

Building Team Resilience in Turbulent Times – Coaching Strategies for Leaders

Introduction

In extremely volatile times where the outlook for many organisations is uncertain, the need for resilience has never been greater.

Organisations likely to emerge from the Covid-19 crisis in a relatively strong position are those who can adapt quickly in the face of massive uncertainty and can “bounce back”. To do this, organisations need resilient teams at all levels - functioning effectively and finding new and resourceful ways to manage through the challenges.

Resilient teams are flexible and agile. They develop the capacity to respond as circumstances change at an extraordinary pace – week by week (and even day by day). They maintain focus and a sense of perspective despite the pressures - they move beyond setbacks and regroup quickly.

However, building and sustaining team resilience in these times is easier said than done. Individual team members can respond to a crisis in different ways. For example, some might become overwhelmed and rigid, with reduced ability to think creatively or see alternative options. Others will focus on solutions - finding a wider range of choices and opportunity.

This diverse range of individual responses can destabilise the team and impact performance. The team’s established ways of working can fall away or may not be useful in the “new normal”.

This presents a critical leadership challenge – firstly, to recognise what is going on in the team and how it might impact performance. Secondly, leaders need to draw on a range of skills and capabilities (and on their own personal resilience!) to lead effectively through the turbulence.

In a crisis, leaders need to role model resilience - leading by example, being positive but realistic, communicating authentically and often.

They also need to “flex” between a range of leadership styles. They need to be decisive in decision-making and directive in focussing effort. They need to push for fast execution. However, leaders also need to take action to cultivate resilience in their teams, and this requires a more collaborative coaching style – by involving the team in identifying options and decision making, and by challenging and supporting the team. The leader needs to deploy a range of coaching strategies to build team resilience, and to sustain team motivation, energy and performance over a sustained period.

In this context, the leader plays a dual role - an effective team leader and the team coach! While it may seem counter-intuitive where teams are under severe pressure, the leader needs to carve out some space to coach the team in order to foster resilience and maintain energy levels. He/she needs to encourage an opening up of high-quality reflection ("the Stop and Think"). The role here is to create the conditions for constructive thinking rather than shut it down.

Key Focus Areas for the Team Coach:

1. Supporting the team in re-setting ways of working to fit the "new reality":

- Clarity is needed around the team's values, purpose and role as it navigates through the crisis: "What's important to us right now? What really matters to us over the next 2 weeks/2 months? What do we stand for right now?". This provides the basis for decisions, and a "compass" to direct the team's energy.
- Create the space to discuss and agree expectations of each other: "How clear are we on what we are doing -and not doing- as a team? How will we support each other while we work remotely?".
- The opening individual check-in at each (remote) meeting becomes most important, not to be bypassed! Encourage each to share "how they are", and "what is important for you right now?".

2. Focus the team on the solution, not the problem:

- Ask the question around the solution rather than the problem: "What is it we need to do next? What are we in control of here, what can we influence? Who can give us help and support to do this?".
- Open up flexible thinking: "What contribution can we make to this situation in the next week/month and what should our deliverables be? What options are we missing? If we did have the resources/time/budget etc, what would we do? What external resources can we bring in? What would it look like if we were doing this better?".
- Focus the team effort on where it can have most impact: Where can we have greatest impact this week? Where do we put our energy?".

3. Encourage flexible goal setting:

- Grow the team's capability to plan with agility in mind.
- Recognise that carefully crafted plans may be scrapped quickly as situations evolve - the team needs to revise plans regularly and covering shorter periods.
- Guide the team to generate plans B, C and D as well as Plan A. Ask "What contribution can we make to this situation in the next week/month and what should our deliverables be? What are our priorities, are these the right ones? How do we constantly shift and rework our goals against a changing environment?".

4. Build team confidence:

- Encourage the team to “connect” with their strengths and resources - and build on what works well: “What we do really well, what we are known for?”.
- Recognise and highlight progress made. Encourage team members to share any “wins”, big or small! Ask: “What strengths did we draw on to achieve this? Where else can we leverage these strengths?”.
- Create space for the team to reflect on “What is working well and what do we need to do differently? How well are we leveraging our strengths right now? How do we optimise team strengths for what we need to do?”.
- It is also valuable to “drill into” past team successes, particularly in difficult situations: “What worked before when we tried this? What happened the last time we successfully did xx?”.

5. Challenge unhelpful thinking:

- Coach for flexible, realistic and solution-focussed mindsets.
- Challenge overly negative and faulty thinking: “Let’s do a reality check here, what is the evidence to support that view?”.
- Encourage the team to focus solely what is within the team’s control, rather than allow a sense of helplessness develop around what it cannot change.
- Challenge assumptions by asking questions and exploring opinions: “Where is the evidence? How would that work/why would that be helpful?”.
- Encourage positivity (not blind optimism!), ensuring that the positivity is supported with a plan.

There is no doubt the Covid –19 pandemic has brought significant and immediate challenges for leadership in every organisation irrespective of size. This will be tested in the period ahead and as emergency restrictions are lifted. In these most testing of circumstances, building team resilience will require leaders who can find the space to nurture it and the skilful deployment of coaching strategies.

If any business has questions, or need further guidance or support on the issues discussed in this article, please do get in touch with me at karl.mcdonagh@stratis.ie.

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