

# THE SEV7N CORE PRACTICES TO BECOME A RESILIENT LEADER

**More than Education. More than Experience. More than Training.**  
More than any one single factor, resilience will determine who succeeds and who fails.

Why do some leaders crumble under pressure while others prosper during such upheavals? Why is it that a safety incident on-site, a commodity downturn or the resignation of a top performing manager sends some leaders into a spin and others calmly dealing with whatever is at hand? We argue that it is resilience – the ability to spring back quickly to effective functioning in adverse circumstances. Exciting scientific advances in the field of resilience provides us with the answers and the tools to increase our own resilience and effectiveness at fostering resilience in others.

So what is resilient leadership anyway? Resilient leadership requires two critical capabilities. First, the ability to personally respond effectively to challenging and adverse situations by transforming them into catalysts for improved performance. Second, the capacity to influence others and the organisation towards helpful and positive outcomes during trying times.

Let's first look at what is happening at the brain level when adversity strikes. Difficulties or challenges that seem above our ability to resolve tend to trigger the 'stress response'. In other words, the brain automatically responds to stressful events by initiating physiological changes that ready our bodies for "fight" or "flight". This response is one of our most basic and primal mechanisms that has been hardwired through millions of years of evolution. The stress response operates automatically and very quickly to maximise our chances of survival when presented with potentially life-threatening situations. If you were to take a tour inside your brain during this time, you would see a deluge of hormones and chemicals that are preparing you to either run away and hide or stand your ground and fight! Of these brain chemicals (otherwise known as neurotransmitters), one in particular – cortisol – has made the scientific community particularly excited. Research has shown that cortisol influences

the stress response and consequently, resilience to challenging situations. Although cortisol is designed to prepare you for fight or flight, too much (due to constant and unmanaged stressors) can have a negative effect on physical and psychological health. This of course points to the necessity for leaders to develop effective coping skills, not only for personal health and wellbeing, but as a primary way to foster resilience.

This fight or flight response doesn't serve us so well in today's world. We know that literal or metaphorical (withdrawing, passive aggressive behaviour or shouting and arguing) fight or flight responses from leaders do not lead to positive outcomes in the short or long term. Therefore, we need to circumvent this primal response by adopting a more helpful modern day approach.

The good news is that our bodies have provided us with the resources (another bunch of counteracting chemicals and hormones) to protect us against the negative impact of our stress response.



Interestingly, initial research is pointing to the notion that these resources switch on more readily with people who tend to be more resilient than others. The even better news is that while some people may be innately more resilient than others at this physiological level, recent advances indicate that everyone can improve their level of resilience.

» Through applying seven core practices, leaders can increase their own and subsequently others' level of resilience and learn to thrive during challenging times. «

# 1

**Combine the brutal facts with a sureness of success.** The way you think about things is critical to responding effectively to adversity. Resilient leaders very quickly assess the reality of any situation and combine this with knowing they have the capability and resources to effectively respond. Through honest and direct communication, resilient leaders encourage others to confront their brutal facts and work collaboratively to generate proactive solutions.

# 2

**Foster an internal locus of control.** The degree to which leaders feel they have personal control over their thoughts, feelings and actions is directly related to their level of resilience. People who don't give up and thrive when "the chips are down" tend to invest their energy into what they can control (their own thoughts, feelings and behaviours) and influence (the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of their team). Additionally, people with an internal locus of control tend to assume greater personal responsibility for outcomes. Internally-locussed individuals typically view setbacks as temporary and changeable and use language that communicates this to others.

# 3

**Develop the habit of improvising.** Encountering adverse circumstances at work is usually unexpected. Resilient individuals have the ability to improvise a solution when one is not obvious and are innovative in putting familiar resources to unfamiliar uses or imagining possibilities and solutions where others become confounded or indecisive. Resilient leaders empower their team and the organisation they work for to do the same.

# 4

**Search for deeper meaning.** Instead of becoming bogged down in "why me?", "why us?", "oh, not now!", resilient leaders always seem to have the knack of quickly seeing how the challenge will create an improved future. They can find a meaningful "why" and communicate this with passion to others and not allow themselves or others to waste energy on what cannot be changed.

# 5

**Nurture strong positive relationships.** The resilience research tells us that individuals who are able to connect with others that they trust are more resilient than those who do not have this social resource. Being able to communicate openly and honestly and receive support from trusted colleagues is a critical factor for resilient leadership.

# 6

**Invest time in knowing your strengths.** Knowing your strengths and those of your team will provide you with a solid foundation when the need for resilience arises. Adversity can sometimes see you go down a path of catastrophic or unrealistic thinking. During times of adversity, it is helpful to reflect on your own, your team's and your organisation's strengths. Effectively employing these strengths will assist with successfully guiding you through the challenging time.

# 7

**Manage your stress.** Remember our friend cortisol, who helps us with fight or flight and whose extended presence is not helpful (just like a guest who overstays their welcome)? Effectively managing your stress before it becomes the cauldron that boils over is the key to a resilient response. Whether it is through mindfulness, breathing strategies, exercise, nutrition or more helpful thinking patterns, getting to calm is critical to resilient leadership.

Flourishing in the face of adversity is the true test of leadership. Whether it is a critical workplace event, dealing with the constant and rapid pace of change, or simply responding to the day-to-day challenging situations that leaders encounter, you can do what resilient leaders do. Cultivate your own and others' resilience and know that when the going gets tough, you can lead with true grit.

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With over 15 years' experience working with individuals and organisations, Kellie applies her extensive knowledge of applied neuroscience, psychology and business to helping clients achieve their individual and organisational change goals and high performance targets. In addition to her career as an elite sportswoman, her roles have included working as a manager with a national award winning NFP in the USA and working extensively with elite sports and businesses to drive high performance. This has encompassed running her own consultancy, working at the Australian Institute of Sport, and working as the high performance psychologist with the West Coast Eagles Football Club. Kellie is a member of the executive leadership team at Sentis and has been part of the team responsible for providing clients with results driven solutions in safety and organisational excellence and growing a highly successful and award winning global business. This has included being part of the team leading Sentis to being named one of Australia's best places to work for four consecutive years in a row (2010-2013), winning an Australian innovation award and multiple international innovation and service awards (2012).

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