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Effort and Attitude: Becoming Resilient in Times of Adversity

by Mary Lynn Pulley and Michael Wakefield.

Economic adversity continues to plague businesses and institutions, communities and families. News articles, talk shows and daily conversations focus on grim numbers and tough choices. In times like these, resiliency becomes more important than ever.

Resilient people demonstrate flexibility, durability, an attitude of optimism and a mindset that is open to learning. A lack of resilience is signaled by burnout, fatigue, malaise, depression, defensiveness and cynicism.

But the ability to bounce back from adversity—and to navigate today's hard times—is not innate. It has a lot to do with how you think about the challenges you face, and it is a set of skills that can be developed.

Learning to be more resilient requires you to modify both thoughts and actions. Some steps you can take:

Accept change. Change is constant and inevitable. Resiliency develops when we learn to be more comfortable with change. You can become more accepting of change if you:

- Get an accurate picture of yourself and an accurate picture of your environment. Don't deny reality if your skills are out-of-date, your industry is in trouble, or your business is facing cutbacks. Understand what's going on and where you fit in. This includes paying attention to your physical and mental well-being.
- Broaden your scope. Don't bury yourself in a single project or limit your interactions to a small group of people. Now is the time to pay attention to the people and the work around you—and more broadly to pay attention to what's going on in your community or field. A narrow view increases your risk of being blindsided by change.
- Stop fighting change that is beyond your control. Control what you can. Give your attention and energies to developing new skills, bolstering key efforts and taking steps forward.

Focus on learning. This doesn't necessarily mean going back to school or retraining. But it is about trying new approaches, being open to new skills, and adapting your behavior. Many managers resist learning new ways, even when it's obvious that the old ways don't work anymore. Improve your ability to apply new skills and understanding in times of change by:

- Being patient. Learning almost always causes a drop in performance before improvement takes place. You may not feel as if you have the time or the "cover" to risk this process; you'll have to weigh out the long-term value of learning new things versus the short-term benefits.
- Spending some time each day thinking about learning. You could jot down a new data point that was useful, an idea that worked, or insight you gained into how you might help your team face a challenge. On your drive home, think about a professional success, what you learned and how you might apply that knowledge to your current situation. What is different and may not apply?

Find your sense of purpose. Develop a "personal why" that gives your work meaning or helps you put it into a larger context. A clear sense of purpose helps you to see setbacks from a

broader perspective. Questions to ask yourself include:

- What is my most important value? What do I do at work and away from the job that reflects that value?
- If there were no obstacles, what would I like to do with my life?

Pay attention to self-identity. Form your identity apart from your job. In today's economy, you are likely to be highly focused on your job and financial well-being, but a job is just one facet of your identity, and a career is just one aspect of your life.

- Consider what roles or experiences you would like to have in your professional life. List and compare them to those you are currently doing. What changes could you make on the job so that you can do more of the things you want to do?
- What images represent who you are outside of work? If you were creating a personal logo or family crest, what would you include?

Reframe your skill set. Reframe how you see your skills, talents and interests. By casting your skills in a new light, you can see how they might shift into new patterns of work and behavior—and help you adapt to a new job or new career. To gain new perspective on familiar skills, try these suggestions:

- Describe five different jobs or careers you could do today given your current skills.
- Think about skills and personal attributes that you use outside of work—at home, in the community, even in the gym. How else could you put them to use? For example, if you're a long-distance runner, how could your personal discipline and training regimen apply to a job search or steering your business through hard times?

Hardships are part of life. But they do offer life lessons that cannot be learned any other way. Through experiences such as career setbacks, job losses, and leading through tough times, you may discover your ability to endure and bounce back.