

RESILIENT LEADERSHIP

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About the Author

Anu Wakhl is in the role of Managing Director of Pragati Leadership Institute since April 2010. As part of this role, she is responsible for the business results of the company. She also is a Certified Coach, Facilitator and Consultant.

Anu has over 25 years of experience in consulting and training across most industry segments like Banking and Finance, Manufacturing, IT & ITES, Insurance etc.



Leadership demands many qualities from people who are in positions that require them to lead. One of the qualities is that of Resilience. We don't often hear this attribute being discussed when we are discussing key leadership skills. However, Resilience is a key attribute that is required to be built and displayed by leaders in today's dynamic and unpredictable environment which is prone to intense change.

Matson, Best and Garmezy have described Resilience as the capacity to maintain competent functioning in the face of life's major stressors. As business leaders we face uncertainty at work due to uncertain external environment eg. political instability, policy changes, shut-downs, climate changes, ethnicity intolerance etc. While all these are not strictly related to our business, they impact the conditions under which we do business. Similarly the work force today has different set of needs. Stake-holder expectations are changing. All this requires Leaders who can manage change, leaders who are resilient and steady.

The first association we have with the word Resilience is perhaps flexibility and adaptability. The ability to handle situations as they come. However well we plan and predict the future, the fact is that life often intrudes on our plans!

Resilience is the ability to see situations as they emerge and deal with them with courage, positivity and creativity. All of us are perfectly capable of handling situations that we know will crop up and for which we are prepared. It is the unknown and uncertain challenges in Leadership that we often cannot predict and therefore are unprepared to handle. Future challenges are still in the realm of the unknown. So while I cannot predict a specific situation, I can however build my capacity and capability to handle these as they come. This is building Leadership Resilience.

Resilience is also the ability to "bounce back" from a frustrating situation and move ahead. In business, we often have bad runs. The sales have been low for a number of years, competitors are catching up with what was earlier our differentiator, key talent is leaving to join other companies

etc. Resilience refers to the ability to manage one's emotions during these periods of difficulty and frustration and consistently maintain a positive outlook and work to overcome present difficulties. This can happen if we reframe "failure" as feedback. As Leaders, we cannot afford to "give up" when experiencing tough times. It is at these times that our teams look to us for inspiration and direction. How we manage ourselves and the messages we give as critical. Resilience is therefore also the ability to tolerate and recover from frustration and failure. Millionaires go bankrupt 7 times! However it is Resilience that gets them to bounce back.

So what are some things we need to work on and develop to be a more Resilient Leader?

It all starts with the mind and our thinking. We need to develop the ability to be comfortable with both successes and failures. No one likes to fail. As leaders we are also not hired to fail. However there are times when no matter how hard we try, we don't get to where we want to be. At these times, developing the perspective of accepting the current situation without having excuses for it helps a lot. Seeing failure as an opportunity to improve, do things in a different way rather than seeing it as a personal shortcoming is important. During difficult times, keeping ones thinking positive and optimistic is extremely important. It is so easy to get into a "victim state" and find legitimate and illegitimate reasons for why things are not going the right way. At these times, we need to develop a "hero" attitude, an attitude of "can do" and moving on. This helps us to bounce back from a tough situation and invest our energy in looking at the future. Staying in the past immobilizes us and drains our energy. That emotional energy can be used to learn from the past and plan for the future keeping the lessons learnt at the back of our mind.

Perseverance is an important attribute of Resilience. It is about not giving up when you hit the first bump on the road. It is about having the mental strength to pursue the path even when we encounter difficulties and road-blocks. This is where positivity and conviction come in. Gandhiji believed that India could be a democracy even before he had figured out a game plan for the same. Resilience can be built up by having strong convictions and belief in the flow of life and the grace of the universe. If you have chosen a path that is in accordance with what's good for people and the business, you are bound to succeed. Even difficult goals can be achieved and we can do it.

The ability to improvise is also an important aspect that builds resilience. Improvisation is the skill of dealing with "what is" in the best way you can.

Since one hasn't planned for it, there is no ready formula for the future. All that you have is your existing abilities and a mind ready to experiment and take on things. Developing the ability to "play" and "being ready" helps us to take on situations for which we may not always have a game plan in place. This is where plans don't help! We can only do this if we are confident in our own abilities and have a belief that we can do it. We are willing to try. We are not worried about the outcome or how we may be seen if we don't succeed. We trust and plunge in. Irrespective of the outcome, we face the situation and act in the situation. This builds our perspective and skills for the present and the future. To improvise, we need to be flexible and be comfortable exerting a variety of choices. Rigidity or response and improvisation don't go well together!

As Leaders, having resilience helps us with our personal leadership journey and our role in building inspiration in our teams to continue to work for the goals we have articulated.