance as they contemplate to leave the organisation but reluctantly stay. As a result, they tend to be complaining, controlling, impatient, indifferent, discouraged, frightened, frustrated, resentful, bitter and selfish. Burnout employees also report the absence of meaning, purpose and positivity in their lives. Ironically, these employees used to be enthusiastic, motivated and energised at work, and they used to function well in the same job or organisation but in the present time they require assistance as they struggle to recover on their own.

<sup>2</sup> Resilience is the capability to “bounce back” to a normal or even optimal state of functioning, mostly in the mist of being stretched or challenged with adversity such as uncertainty and ambiguous circumstances. Resilient employees demonstrate positive psychological growth, accomplishment, and achievement regardless of their circumstances. It is their ability to cope from within, and positively cope with adversity, trauma, stress and illness. Amid being stretched or challenged with adversity, they demonstrate the ability to quickly recover from difficulties. It is their deliberate, positive and constant efforts (lifestyle) that help them to manage taxing personal and organisational demands. The most celebrated cases of resilience are often depictions of individuals that overcome overwhelming odds in order to be stronger, have a positive human impact and exhibit moral goodness.

It is important to understand that resilience is not an extraordinary gift but rather found in the daily conduct of individuals who demonstrate positive coping behaviour. Basically, they are able to effectively balance or counter negative experiences with positive ones while at the same time they learn new competencies to adapt in challenging situations. They are faithful, reliable, authentic, focussed, controlled and engaged. Resilient employees experience hope, efficacy, autonomy, meaning, fulfilment and happiness amid economic decline, downsizing and organisational change. In general, resilient employees are more thankful, peaceful, generous, forgiving, self-less and inspired while they enjoy social connectedness and supportive interpersonal relationships.



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