

A man in a dark suit and white shirt is walking down a wide, modern concrete staircase. The staircase is made of large, light-colored concrete panels and has a black metal handrail. The man is looking down and to the right. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Part 1:
KNOWING YOURSELF

Understanding
Resilience as a Leader
in Challenging Times

CLARITY^{VP}

PART 1: KNOWING YOURSELF

In Part 1 of this series, I explore the nature of leaders' resilience in times of crisis and look at the innate human traits that conspire to dampen our resolve. In Part 2, I consider how we can overcome these behaviour patterns and maintain our resilience as leaders during challenging times.

TAKING CONTROL

The word 'resilience' is often overused at times like these, particularly in the world of business leadership. Many think that leaders can simply flick a switch and shift into 'resilience mode' automatically. But, like myself, leaders are humans first with the same concerns as anyone else – and many of us have been rocked by recent events in our local, national and global community.

In my conversations with clients and colleagues, there is palpable and justified anxiety around how this pandemic will impact our professional and personal lives. No one knows for sure, but the one thing we can control is how we react to this unprecedented situation. This is especially true for business leaders. At times of crisis, others look to us for guidance and reassurance, and it is important that – where we can – we accept this responsibility and exercise it carefully.

BRAIN POWER

Firstly though, we need to understand what true resilience is. There are many variations on the definition, but there are two that resonate with me from a leadership point of view: 'An individual's ability to properly adapt to stress and adversity' and 'Being ready for any eventuality.'

In a nutshell, resilience is the innate capacity of the brain to bounce back

from difficulty, and it is developed through experience. Any experience we have, whether positive or negative, causes neurons in the brain to fire. Repeated experiences make these same neurons to fire again, and neurons that fire together ultimately wire together. This encodes patterns of response and behaviour deep within our neurological pathways.

RESILIENCE IN A CRISIS – HOW DO WE REACT?

The great Robin Sharma talks about how major challenges in our lives can initially bring out our weakest selves. With the value of hindsight, when we reflect on our reactions, we often see that past experiences have influenced our response patterns. For many of us, moments of crisis conjure up an abundance of previous emotions. Times when we felt out of our depth or made the wrong call when we thought we were being brave. These experiences bring with them logical fears of:

- Failure
- Being exposed
- Being ridiculed
- Insecurity
- Losing credibility.

All these feelings are valid, and our natural reaction is to avoid situations that might expose us to them again. In some cases, we don't want to be reminded of these past experiences at all or talk about what went wrong. Our old beliefs try to dominate our current reactions, but it is critically important that we override our instincts and create new patterns of behaviour.

Easier said than done, I know! However, understanding how your brain is wired and your ability to 'unfasten' learned reactions will help you to become more resilient as a leader.

OVERCOMING NEGATIVITY

As humans, our brains are pre-wired towards negativity – it's that fight or flight urge in us when something harsh or unexpected happens. In The Chimp Paradox, Professor Steve Peters asserts that we all have a chimp (or limbic part of the brain) that is unleashed when various scenarios are thrown at us.

This 'emotional machine' can channel both good or bad emotions, and behave constructively or destructively. And, sometimes, the destructive reaction can materialise as that inner voice, the one we are all familiar with that sows the seeds of doubt.

Peters goes on to describe the frontal part of our brains as the logical part. As leaders, we need to listen more carefully to our logical selves and stifle that voice of doubt. The good news is that neuroscience tells us the brain can rewire new beliefs and behaviours. This, of course, needs active practice and must be grounded in your current reality – but it is possible.

Valerie O'Keefe is CEO of ClarityVP Consulting. For many years, she has helped leaders and teams to maximise their strengths and achieve significant results. With a former career in finance, Valerie uses her leadership experience and background in behavioural psychology to work with clients across a broad range of sectors.

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