

PEAK PERFORMANCE FOR THE POLITICAL LEADER

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Leadership is a noun. Leading effectively is a modified verb, a proactive process. Effective leaders know how to engage themselves and others to identify and address the challenges at hand, to adopt new points of view regarding the problems, to generate confidence in the leader's agenda and strategies, and, then, to implement strategies and solutions that may not be aligned with what many believe is correct or best. In response to effective leaders, constituents commit to—rather than comply with—initiatives. Commitment creates long-term changes. Compliance creates resistance and situations in which any changes are short-lived at best.

The ability to get focused on priorities, to create confidence, and to generate the momentum to get people moving is what we call *engagement*—getting “in the zone”—that state that peak-performing athletes access to perform their best under pressure. In addition to engaging self and others, peak-performing leaders, in politics, sports, and every arena of life, know how to reengage when the going gets difficult.

Effective leaders in democratic systems also know how to reengage themselves and others when things do not go as planned, when extraordinary natural and manmade disasters present blindsiding obstacles. In such instances, effective leaders know how to bounce back, to reengage with the challenge at hand with focus, energy, momentum, and a common purpose. This ability to get one's self and others back into the fray—to recover from errors and correct misperceptions, both of which are difficult with even the best media gurus on your team—is what we call resilience (Brill, 2004).

Resilience is the ability to reengage ourselves and others when obstacles have diminished our commitment and drive. In a democracy, resilience enables political leaders to reengage others when challenges have diminished their commitment to working toward a common vision, toward taking the actions to turn goals into reality.

Surprisingly, leading by engendering commitment versus compliance is more challenging in a democratic governing structure where the sacred value of freedom enables individuals to hold many differing points of view regarding the critical issues and optimal solutions. That makes the challenge of leading more difficult than in nondemocratic systems where leaders can rule by compliance over commitment. Those who lead successfully within democratic systems must engender the commitment of constituents and other political leaders as well as media representatives to make the changes that will implement solutions and strategies supporting their leadership agenda. In the face of such pressure, it is difficult to perform at peak levels, to recover from errors, and to correct misperceptions. Learning how to engage self and others and to reengage with resilience are critical capabilities for leaders and their teams in democratic systems.

We have devoted our careers to studying these attributes, engagement and resilience, and to assisting leaders in developing them. Based on our decades reviewing research, conducting our own inquiry, publishing in journals and books, and consulting with individual and organizational clients within highly competitive industries including politics, sports, business,

law, and medicine, we have determined that the abilities to engage and to reengage self and others with resilience are critical to leading effectively in politics as well as other arenas. In addition, we can assert that the ability to engage with challenge and the ability to reengage resiliently—to bounce back from setbacks—can be learned. It takes a set of strategies that can be customized and fine-tuned through practice and, ideally, through working with a skilled coach, just as a peak-performing athlete in sports. As professional advisors with experience working with political leaders, we have a research-grounded, field-tested system that can enable political leaders to enhance their abilities to lead with engagement and resilience.

Coaching for resilience offers leaders in political arenas an opportunity to learn to function at peak levels under the scrutiny and pressure built into their profession and offers, too, the chance to recapture the purpose and passion that originally drew these leaders to this high-profile and high-pressure industry. This generates commitment and also provides elected leaders with a competitive advantage as they face elections to continue their leadership roles.

Engagement and Resilience: Learned or Innate

Based on our research on resilience, we have determined that there are specific factors that enable some leaders to be more resilient than others, and those factors enable them to lead in a way that brings out the “bounce-back” capacity in others. Being resilient is based on the ability to develop relationships in three critical arenas: relationship to self, relationship to others, and relationship to the environment. The three work in sync to determine our ability to engage and to reengage with resilience after being blindsided by natural and man-made, including media-generated, challenges we could not predict.

RELATIONSHIP TO SELF

How we envision ourselves, what attitudes we choose, and how we understand and manage our emotional responses are all components of our relationship to self. Specific attributes are confidence, optimism, positivity, self-awareness, and self-management.

