

Resiliency is a trait all leaders share

The ability to respond effectively in times of upheaval requires honesty, courage.

By Dr. William Sparks

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While I was preparing my remarks for this year's Charlotte Business Woman of the Year Award honoring Cathy Bessant from Bank of America, she shared an insight that is profound: Leaders are not successful in spite of their setbacks; they are successful because of them. As I reflected on this perspective, I began to see its relevance for all of us. From demotions to divorces, overcoming obstacles and disappointments is one thing we all have in common.

Resiliency is a topic that is rapidly growing in popularity across a diverse spectrum of disciplines, including business, public policy, and performance psychology. From global events in today's headlines, including concerns over Greece's economy, earthquakes and climate change, to our own struggles here in the Queen City, resiliency is an important topic for all of us.

Simply defined, resiliency is the ability to respond effectively to disruptive events. The ability to respond - "responsibility" - allows us to transcend our more common reactive mode. When we react, chances are we overreact. Philosopher, psychoanalyst and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl said that choosing our response - our attitude - to any situation is the only true freedom we possess. Although we often give this freedom away when we react in anger or fear, it cannot be taken from us.

When it comes to leading with resilience, it's important to reacquaint ourselves with Abraham Maslow's concept of "self-actualization." Although Maslow found that individuals who are more self-actualized tend to be more creative, spontaneous and humorous, he found that above all else, they maintained an accurate perception of reality.

I have spent the past 15 years researching leadership, group culture and organizational performance, and have reached this conclusion: When it comes to leadership, there are three common fears that inhibit our ability to objectively and accurately perceive reality. I call these the "Three Shadows of Leadership."

The first shadow is the fear of failure. This type of leader is obsessed with winning, success and recognition. They tend to micromanage others and are often considered perfectionists. But as I often tell my students and clients, the curse of perfectionism is that you're unhappy when you should be happy; bitter when you should be thankful.

The second leadership shadow is the fear of rejection. This type of leader avoids conflict at all costs, preferring to maintain a norm of politeness as opposed to a norm of candor. They're more concerned about what others think of them than what they think of themselves. This mindset prompts me to remind them: We would worry much less about what others thought of us, if we realized how seldom they do.

The third shadow is the fear of betrayal. This type of leader is a classic control-freak and driven out of need of power. On the one hand, they are decisive and results-oriented. On the other, they are brash and overly confident, more concerned about being "right" than being effective, or even happy.

These three fears - shadows - lead to three distinct styles of leadership. In doing so, they inhibit an ability to accurately perceive reality, and as a result, diminish the ability to lead with resiliency.

So, what can we start doing differently to increase our capacity to lead with resilience? I believe there are three important factors for building our resilient muscles.

First, we have to show up. After a disruptive event occurs, we have to make the decision to be present. Cathy Bessant's insight into this resiliency factor is that oftentimes, showing up precedes our acceptance or understanding of the situation or the circumstances surrounding the disruptive event. Nevertheless, resilient leaders show up. And when the "event" is framed and managed with resiliency, it can be liberating by giving us the freedom to re-engage on our own terms.

Second, resilient leaders must confront the brutal facts. The ability to stare down reality while maintaining realistic optimism for the future is crucial. Although resilient leaders are optimistic, "hope" is not their default strategy.

Finally, resilient leaders possess a high degree of self-awareness. Not the kind of awareness that validates our perception of ourselves, but the kind that disturbs and disrupts. This kind of acute awareness allows us to know our shadow, and to manage our fear so it doesn't manage us.

I believe these three resiliency factors share a common theme: courage. The courage to show up when you may be hurt, disappointed or embarrassed; the courage to confront the brutal facts that may be difficult to accept or acknowledge; and the courage to develop the self-awareness necessary for leading effectively.

When we demonstrate the courage to show up, to confront brutal facts and to continuously learn, we, too, will be successful - not in spite of our setbacks, but because of them.

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