

RESILIENCE

OR HOW TO SURVIVE IN TOUGH TIMES

BY JOHN VARNEY



"Don't let things slip because there is danger – now is the time to be alert and on top of things – but especially on top of doubt and uncertainty."

Resilience in physics is that property of a substance that enables it to recover its shape after deformation – like, say, a rubber ball. The energy that causes deformation is released as it recovers its shape.

Does this also apply to living entities as they undergo deformation? We could say that, in the current global financial storm, deformation is rampant and the road to recovery is widely sought. Of course, in this case we are no longer talking of just a physical phenomenon but also of feelings, behaviours, and relationships. So what is it that makes for resilience in people?

To try to find an answer, Hugh Montgomery, cardiovascular genetics consultant at University College London, led a medical research team up Everest, studying themselves as they went. Having also met many survivors of extreme events, his research identified nine factors that make a difference to the chances of survival for individuals in life-threatening situations:

Genetics: Nothing you can do about this one! You are stuck with what your parents gave you.

Thankfully the other eight factors are under your control!

Attitude: How strong is your intent to survive?

Physical fitness: How lean and fit are you? Fat and body shape make a difference.

Emotional fitness: How well can you manage fear and pain?

Mental fitness: Have you the mental agility to reconfigure what makes sense?

Humour: Can you laugh at yourself and your situation no matter how grim?

Right use of imagination: How well you can make believe (literally)? Can you see and believe in a good outcome?

Planning: Can you rehearse the future? Having a plan gives energy and confidence.

Discipline: Can you maintain control of yourself?

Resilience in teams and organizations

Individual humans are living wholes. But so are teams, and organizations. In times of crisis, the work of leadership is to pull things around so everyone survives in the best possible fashion. Transfer the above human attributes to an organization scale and we get the following:

Genetics: Re-visit your business model and check that resilience is built into it. What was good last year may not be fit for the future. If not, then change!

Attitude: Encourage the intent to thrive in spite of danger. Don't err towards either wishful thinking or arrogance. Never doubt your capability to learn to survive as an organization – and be

prepared to put everything into the melting pot.

Physical fitness: Make sure your organization is slim, lean, and fit for purpose. Make sure it is dynamic and fleet of foot. Remove resistance, redundancy, and deadwood. Train and practice.

Emotional fitness: Maintain confidence and vigilance. Use the energy of the situation to build strength in leadership and relationships. Don't dither – get things moving. Impart urgency, pride, and trust.

Mental fitness: Think afresh – involve everyone in re-thinking the organization, where it is headed, what it is for, and how adaptable it is to changing conditions. Involve and engage everyone to think and re-think.

Humour: Laughing stops you from taking things too seriously. It helps you through uncomfortable situations and releases pent-up emotions. With humour comes creative play, which feeds creativity and innovation. Play to win the day.

Right use of imagination: Use imagination positively. Re-define success and help people build a narrative of a successful outcome. Feed and sustain this positive view so everyone creates their own role in the story.

Planning: Take stock and plan for the future. Envision the success you desire and plan how to get there from where you are. Planning prepares the mind. Rehearsing the future you want makes it more likely you will see opportunities and seize them.

Discipline: Physical, emotional, mental! Keep to time. Keep to what you have promised. Don't let things slip because there is danger – now is the time to be alert and on top of things – but especially on top of doubt and uncertainty.

Together these nine factors add up to a leader's survival strategy, giving the resilience needed to cope with unexpected adversity. There can be no guarantees, but working this way will greatly increase your survival chances as Hugh's research has proved. So seek out your own Everest – and prepare yourself to bounce back!

John Varney is founder and chief executive of the Centre for Management Creativity (CMC). Based in the UK, the CMC works with a wide range of organizations, inspiring vision, strategy, and helping people develop a creative approach to organizational challenges. His work develops the attitudes and beliefs of management, changing relationships and behaviours to define and achieve common purpose and organizational goals.

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