Resilience Attributes	Descriptions
Confidence	When an individual is confident in his abilities to cope with his world, he/she is more open to new ideas and can come up with many alternatives to deal with a particular issue.
Optimism	The ability to look on the more favorable side of events or conditions and to expect the most favorable outcome.
Positivity	An individual who cultivates positive emotions finds the good in life and does not dwell on the negative. This increases energy for life.
Self-Awareness	Self-awareness provides us with the opportunity to look at our own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and adapt them to deal with current issues. When we are self-aware, we know how we feel, what we think, and how we are perceived by others.
Self-Management	Self-management of thoughts, feelings, and behavior is necessary in navigating our social world. If one acts without thinking, that individual runs a greater risk of getting into conflict with the external world.

Engagement and resilience start with keenly developed self-awareness—of one’s thoughts and feelings and the behaviors exhibited. Self-awareness is the cornerstone for leading effectively, for engaging self and others to address challenges, and for resilient recovery when things have not gone as planned. Our research demonstrates that self-awareness is the foundation to being conscious of one’s impact on others and on the greater environment. It is based on a solid connection to how one feels, including physical tensions and physiological signs including heart pace and breath, as well as internal beliefs, judgments, and dialogue. For those in the high-visibility roles of politics, self-awareness is all the more critical yet even more difficult to develop, with cameras flashing and microphones being waved.

With *self-awareness*, a leader can assess thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. With *self-awareness and self-management* of thoughts, feelings, and actions, leaders

can choose to align behaviors with stated intentions. We can make proactive decisions about what we want to do. We become *confident* that we can determine what actions and behaviors we want to proactively take—and those that we want to avoid—and we can assess the impact of doing so. Managing “self” enables us to be proactive, to play to win versus play-not-to-lose. In sports and in politics, in any arena, when we play to win we do our best—we might not win, but we will do our best. When we play-not-to-lose in a reactive versus proactive stance, we might win. But we will never do our best; we will never see what we really have to bring to the table. And when leaders are operating under the microscopic lens of those in politics, playing-not-to-lose runs the risk of engendering early and loud criticism from opponents, constituents, and media for flip-flopping and not placing a stake in the ground and standing by it.

Optimism and *positivity*, the other two aspects of relationship to self that build resilience, may seem an unlikely duo in politics, where daily scrutiny is built in. With self-awareness, clients face the “as is”—the real challenge. *Optimism* is the ability to see the half-full versus the half-empty. Attention in real life is always selective. We often assume that others select the same sliver of the broader reality on which we focus and then call reality. But that is not a valid assumption. Reality is based on selective perception and the personal beliefs, valences, and judgments that we layer on those selected slivers. Here is where a leader can choose to lay a half-empty lens on top of what is seen and heard or a half-full lens—that’s what we call *optimism*. Optimism is not blissful denial or rose-colored lenses; it’s a skill that anyone can cultivate. Coaching for optimism enables clients in the political arena to stand tall in the face of scrutiny and to maintain integrity in their decisions.

Positivity is the ability to cultivate positive emotions. It harkens back to William James, the trained physician who became a pioneer in the new science of psychology in the late 1800s and who, because he taught at Harvard, shocked fans and colleagues when he proposed a simple “as if” technique for changing one’s life: “If you want a quality, act as if you already had it.” With the advent of technology that enable us to peer into the workings of the brain and body, we now know that William James had it right; when we picture a feeling, when we act as if we feel an emotion, including confidence,

our natural chemicals churn to produce a state associated with that feeling. On a daily basis, leaders can choose to act “as if” they feel the emotions of positivity and confidence in self and others and as if they see the optimistic half-full. Or they can choose to act “as if” they feel the emotions of negativity and self-doubt and other-doubt. And leaders can choose, too, to see the pessimistic half-empty. In politics and in life, the latter choices will ruin long workdays, lead to negative evaluations and bad press, and, in the long run, have career-ending impacts and negative effects on health and longevity.

