



**KETS DE VRIES
INSTITUTE**

KDVI Learning Lab

Resilience in Times of Crisis

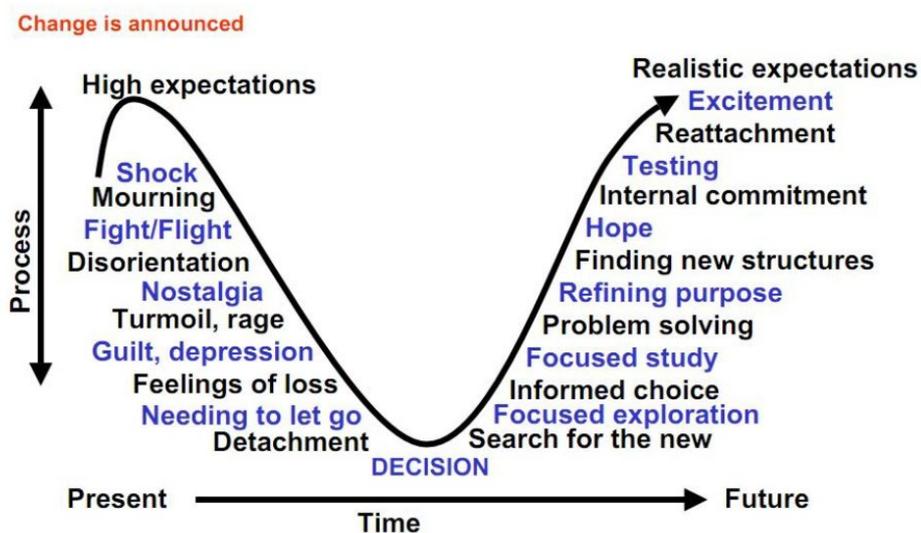
Graham Ward, PhD

In times of crisis, building resilience has come to the foreground as a core capability to respond to stress and thrive from it. This session presented a synthesis of key ideas around resilience and explored how we can cultivate it within ourselves and in organisations.

Resilience in the change journey

Resilience has emerged as a hot topic, especially in response to the stress, uncertainty and rapid change created by the pandemic. We are seeing responses that fall into three broad categories: (1) people and organisations who were already set up to manage their way through the crisis, (2) others who would find a way through the crisis and, (3) those who would succumb and fail. At the intersection of these three is resilience.

Resilience can be defined as the ability to regenerate, renew, revitalise and move forward after difficulties. It is also akin to being able to mentally or emotionally cope with crisis and to return to a pre-crisis status quickly. In the change journey, building resilience involves moving through a series of negative experiences and emotions and regaining hope, energy and direction.





Building blocks of resilience

Research and intervention studies on resilience suggest the following features in common:

- **Sense of purpose:** Purpose is the reason for being, and can be identified by asking a number of questions related to Whyⁱ: What am I good at? What do I love to do? What can I be paid for? What does the world need? Purpose is the fundamental driver which gets you up in the morning and keeps you goingⁱⁱ.
- **Self-awareness:** In adaptive and crisis situationsⁱⁱⁱ, self-awareness is the ability to understand where we are emotionally and recognise when we are in over our heads and need additional resources to help us cope and accomplish our goals.
- **Positive self-regard:** Within adult development theory^{iv}, the self-authoring state in which one is independent, driven by one's own compass, and has an internal locus of control and meaning, usually occurs after a series of life experiences, setbacks and successes. Crises can propel us to deeply reflect, learn and consider where we need to go. Similarly, resilient organisations are those who undergo difficult periods and are able to adapt, learn and reach higher orders of purpose and direction.
- **Problem solving:** Resilience is also related to confidence and aptitude to problem solve. Problem solving in turn requires the ability to get on the balcony and take a systemic view, bring in and engage other people, and make decisions.
- **Communication:** Finally, resilience is tied to the desire and willingness to communicate our needs and vulnerabilities. At an organisational level, communication during periods of crisis is made more complicated when people gravitate to tasks and processes, become compliant and dependent on the system for solutions, leading to a spiral of silence and conformity^v. This in turn affects innovation, constructive conflict and risks a small vocal minority determining the path of the organisation.

Questions for reflection and discussion

- To what extent has your purpose shifted during the crisis? Has your organisation's purpose shifted and has that been clarified to people?
- Where are you emotionally and how is that congruent with your organisation's emotions?
- What patterns do you observe in your organisation?
- What needs to be said that you are not saying? And why are you not saying it?

Insights from the Learning Lab

Discussions with participants reveal different journeys across companies and between individuals and their own organisations. There were recurring themes around the tensions between personal resilience and the expectations of their organisation as well as a resilience "trap", notably the fine line between responding to and working through adversity and burnout.

- **Purpose sharpened or in flux:** Sense of purpose has been sharpened for some organisations and in flux for others. For companies whose original purpose is aligned with the demands created by the pandemic (e.g. health care, technology firms), their sense of purpose has been reinforced, serving as a unifying and motivating factor for its



people. For other companies who have experienced loss of work and revenue, the sense of purpose requires rethinking and adjustment in an environment of constant change.

- **Adaptive responses can add extra pressure, taking a toll on resilience:** In response to the pandemic, some companies have responded with major restructuring. While these changes may be an attempt to make the organisation more resilient, it can also carry inordinate amount of work and additional pressures. While adaptive, they can generate personal and collective resistance as people face increasing workloads and changing responsibilities. Without proper channels to communicate their experience and needs, people may act out or be quiet and become resentful, undermining long term resilience.
- **Dark side of demonstrating “resilience” is overwork and burnout:** One common coping mechanism is for people to go into overdrive, to not show vulnerabilities (which can be perceived as the opposite of resilience), and to focus on overcoming obstacles and achieving tasks. Some participants report a lot of pressure, especially in high achieving cultures, to push themselves to maintain levels of performance. While this can cultivate a sense of efficacy and resilience in the short term, sustained periods of stress and heavy workloads can lead to burnout.
- **Need for reflective spaces to disconnect in order to reengage:** To counterbalance the pattern of overdrive, participants noted a need to create spaces to “get on the balcony”, psychologically disconnect from immediate demands to reflect on the issues they are facing and where they are emotionally, in order to renew perspective, motivation and energy.
- **Need for psychological safety to share experiences and express needs:** Participants also described a delicate balance of being able to speak truth to power and address the “elephants in the room” – one of which is the paradox between resilience and overdrive.

Being resilient, for the long term, requires both an ability to deal effectively with challenges at hand but also the space to disconnect, connect, recharge and plan forward. Without this equilibrium between action and reflection, individuals and organisations may be at risk for mental and emotional exhaustion due to prolonged and repeated stress.

Sources:

ⁱ Simon Sinek (2009). How great leaders inspire action.

https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action?language=en

ⁱⁱ Garcia and Miralles (2017). Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life. Penguin Life.

ⁱⁱⁱ Heifetz, Linsky, and Grashow (2009). *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*. Harvard Business Press.

^{iv} Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. L. (2009). *Immunity to change: how to overcome it and unlock potential in yourself and your organization*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press.

^v Noelle-Neumann (1993). *The Spiral of Silence: Public opinion- our social skin*. University of Chicago Press.

https://books.google.fr/books?hl=en&lr=&id=ECXwC4ldmRIC&oi=fnd&pg=PR9&ots=MyIGmgLVR_&sig=hSJ3rQVd7sasB9VcfJZcsgQqRVU&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false