

Succeeding as a Manager: Five Ways to Build a Resilient Team

Overview

Five key ways to build and sustain resilience among the individuals and groups you manage.

1. Build your own personal resiliency
2. Encourage autonomy and flexibility
3. Help employees manage change
4. Provide opportunities for ongoing learning
5. Help employees find a sense of meaning in their work

We all know what resilience is -- the ability to bounce back from problems and challenges with energy, effectiveness, and positive action. "If you want to spot the resilient people in your organization," says management consultant Arlene Johnson, a vice president at WFD Consulting, "they are the ones who stay focused and take action when things get tough. They stay mentally and physically healthy when life gets difficult. Resilient people are able to deal with uncertainty and react positively to change." Isn't that the kind of employee we'd all like to work with and manage?

Following are five key ways to build and sustain resilience among the people you manage.

1. Build your own personal resilience.

- *You can't build a resilient team unless you're resilient yourself.* You need to be physically as well as mentally prepared to weather the inevitable stressful events at work. It takes some effort to keep yourself physically ready, but your improved capacity for change will make it well worth the effort. Take care of yourself. Get regular checkups. Exercise often. Maintain a healthy diet as defined on the government Web site http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/index_e.html.
- *Pay extra attention to taking care of yourself during stressful times.* Maintaining a sense of balance between work and personal life can be challenging, particularly for managers. But if you're physically exhausted, or feel overloaded or overextended, it's much harder to be resilient.
- *Be familiar with the symptoms of stress.* These include sleep problems; trouble concentrating; headaches; stomach-aches; neck, shoulder, or back pain; heart palpitations; and lack of energy. Identify the sources of stress in your personal and work life. Then let go of feelings of anger and frustration, pressure and tension, by practicing stress-reduction techniques, such as periods of deep breathing, faithfully.

2. Encourage autonomy and flexibility.

To build resilience on your team, you'll want to be a role model who shows people how to identify and solve problems; gather the right resources, people, and ideas;

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break big tasks into defined and manageable steps; and find solutions. Your good management will bring these traits out in people and give them an opportunity to practice them. You'll also build resilience in your group by providing training and developing each employee's sense of autonomy and control at work.

- *Encourage individual and team problem-solving.* Involve team members in finding solutions to work problems and challenges. Encourage employees to problem solve without you. Encourage suggestions from all employees.
- *Encourage decision-making.* Be sure employees have the information and resources they need to make and implement decisions. Ask yourself, "Do I need to make this decision or could someone else in my group make it?"
- *Encourage flexibility.* Flexibility and resilience go hand in hand. Flexibility may mean giving employees the freedom to plan their own work, set their own pace, have some control over their schedule, or take a break when they need it.

3. Help employees manage change.

The "ability to improvise" and adapt to change is one of the fundamental characteristics of resilient people and organizations, writes Diane L. Coutu in a Harvard Business Review article, "How Resilience Works."

- *Meet with employees when a change is taking place within your organization.* Employees need to hear from their managers during times of change. Help them understand what the changes will mean for them. Try to put yourself in employees' shoes and to see things from their point of view. You might say, "I know this restructuring is hard on all of us. But we'll manage the changes and get through this together."
- *Be an effective and diligent listener and communicator during times of change.* Be clear, honest, and timely in your communications with employees. Be an especially careful listener when people are stressed, have questions, or have complaints or criticisms.
- *Help people take control of the situation.* One of the reasons that change is so challenging is that it makes us feel like things are out of control. Clarify roles and priorities during times of change. Encourage people to take control of the situation by helping them get back to work. People need to see that while they can't always control events around them, they are the ones in control of their own reactions to those changes.

4. Provide opportunities for ongoing learning.

A 2004 study by the Families and Work Institute showed that employees who have jobs that provide them more opportunities to continue to learn and whose supervisors

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support them in succeeding on the job are less likely to feel overworked. Learning makes us more resilient, too. We learn from our successes as well as our failures and mistakes.

- *Provide employees with learning opportunities.* Offer "stretch assignments," and opportunities to work on new tasks, committees, projects, or jobs.
- *Help employees find mentors and a network of support within the organization.*
- *Provide opportunities for training and retraining.* Employees of all ages welcome the opportunity to learn new skills.

5. Help employees find a sense of meaning in their work.

We all need to feel that our work matters and that we're valued for the work that we do.

- *Help individuals and the group see the value they bring to the organization.* You can do this in individual performance reviews, one-on-one meetings, and in team meetings. Help people see the connection between their work and the company's success -- how their work fits into the business plan or makes a difference to clients or customers.
- *Provide opportunities for "people time."* Social connectedness matters.
- *Help people feel appreciated.* As a manager, you play an important role in helping people see meaning in their work. One way to do that is by thanking and acknowledging them regularly and often.

People who develop and practice their resilience in advance will mobilize much more quickly in times of crisis and change. This will allow you to achieve your department's goals and objectives with an efficiency that you and your team will be proud of.

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