This relationship to self requires a sense of being present and authentic that is more difficult to develop and to sustain in the heat of competition and constant scrutiny. Coaching leaders in politics requires that the coaching professional teach the leader to develop and sustain these attributes on a daily basis and in the heat of pressure.

RELATIONSHIP TO OTHERS

Cultivating and maintaining our friendships, family, and collegial relationships makes a powerful difference in our personal resilience. The resilience attributes under relationship to others are appreciation, helping, accepting, collaboration, and empathy.

Resilience Attributes	Descriptions
Appreciation	An individual who feels appreciated by others and can acknowledge the same has the ability to see events from multiple perspectives, building flexibility and better coping strategies. Those who appreciate others establish positive interactions through that appreciation.
Helping	As humans are social animals, other people matter. As such, sharing a difficult time with another provides more support and connectedness while building confidence and problem solving skills. Helping creates community.
Accepting	Being able to ask for help means we are capable of understanding our own needs and of receiving what others have to give us.

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Collaboration	An individual who does not work well with others will not find those people available to him/her when he/she might need them.
Empathy	By being empathic, an individual can put him/herself "in another's shoes" and view the world as that person sees it. This strengthens relationships and builds support.

Political leaders must have a strong awareness of relationships to others, including the omnipresent media as well as constituents and colleagues with dramatically differing points of view. Without awareness of others, a leader in the political arena will quickly lose the support that enables achieving the desired impact and that determines the length of stay in office and the way in which one's leadership will be portrayed in history.

Many, if not most, political leaders are well aware of the need to *collaborate*, to engage others to drive agendas and to collaborate on supporting the agendas of others as well. For many political leaders, the desire to help was what spurred them to pursue careers in politics. Even so, our experience suggests that coaching leaders in political arenas can be more powerful when we assist them to remember that passion for helping others that drove them to this field and that can, over the years, be muted by the pressure to perform for media and conform to constituents' goals in order to secure popularity and votes.

For political leaders, *empathy* takes on a bigger meaning. Learning to experience empathy for those who have attacked their points of view, who have filtered sound bites to misrepresent them, who are on the lookout for any error that could end their political careers—that is the challenge required to engage and to be resilient. Coaching political leaders to extend empathy to those who do not always hold them in a favorable light—even to competitors—offers the opportunity for leaders in political spheres to withstand and bounce back from attacks and other setbacks. Without such empathy, leaders are prone to lash out in attacks that can lead to self-generated falls.

Political leaders know how to express *appreciation* for being elected. It is a deeper level of appreciation that

contributes to one's relationship to others. Our research suggests that the ability to both express appreciation and to feel authentically appreciated by others contributes to resilience. For politicians under the microscope where media and public outcries suggest that appreciation is lacking, it takes more concerted effort to summon a sense of appreciation. And yet, this very sense of appreciation is critical to being able to take the perspective of others in order to appreciate and empathize. It's a circular relationship; seeing and appreciating the perspective of the other (especially when it is dramatically different from your own) requires appreciating that person including his/her points of view. Acknowledging appreciation and respect for another individual or group opens others to appreciate a leader for that very trait of appreciation. Coaching political leaders to put aside the feelings of anger or hurt that they can develop when they feel misunderstood, misrepresented, and not appreciated for their hard work is the starting point to open them to appreciate others, including and especially those who are not automatically aligned with them.

Accepting support and help from others is especially delicate in politics where it is challenging to know who you can trust and whether an assist is really an assist or a trap. The interchange of assists in politics is often driven by agendas. Is it any wonder then that coaching political leaders to learn to ask for and accept help is extraordinarily sensitive?

