

## **Resilience in Leaders: Conceptualisation and changes brought about by coaching**

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Summary of presentation on 17<sup>th</sup> October 2013 at Critical Coaching Research Group, Arnos Manor Bristol.

*'More than education, more than experience, more than training, a person's level of resilience will determine who succeeds and who fails. That's true in the cancer ward, it's true in the Olympics, and it's true in the boardroom'*  
*Dean Becker CEO Adaptiv Learning Systems*

It was quotes such as these that led me to become interested in the topic of resilience and how it was approached in coaching. Following recent world events the topic of 'resilience' became prevalent in coaching and yet there seemed very little dedicated research in the leadership arena. Most of the ideas and approaches were drawn from clinical or developmental literature with little in the organisational world beyond the military or nursing context. Many companies with a vested interest in the selling of services or consultancy purport to address leadership resilience, however empirical research is an emergent area. Only one study directly links coaching with leadership resilience and reported that 'coaching increases resilience in managers' (Grant et al 2009).

Initial investigations revealed significant confusion about what the term 'resilience' meant. For some it referred to the outcome experienced after a traumatic event for others it reflected the process of coping (Carver 1998). Such confusions were mirrored in the various psychometric measures that purport to measure resilience. Some measures clearly address outcomes with questions such as 'I tend to bounce back quickly from hard times' (Smith et al. 2008). In contrast others measure the processes that might increase the chances of a resilient outcome e.g. 'I feel that I am optimistic and concentrate on the positives in most situations' (Baruth and Carroll 2002). Assessments currently available therefore show wide variations in what they actually measure despite all claiming to measure resilience.

Resilience has however recently emerged as a core attribute in leadership and is defined in the PsyCap model as 'the positive psychological capacity to rebound, to 'bounce-back' from adversity, uncertainty, conflict, failure or even positive change and progress' (Luthans, F. 2002). Such definitions are common in referring to this 'bounce-back' yet do not state what it is that is 'bouncing-back'. In the organisational context this might refer to emotional stability or perhaps performance?

There is also debate about the attributes that make up resilience. The factors identified as relevant often include attitudes, skills, traits, some that might be considered states and even virtues (Richardson 2002). Among the component parts identified are cognitive flexibility, optimism, positive future orientation, hardiness, self-understanding, interpersonal understanding, internal locus of control, high self-esteem, emotional control, sociability, active coping, spirituality and many more (Skodol 2010, Kent and Davis 2010). This exemplifies the difficulties of gaining a clear understanding of what is meant by many of these terms, yet this 'list-like' approach is common. In fact, the list of relevant attributes seems almost endless when different authors and contexts are reviewed.

This means that as coaches it is hard to define how we should work with resilience in the leadership population. With little agreement on definitions or the component elements this research aimed to increase our understanding of resilience in the leadership population who most commonly take up coaching.

This grounded theory study gathered interview data from eight leaders and eight coaches to address three research gaps.

1. What does resilience mean for leaders?

2. How should coaching conceptualise resilience?
3. What is the shared understanding of resilience?

## Headlines

### 1. The resilience timeline

Resilience was described as operating differently across the timeline. Resilience does manifest as conquering the past but also has a present and future component. Resilience in the present is about connecting to the present and engaging to exert control. However there is also a strong future focus, with the courage to face risk. This suggests that defining resilience as only 'bounce-back' from the past is not reflective of how the leadership population experience resilience.

### 2. Values matter

Leaders felt their resilience was most tested when they experienced a clash of values. The picture that emerges is of capable individuals who are taking responsibility for resolving issues by applying problem-focused and emotion-focussed strategies. They are well versed in dealing with issues and managing their reactions or perceptions. They say it 'comes with the territory'. Yet when faced with a clash of values these strategies seem inadequate.

### 3. Resilience as resource

Consistent language and metaphors referred to resilience as a fuel or resource. This means that leaders do not experience resilience as a set of skills but rather as a system to be managed. Having more skills may help conserve resource but even with exceptional resilience skills there may be times when the resource simply runs out. This would explain why apparently very resilient and senior leaders can still experience resilience issues.

My definition is therefore:

*Having the capabilities and the capacity to conquer the past, to connect to the present and to have courage for the future in times of difficulty.*

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