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DR. KEVIN NOURSE

Advancing Leadership Success by Building Resilience

The journey to the top of an organization is filled with roadblocks, adversity and unforeseen challenges. An ability to bounce back and thrive in the midst of adversity, setbacks and change is a crucial success ingredient for anyone on a leadership trajectory. Demonstrating resilience when faced with tough times often determines who reaches the top and who does not. While a few gifted leaders seem to be naturally resilient, most of us have to work at it. Fortunately, resilience is a skill that can be developed.

Resilience consists of a set of skills and resources that help people cope with and navigate adversity. Beyond merely surviving tough times, resilient people thrive and are transformed by tough times. Other attributes of resilient leaders include:

- Drawing upon internal and external resources to respond powerfully in crises and maintain a calm demeanor.
- Anticipating emerging challenges and prepare for them.
- Avoiding getting mired in the emotions of failure and recovering quickly from setbacks to move into action.
- Becoming more skilled at responding to future challenges.
- Demonstrating a confident, optimistic presence and thereby inspiring others to achieve more.

An increasing number of organizations are embracing resilience as a core competency for professional and leadership success:

- The U.S. Army has offered resilience training for soldiers as a means to prepare them for the traumas of warfare. Given the frequency of suicide attempts among the military as a result of post-traumatic stress, instilling resilience in soldiers is a matter of life and death.
- The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) identifies resilience as an essential change leadership skill.

- Zenger Folkman, a leadership development firm, collected data on 500 leaders and found that the most resilient leaders were also perceived as the most effective.

So how can you build your resilience muscle and improve your career success? There are six strategies to consider:

1. Strengthening your physical resilience
2. Building and maintaining your support networks
3. Revisiting your vision and purpose
4. Expanding your coping strategies
5. Aligning with your strengths
6. Enhancing your emotional intelligence

Strengthening Your Physical Resilience

Physical resilience is the foundation of psychological resilience. Consider the last time you felt sick and how that impacted your sense of optimism and performance. Resilient people regularly and consistently invest in self-care activities including a healthy diet, exercise and getting adequate sleep.

One aspect of physical resilience and self-care that is particularly challenging for many of my executive coaching clients is sleep. Recent research has found that sleep-deprived people experience apathy, reduced attention span, memory issues and blocks to their creativity. According to a 2016 study cited in the Harvard

Business Review, there are four aspects of leadership effectiveness that are negatively impacted by a lack of sufficient sleep: results orientation, problem-solving, seeking out alternative perspectives and supporting others.

There are numerous ways to improve your quality and quantity of sleep. Some of my favorite strategies include:

- Use an Apple Watch or Fitbit to track your sleep including time to bed, time awake and total hours of sleep.
- Develop sleep rituals as you prepare for bedtime such as turning off technology, a warm bath, and dimming the lights in your home.
- Avoid caffeine at least six hours before your regular bedtime.
- Use a white noise app to reduce the impact of background noise.

A great way to improve your physical resilience is by establishing accountability for your self-care habits with personal and professional colleagues, the second resilience building strategy.

Building and Maintaining Your Support Networks

In my 30s, I studied with several well-known trapeze flyers to learn their craft. Knowing that a net would catch me when I fell from the trapeze empowered me to take bigger risks. Our personal and professional support networks function in similar ways.

Resilient people cultivate personal and professional networks to help prevent setbacks, set more significant goals and navigate challenges when they happen.

According to the Center for Creative Leadership, a solid network benefits leaders in three ways: people, information, and resources. Many of my coaching clients have indicated a desire to think more strategically about their role and new ways they can add value to their organization. Several have made a point to reach out to trusted colleagues to learn more about emerging trends and best practices they might introduce to their own organizations.

For a network to be most effective, it needs depth and breadth. Depth consists of high levels of trust in a relationship and takes the form of people you can reveal your deepest fears and doubts to. Breadth includes connections from a variety of sources including your organization, profession and industry sector. Consider the case of Susan, a finance director in a nursing-related association. Beyond strong relationships with key stakeholders in her organization, she's also connected to colleagues in both the California Society of Association Executives and a professional association for finance professionals.

Some strategies you can use to enhance your support networks include:

- Establish a new habit of going to lunch once a month with a colleague whom you would like to deepen your relationship with.
- Create an inventory of your top 10 professional contacts and assess how current the relationship is; use this to prioritize people you need to reach out to.
- Once a week, make a point to introduce colleagues who share interests with each other.
- Assess your existing network with an eye toward relationships you need to end; are there negative, pessimistic or toxic people that sap your energy and focus?

Revisiting Your Vision and Purpose

Resilient people articulate and periodically revisit their vision and purpose as a means for staying focused

and sustaining momentum if the face to setbacks. Clarity and focus on your vision also inspires a sense of hope and optimism when faced with setbacks.

Consider the experiences of psychologist Viktor Frankl during the period he was interred in a concentration camp during the Holocaust. He attributes his resilience to a compelling vision he had of himself after being freed from the camps lecturing to a group of students about his experience. His vision allowed him to reframe the horrors of the camps as the source of insight for his future students.