To coach leaders in the political arena, a coach must understand the nuances and risks. This is where that core attribute of resilience—*self-awareness*—for the coach and client comes into play. Advisors can teach clients to monitor their guts, brains, and hearts to detect signs that alert them that an assist is authentic. Advisors can teach leaders to accept *help*, even when it is in trade, only when the trade and the assist are aligned with their goals, integrity, and intent. In coaching political leaders through this potentially landmine-filled terrain of accepting help, it is important that advisors use their own guts and skills to point out where an advisor might see danger or opportunities for authentic accepting and offering of help for clients to seize. To fine-tune this skill, advisors can assist clients to debrief the lessons learned: what they did well, including self-awareness as a tool to identify the real nature of the assist

and what they will do next time in the journey to include *accepting* as an underutilized resilience tool in the world of politics.

RELATIONSHIP TO ENVIRONMENT

When we are operating from a place of resilience, we are able to see our world as a place of learning, growth, and possibility. We get goals, orient ourselves toward things larger than ourselves, and go after what we want. Attributes within our relationship to environment are reframing, goal-oriented, future-mindedness, purposeful, and proactive.

Resilience Attributes	Description
Reframing	Reframing is the ability to shift one's perspective and frame reality in a new light. An individual who has confidence that events, no matter how challenging or difficult, are an opportunity for learning will not shy away from reasonable risk taking, fostering personal and/or professional growth.
Goal-Oriented	An individual who sets goals provides him/herself with a compass to guide him/herself through life's journey. By setting realistic goals, the individual has a better chance of reaching those goals, thus building confidence to set new goals.
Future-Mindedness	An individual who is future-minded can put what is occurring in the present into better perspective. He/She can envision new possibilities and strategize based on those possibilities.
Purposeful	An individual who lives a life of meaning and purpose does not have to expend extra energy to determine whether a particular choice has merit. The individual tests the decision to see if it is consistent with values and acts. They feel connected to something larger than themselves.
Proactive	By acting rather than reacting to events, an individual can move forward and take charge of his/her life, rather than experiencing life as a victim of circumstance.

For those leading in political arenas, relationship to environment takes on a new meaning: *Environment* is wider, more diverse, often more hostile and untrustworthy, more nuanced, and not always as it would appear on the surface. That being the *as is*, the ability to be resilient enables political leaders to leap out from under the covers each morning and to jump back into the fray—their environment.

Most leaders in politics understand that a *future-minded* orientation is what spawned a passion for politics and formed the platform that led to holding the leadership role. The *future-minded* and *goal-oriented* attributes of resilience are part of what contributed to a political leader's success and are often almost "natural" for those in the early phases of their political careers.

But the challenges of the daily operations of political leadership are unique. With the constant scrutiny that is built into political leadership and the high visibility roles of politics, the future that is envisioned and the goals that are crafted can often change, colored by public opinion, as well as attempts to align with what will ensure longevity in office and to avoid poorly timed negative media spin. Goals can also be misdirected based on advice from confidential advisors whose own agendas may be questionable. (This is another area for helping your political client to use self-awareness to assess when and where to accept help.)

Here we can apply the strength of *self-awareness*, to enable our clients to recall the *purpose* and meaning that motivated them to choose the field of politics and to assess whether this original sense of *purpose* is still meaningful. Then, we can assist them to review current *goals* and *future-mindedness* along with original dreams of future that brought them to this competitive field to determine if their current goals and future visions are aligned with who and how they want to be.

Reframing and operating from a *proactive* stance—the other two aspects of relationship to environment that build resilience—are essential to staying positive and energized as a leader in the world of politics where forces conspire daily to make it easy to frame things with a negative lens and to operate reactively from that playing-not-to-lose stance. With self-awareness, we taught to accept the *as is* and operate with the *as if*. Both of these enable political leaders to *reframe* and to

be *proactive*. With *reframing* political leaders can learn literally to re-view challenges and opportunities that others might see and frame as negative oppressions. With *reframing*, including learning to shift language from the *shoulds* and *have tos* to *want to* goals, leaders in political fields can begin to again take calculated risks that take them out of the *reactive* operational field of safety to a *proactive* stance and way of operating that makes them stand out in ways that constituents, and even the media, will respect. In doing so, they will reclaim that original purpose that brought them to their fields and they will experience an enhanced sense of pride in being aligned with the inner self that will sustain them in the face of scrutiny and attack that is built into their chosen field.

