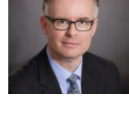


Professional

I've got one word for you: resiliency

In my role as a CEO coach, I am sometimes asked if there is one trait that I value over all others in leaders. The answer is yes: resiliency



by James Fleck

March 13, 2024



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In my role as a coach to chief effective officers, I am sometimes asked if there is one trait that I value over all others when assessing leaders. The answer is yes.

The trait is resiliency.

A resilient leader can prevail in the face of horrible market conditions, vicious competitors, product mishaps and even a dysfunctional team. At its core, resiliency is about “Nolite te Bastardes Carborundorum,” an old high school Latin joke, most recently surfaced in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. For those of you who missed high school Latin, it translates as “Don’t let the bastards grind you down.”

While some markers for resiliency are hard wired in our early years, anyone, and certainly any aspiring leader, can deliberately build their own resiliency. A quick search will demonstrate that there is no shortage of approaches and theories about how to build resiliency. But after many years of working with senior leaders, I have distilled my own approach down to three concepts: know yourself; build a structure to reinforce resiliency; and surround yourself with a supportive ecosystem.

The journey toward knowing yourself sounds deceptively simple. In reality, it is fiendishly difficult to illuminate your own behavioural blind spots. So I recommend that you start by asking people who know you well. Spouses, partners or close long-term friends can provide insight and, interestingly, siblings are often a good source if you are willing to listen. Our brothers and sisters have known us longer than anyone other than our parents, and they can be much more objective.

The main insight that you are trying to gain is an understanding of how you behave when you are under significant stress. Some of the behavioural assessment tools touch on this idea, and my personal favourite is the Birkman Method, which does a good job of describing stress behaviours that include bullying, impulsive action, stubbornness and avoidance. The value of knowing how you react under stress is that you can spot, and even anticipate, these behaviours and then consciously work to modify how you respond. We can’t change who we are, but we can change how we behave.



As an example, I work with a few different tech founders who are wired to be impatient and impulsive under stress. This scrappy orientation has probably served them well as they pushed their companies through the start-up phase. However, as their businesses grow and become more complex, it is important for them to deliberately slow down, collect more information and build more alignment before acting. This is where their self-awareness, coupled with their willingness to alter their behaviour, can make them much more effective and resilient leaders.

Turning to the idea of building a structure to support resiliency, a great example is how pilots use checklists in every stage of flight to ensure routine items are not forgotten. Checklists also keep the crew calm and resilient in the face of emergencies that can develop in seconds in an airplane traveling hundreds of miles an hour.

For many organizational leaders, structures that build resiliency can often be found in concepts such as purpose, vision or strategy. I recently had a client persevere in a multi-year battle with his board because he felt passionately about a strategy his board was trying to fundamentally change for short-term gain. As this drama unfolded, my client survived attempts to sideline him and even kick him out of the company. Through all of this, he remained steadfast, supported by the structural principles of his strategy.

The final concept is surrounding yourself with a supportive ecosystem. It is really lonely at the top. And we all benefit from close relationships with people we trust, who have our best interests at heart and who have great judgement. These are the people who can challenge our assumptions but who can also provide almost unconditional support and give us the space to vent.

I always encourage my CEO clients to find some kind of peer group, such as the Young Presidents’ Organization or any number of other similar groups.

There is also a role for a good CEO coach to be part of this ecosystem. In my own coaching career I have always tried to be part of a peer supervision group where I can bring difficult problems for perspectives and advice and provide the same back to my peers.

I have no doubt that the ability of leaders to be resilient will only become more important in our chaotic and unpredictable world. By following this framework of knowing yourself, building a structure to reinforce resiliency and surrounding yourself with a supportive ecosystem, you can set yourself up to be effective and impactful in the face of inevitable leadership challenges that you will face in your own career.

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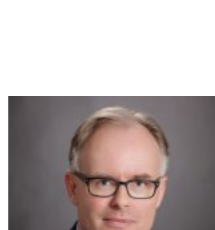
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