In my own life I've had multiple opportunities to apply this concept. While working on my doctoral program from 2002-09, I would periodically visualize myself on the day of graduation with my degree. I imagined the view of the audience from the podium as I spoke about the experience to friends, family and my teachers. I could see myself going for a long run that day on the boardwalk as the sun rose over the Santa Barbara mountains.

A compelling vision and purpose easily transcend our personal domain into our organizational lives. Several leadership teams I have worked with periodically revisit and recommit to their vision and purpose as a means for bridging their differences in team conflicts.

Other strategies and rituals for revisiting your vision and purpose:

- Translate your vision into a compelling image and display it where you see it regularly.
- Create an accountability partnership with a trusted colleague and schedule a lunch check-in on a quarterly basis to review progress toward your vision.
- Read Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech as a compelling example and use it to guide the development of your own personal or professional vision.

Expanding Your Coping Strategies

People who are resilient develop and practice multiple coping strategies to navigate setbacks and motivate



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One fundamental way that people develop their strengths is by creating situational awareness of when to use it.

themselves to take action. Rather than getting trapped in their emotional reactions to adversity, they problem-solve: They create a plan, formulate a vision, ask for help and find ways to get perspective. Reframing “failure” into a learning opportunity is vital.

One particularly critical coping skill used by highly resilient people is positive self-talk. Self-talk consists of the internal messages you give yourself when experiencing both success and setbacks. In her book *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, writer Angela Duckworth suggests that optimistic self-talk leads to increased perseverance in the face of adversity.

Other studies have highlighted the importance of debating the negative messages you give yourself with evidence. For example, if your internal critic says “I’ll never get a promotion since I just don’t have enough of the right experience,” you might counter with “If that’s true, why did that headhunter call me that week with a new job opportunity?”

Other strategies and rituals for expanding your coping strategies include:

- Keep a file of accolades and positive feedback you have received; re-read these messages when faced with a daunting challenge or while recovering from a tough situation.
- Develop exercise routines you can use after experiencing adversity to discharge your emotions and help you refocus on taking action.
- Design your life to create meaning and joy from multiple domains, such as church, friends, family or volunteer work; this will allow you to keep perspective on potential setbacks at work.

Aligning With Your Strengths

Resilient people know what they are good at and develop and align their roles with these strengths. As a result, they have a greater awareness of their own power that enables them to assert their ideas more effectively. People who are grounded in their strengths have power!

A strengths-based focus can take on two perspectives. First, aligning your work with your strengths creates energy and achievement. You will feel more satisfied and enriched by your work, which contributes to an optimistic attitude. Second, when faced with setbacks we often go through a phase of self-doubt and feelings of incompetence. By maintaining awareness of your strengths, you will be better able to bounce back after hitting a roadblock.

In addition to aligning your professional role with your strengths, it is critical to continue developing them. One fundamental way that people develop their strengths is by creating situational awareness of when to use it. For example, if you are highly skilled at strategic thinking, using this strength in situations when you should function operationally or tactically may backfire. In many cases, weaknesses are actually strengths either overused or misused.

Other strategies and rituals for better aligning and developing your strengths include:

- Mentor others’ development in your strength areas; this is a powerful way to give back to others, broaden your professional network and deepen your strength.
- Ask three trusted colleagues to identify your top three professional strengths.
- Commit to at least one opportunity quarterly to develop your most significant strengths.

Enhancing Your Emotional Intelligence

Resilient people are self-aware and use these insights to manage their behavior like a thermostat helps to regulate the temperature in a building. Self-regulation is particularly critical in many adverse situations that call for diplomacy, tact and a grounded presence.

Just recently, Uber CEO Dara Khosrowshahi demonstrated the powerful impact of emotional intelligence on averting a major lawsuit.

His organization faced substantial legal challenges from Google because of allegations of trade secret theft that occurred with the former CEO. Distinguishing himself from the short-fused former CEO, Khosrowshahi apologized for Uber’s past mistakes and reaffirmed the value of the relationship with Google. As a result, he rebuilt the strategic partnership with Google.

In contrast, I recently worked with an executive director in an association who was charged with guiding her organization through a radical reorganization. Unfortunately, she was highly impatient, constantly flustered and rushed, and cut off her staff when they attempted to surface issues regarding the restructuring. As a result, many of her senior staff became passive and resistant to the impending changes largely as a result of her lack of awareness and leadership presence.

Some strategies and rituals for enhancing your emotional intelligence include:

- Before sending an email or attending a meeting, consider how your audience might react to the information you are sharing.
- Double-down on your efforts to get adequate sleep; people who are exhausted often have a short fuse in stressful situations.
- Regularly capture your thoughts or feelings in a journal; reflect on your issues that stress you to get perspective.
- If you are prone to snap reactions to others, make a concerted effort to take a deep breath and count to five before responding.

The journey toward a fulfilling career as a leader can be lengthy and challenging. By establishing and maintaining your resilience-building skills and resources, you will be uniquely prepared to achieve career success.

Dr. Kevin Nourse is an executive coach, researcher, author and professional speaker who has a passion for helping leaders resiliently navigate change. He works extensively with association leaders and boards, as well as designing and facilitating volunteer leadership development programs. He is based in Palm Springs, CA, and can be reached at www.nourseleadership.com.