Leading on The Hill: A Coaching Case Study¹

“I’ve lost my mojo” is how a Capitol Hill leader described his leadership challenge when he got on the phone call that had been patched in by his chief of staff. I knew it had taken a huge amount of courage for this leader to make the call. I was impressed that, after multiple stints in his Capitol Hill seat, he still had enough self-awareness to know what had been lost—*my mojo*—and that he needed that mojo to continue to lead. The media had been relentless in criticizing his decisions and in publicizing the loss of support by colleagues as well as a portion of his previously loyal constituent base. It was no surprise that he had become less resilient in the face of such critiques.

After a brief call, we decided to meet in a private setting where I felt he could be more candid and where no one would learn that he was consulting with anyone on his leadership. Confidentiality in working with political leaders on every level is critical both to ensure that they will confide in the coach and also to eliminate any chance that the media could seize on this—the probability is high that consulting with a coach would be spun as a sign of weakness.

I will admit that I was initially intimidated—my resilience on the wane—to think of the wide-reaching effects of any counsel that I might offer to this leader. Add to that his towering height, and I was relieved when his wife greeted me warmly at the country setting

in which we had agreed to meet. This is where it is essential that we, as coaches, work on our own attributes of resilience including the core of self-awareness and self-management that enables us to listen with authenticity and to respond with confidence.

During our initial discussion, my client and I agreed that ongoing media attacks had diminished his ability to bounce back. He had lost his passion around engaging his staff in both offices, the Hill and in his State, and his resilience to get back in the fray and make values-based decisions that would not be popular with everyone, including some of his advisors. He had also lost his ability to face media misrepresentations. In the past, he had a jovial relationship with press professionals, even those who consistently put a negative spin on anything he did. Now he described a hangdog reactive stance filled with negativity and an inability to manage that when he even thought of approaching press conferences or when he was caught in the flash of camera lights and unsolicited questioning that put him on the spot. In this instance, I brought his wife into the discussions to get a reading of how this leader had looked and operated when he was at full force of resilience as he had been when he served in the armed services and when he first entered political life. The vibrant picture she painted of her husband—of how he related to self, others, and environment—was a stark contrast to his current state and that vibrance. Recapturing his *mojo* became our goal.

To get a picture of the current state of resilience, we agreed that it would be best for me to visit the in-state and Washington offices while he was in residence. To ensure confidentiality, we crafted a communication to all staff to introduce his goals to become a more effective leader, to build a team culture within both offices, and to develop—in himself and in team members—the resilience that would enable them to stand strong and support his decisions in the face of media and constituent critiques. He also included a brief introduction to my background. The need for keeping this confidential was made clear, and each team member was asked to sign an agreement of confidentiality regarding this process.

We agreed that I would interview all staff in small groups to get a 360-degree view of his resilience attributes. A team member was appointed as project manager

to ensure that documents were signed and to schedule small group meetings and my time at each site. The project was launched with speed as our initial meeting had made the client acutely aware of just how much of his previous spirit he had lost and of that impact on his success and passion for his work.

Interviews with staff in both offices provided a consistent picture that reflected the images painted by the leader's wife. Staff perceived that their leader had maintained his level of *relationship to self* in terms of *self-awareness* and *self-management* but that he had lost his ability to be *optimistic*, the skills to project *confidence* in his decisions and in self and in others, and his ability to choose *positive emotions*.

