

Assessing Resilience: The Resilience at Work Assessment (RAWA)

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Lisa is an executive in a staffing company and has had three direct managers in the span of eight months due to corporate restructuring. Each manager brought a different set of expectations for how Lisa needed to do her job. One manager was a “micro manager” who questions every move she made. The next manager was more “hands off,” leading Lisa to wonder if she was doing the job properly. Once she started to report to her third manager, her direct reports began to complain about Lisa and her inconsistency. They said she was alternately frantically criticizing them and then would leave them alone for weeks at a time. They didn’t know where they stood. Lisa took this feedback very hard. She has a strong need to do the best she can for her organization and gets down on herself when she is not “the best.” She began to tell herself a story that she may not be right for this job. She began to tell herself that maybe she shouldn’t be a leader. If someone needed to tap into her resilience, it was Lisa.

The Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate® Dictionary, Eleventh Edition defines resilience as, “an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.” Reivich and Shatte identify four uses for resilience. Many individuals must call on their reserves of resilience to overcome the negative experiences of their childhood. Abuse, divorce, poverty, and neglect can weigh heavy on those who have experienced any of them during childhood. Resilience helps to contain the damage of these experiences and help the individual live the life they want. Resilience also helps us steer through the everyday stresses and hassles that fill modern life. A third use of resilience is to help us bounce back from adverse events such as job loss, divorce, a death in the family. We can become either helpless or resigned to our fate or can use our internal resources to bounce back. Finally, resilience helps us reach out into the world and find renewed purpose and meaning in life. This allows us to achieve what we are capable of.

Martin Seligman, in Learned Optimism (1990) determined that resilience skills can be learned. While we cannot change the events of our past or the world around us, we can change the way we think about those events. One of the ways we can start changing our resilience mindset is to be more realistic in our thinking. By accurately assessing one’s own strengths, identifying the true causes of problems and evaluating oneself and others, we get a truer picture of the events unfolding around us and our level of control over those events.

We all need resilience, but leaders in particular need to understand how resilience – or change-readiness – can make them and their organizations successful over time. Leaders need to understand how to develop resilience in their teams and in their organizations as well as cultivating their own ability to bounce back from change and challenge.

Given my work with executives and the challenges they face, I, along with Karlin Sloan, wondered how we can help leaders develop resilience. The first step was to create an assessment that could assess an individual's level of resilience and identify what attributes of resilience were strengths and what attributes could be strengthened.

Based on the existing research and our coaching experience, we created a resilience model. It is based on the biopsychosocial model described by psychiatrist George Engel (1977). He suggested that to understand medical issues, one needs to consider the physical, psychological and sociological factors that contribute to the illness. Our research has suggested that we can think about resilience in the same way. How we care for our bodies, think about ourselves and those around us all contribute to our ability to be resilient.

We created a list of attributes that resilient people display. We divided these attributes into three categories: attributes associated with how we relate to ourselves (the psychological self); how we relate to others (the social self) and how we relate to events in the environment (the context).

Below is a list of the 15 attributes we identified and how we distributed them among the three domains.

Relationship to Self (Psychological Self)	
Confidence	Being confident in our ability to cope with the world. Believing in our abilities, skills, or attributes and our capacity to succeed in what we set out to do.
Optimism	The ability to look on the more favorable side of events or conditions and to expect more favorable outcomes.
Positivity	Cultivating positive emotions to find the good in life and not dwell on the negative. The ability to hold onto positive emotions despite challenges.
Self-awareness	Having the ability to reflect on what we think and how we feel. This includes having an understanding of how we are perceived by others.
Self-management	Exhibiting self-care and managing our own energy and emotions. This includes adapting our behaviors to socially appropriate norms. and exhibiting self control.

Relationship to Others (Social Self)	
Appreciation	The ability to express gratitude and say thanks to others. The ability to receive thanks and appreciations from others.
Helping	Providing support to those who need it. Caring for or assisting a friend or colleague builds confidence, community and trust.
Accepting	The ability to ask for and receive help from others.
Collaboration	Being a team player means sharing information and resources to achieve better results and make collaborators more engaged.
Empathy	The ability to put ourselves “in another’s shoes” and view the world as they see it.
Relationship to the Environment (Context)	
Reframing	The ability to shift our perspective, and see “reality” in a new light. Seeing challenges as learning opportunities encourages reasonable risk-taking, and fostering personal and professional growth.
Goal-Oriented	Setting goals that gives us a compass to guide ourselves through life’s journey. By setting realistic goals, we have a better chance of reaching those goals.
Future-mindedness	The ability to envision new possibilities that get ourselves beyond the “here and now” and better able to put what is occurring in the present into better perspective.
Purposeful	The ability to test decisions to see if they are consistent with one’s values and beliefs.
Proactive	Being able to think ahead to prevent possible problems and take advantage of opportunities. Taking charge of events rather than experiencing life as a victim of circumstance.

To date, more than 2000 leaders have taken the Resilience at Work Assessment. The most important findings that we have gathered from our work thus far have been the resilience attributes that contribute most to a leader’s resilience. Those three attributes are: Future-Minded, Purposeful and Collaborative. It reinforces for us that the most resilient leaders are those who

look to the future, see their work as part of a bigger endeavor and are comfortable collaborating with others to move into the future. We have also found that the older and more educated the leader is, the more likely they will deal with setbacks with a positive mindset and ultimately, be more resilient.

Lisa had taken the Resilience at Work Assessment earlier and was working with a coach. After she received the feedback about her behavior with her team, she and her coach took out the RAWA and re-identified her resilience attributes. She is naturally optimistic, purposeful and able to reframe situations. Being collaborative, while not a weakness, was not as well developed as her primary strengths. She developed a plan with her coach to meet this challenge head on by meeting with her direct reports and ask them for feedback on how she was doing in being responsive to them. She shared her purpose to help the organization be successful and her optimism that if they all worked together, they would do well. She told her new manager that she was going to dedicate herself to building a more cohesive team by regularly asking for feedback.

After a couple of months, one of Lisa's direct reports left the company. In her exit interview, the direct report stated that she loved working for Lisa the past few months but other circumstances required her to leave the company. While Lisa feels she is still a work in progress, she is more confident that she is on the right path. She found the feedback she received from the RAWA and her coach contributed greatly to her new found success.

More information about the Resilience at Work Assessment can be found at
www.theresilienceproject.net.