In terms of *relationship to others*, staff expressed a curious and consistent response. While their leader had maintained his abilities to *collaborate*, to express *empathy*, and to *offer help and appreciation* to others, he seemed to have lost ground when it came to *asking for and accepting help*. And while he was still able to express appreciation for others, he seemed discouraged and to feel *inadequately appreciated* himself for his efforts, intent, and achievements. *Relationship to environment* revealed another pattern of strengths maintained—*future-mindedness*, *goal-oriented*, and others lost—*purposeful, proactive, reframing*.

Shadowing this leader for a day in each office, including watching him head a Committee meeting with his peers and observing him interviewed at a press conference, enabled me to confirm that assessments were accurate and to provide real-time observations from which we could work. Focusing on each of the areas to improve, we developed alternate responses that he could use when he next faced a similar challenge.

At the core of our work was a discussion related to *relationship to environment*, beginning with a heartfelt revealing of the *purpose* that had drawn him to a career of service—first in the armed services and now in the political arena. Tapping back into that original purpose and translating it into today's challenges, he was able to *reframe* the negative comments from media and constituents and peers and to understand these in a new more positive context. In doing so, he naturally recaptured the *proactive* approach to his role as leader of staff and as a political leader. This reinforced his *future-mindedness* and, in fact, extended the vision that he

held of future as a leader in politics, leading him to revisit his *goals* for his team members and his *goals* for what he hoped to accomplish as a politician. Using the technique of relaxation and visualization that peak-performing athletes use, I had this leader visualize achieving the visions we had discussed. From that vision, we worked back and he set realistic yet high reach goals that inspired him to leap out of bed each day to tackle his day.

By addressing his relationship to environment and having him picture achieving heartfelt goals, this leader became stronger in relationship to self. His *self-confidence* soared as he felt purpose-driven and proactive and moved toward new goals. Still suspicious of others though, including his staff, we worked on focusing him on the half-full of *optimism*. Each time he found himself bemoaning the half-empty aspects of work completed, he automatically looked instead at the half-full aspects, including reports by the media—even when the only half-full was that he was important enough to be in the limelight. We worked, too, on *reframing*. When he heard himself use “have to” or “should”—either in the privacy of his self-talk or in dialogue with others—he learned to habitually turn the “have to” or “should” with “want to.” “If” was turned into “when” to reinforce achieving the art of the possible. And anything prefaced with the word “Don’t . . .” was turned into telling people what and how to “do . . .” since our brains picture only the words that follow the word *don’t*. These new habits fueled his lost sense of humor along with a capacity to choose and adopt other *positive emotions*. Soon, staff members were exuding that same *positivity*—it’s contagious—and happy to have the mojo back in their leader.

Building on the strengths developed, this leader simultaneously improved his *relationship to others*. Already capable in the attributes of *collaboration*, expression of *empathy*, and *offering help and appreciation* to others, we set goals—with well-calculated chances of success for *asking for and accepting help* from staff and colleagues and others, including his wife. When he saw people pull through for him—including fellow politicians—he developed more *confidence* in his ability to be real and to be vulnerable even in such a high profile role. In asking for an assist and having people deliver, he rediscovered that lost sense of being truly

appreciated, which led him to express gratitude and even more *appreciation for others*, fueling a circular systems relationship of appreciation given and received. His real test, though, was when he learned to thank reporters who consistently reported a negative spin on him when they asked him questions that could be perceived as traps and that he now *reframed* as opportunities to get his message out and to express *appreciation* to constituents and media for the job that they allowed him to do. With resilience, even formerly adverse situations can be approached as opportunities.

Conclusion

Coaching political leaders offers its own set of challenges to the resilience of the coach. In this article, we have offered a proven framework to assess and improve the core attributes of resilience—relationship to self, others, and environment—that can enable political leaders to withstand the daily pressures of leading in high-profile, high-pressure arenas. Developing your own

resilience, an ongoing journey, will enable you, as coach to political leaders, to stay the course.

NOTE

1. Case study by Pamela Brill.

Reference

Brill, P. (2004). *The winner's way: A proven method for achieving your personal best in any situation*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

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