

Resilience and Human Nature

by Beth Masterman and Fernando Morais



What if you knew you would emerge from a difficult challenge stronger, wiser, and even more resilient than before? How would you feel knowing the instant you become aware of possible disaster that the decisions you make will be the right ones?

If you are a leader who enjoys what you do and who wants to be resilient, then read on. This article is for dedicated and purposeful leaders who want to face adversity with realistic optimism, agility, and resilience for themselves and for those who depend upon them in uncertain times. When danger looms, a leader's role and responsibility is to grasp the situation and then provide credible, current, factual information. Also, people will turn to their leaders for compassion and a way forward. This article offers five pathways for finding and filling your reservoir of resilience when you need it most. The technique is based upon a metaphor to remind us that we are part of the natural world and deeply in sync with its five elements: Earth, Water, Air, Fire, and Ether. These elements were once thought to make up everything. To be sure, our understanding of the universe has become more nuanced and

sophisticated, but these elements remain unchanged, are part of who we are, and hold a message for us about human resilience.

The American Psychological Association (“APA”) defines resilience as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress; it involves “bouncing back” and personal growth from these experiences (APA, Feb. 20, 2020).” Resilience can be developed and lead to a better quality of life, stronger focus, composure under stress, better memory, and more impactful leadership.^[1] The choice is yours. With practice, you can develop deeper resilience and show up as the morale-boosting, skillful leader you want and need to be, or instead, you can bow to the hardship, to your fear of making mistakes, and hold on tightly to hope that the problems will all just go away.

There will be Pain

If you are alive, there will be pain and suffering. Resilience will not shield you from pain but will reduce the depth and duration of the suffering. In fact, it is impossible to truly know how resilient you are unless circumstances provide you the “opportunity” to struggle and suffer for your values, or for your own (or the organization’s) survival. Peril is everywhere; are you ready? Consider the following five mindsets to help you navigate disruption and build resilience.

Earth: Get Grounded

You have to be grounded to bend with or remain resolute in the presence of risk and ambiguity. “Every frightening event, no matter how negative it might seem from the sidelines, has the potential to be traumatic or not to the person experiencing it. The experience isn’t inherent in the event.”^[2] It resides in how each person perceives and construes its impact. Imagine a German Shepherd barking and running directly toward two people, one is a dog lover and the other is not an ‘animal person.’ Given that not every person (leader or team) will perceive a threat from an identical challenge, it follows that there must be an opportunity for choice after the stimulus and before the response. The moment may be fleeting, but in that microsecond, there is freedom to choose how to respond. You may not be able to choose

your first reaction, but it is possible to develop the ability to deescalate, to become aware of available options, and to make an intentional choice about what to do next. The resilient person will choose their role to play and the attitude with which to approach what is happening.[3] When self-awareness and situational awareness[4] replace impulsivity or habit, better decisions are made. When you are grounded in your values and strengths, you can confidently open your mind to assess options, opportunities, and include others' opinions. Notice your discomfort then pause; label the feelings if you can. What are you focusing on? What do you believe about the challenge? What if your assumptions are wrong? Your thoughts and conclusions made in the heat of the moment are not necessarily your best, so the sooner you notice your first instinct and regroup, the sooner you can return your focus to the present, and then decide what you can control, what to do next, and which aspects of the situation will require more time or information before acting.[5]

As the force of gravity reliably holds us fast to Earth, so will the force of our experiences and quieted intuition guide us in our assessments of what is happening now, and how it affects us, our teams, our organizations, the stakeholders, and the vision set to be our guide.

Air: Breathe to Reclaim Your Brain

When a challenge feels like a threat, the triggered brain jumps to the rescue with the fight, flight, or freeze response. In that state there is no time to think, breathing becomes shallow, the heart rate accelerates, and the sole focus is on survival. In most cases our lives are not at stake and it would be more helpful to all concerned if we were able to reclaim our brain and heart to face the threat energized and with calm, clear, strategic thinking.

Decades of research confirm that mindfulness improves performance, heightens memory and focus, fosters innovation, and enhances likability.[6] At any time, by turning your attention to your breath, slowing it down, and inhaling and exhaling more deeply, you will slow your heart rate and ignite your ability to reason, notice, and respond intentionally to what is both new and present. There is a reason why airlines instruct caregivers to first put on their own oxygen

masks before helping others. It's all about intentional focus on breathing fresh air in and out before acting. If you are already breathing, you are halfway there:

“Bring your full attention to your breath. Don’t try to control it — just sense the full breath in and the full breath out. If you notice that your mind has wandered, simply bring it back to your breathing and start over with the next breath. Don’t judge yourself for your runaway thoughts – we all have them...it’s the act of bringing the focus back to the breath that seems to strengthen the brain’s circuitry for concentration.”[7]

When we are calm in the face of challenge, our breathing is steady, centering, and restorative. There is plenty of air for us to share, so take as many centering breaths as you need until you gain perspective on whether your life is in peril or whether there is a call for your leadership. If your life is in peril, then run! If there is a call for your leadership, then take a breath, get grounded, and decide what to do next.

Water: Ride the Wave to Shore

Feeling overwhelmed and as though you are drowning in everybody’s worries and needs? Your life jacket is the certainty that there will be a way through, under, over, or around the disturbance. Your resilience will provide the buoyancy you need to persist during turbulent times. Resilient leaders use their reasoning mind and their intuitive heart to navigate, innovate, and discover what could be helpful along the way. The earth is 71% water and the brain and heart together are composed of 73% water. The human body is built to ride and survive waves of disruption.

I struck it but it did not suffer hurt. Again, I struck it with all of my might — yet it was not wounded! I then tried to grasp a handful of it but this proved impossible. This water, the softest substance in the world, which could be contained in the smallest jar, only seemed weak. In reality, it could penetrate the hardest substance in the world. That was it! I wanted to be like the nature of water.[8]

As water always finds a way, so will leaders who get grounded, breathe, and then face challenges with a calm, clear, curious and compassionate head and heart[9]. Those who depend upon you during difficult times tend to defer and trust that their leader will honor the common mission and secure the survival of as many as possible. Put your oxygen mask on first, then ride the rough waters to shore.

Fire: Capture and Use the Heat of the Moment

John O'Leary, author of [On Fire](#),^[10] tells his story about being burned on 100 percent of his body as a nine year-old child. He nearly died, spent 13 months in recovery, lost fingers, and lives with the scars. He was asked, if he had the choice would he do it again? He answered "yes." He found his purpose by struggling, bouncing back, growing, and emerging stronger. He became a hospital chaplain, an author, and motivational speaker.

A resilient leader develops the ability to take advantage of the heat of the moment, the emotional power underlying our drive to survive and thrive. John O'Leary explains that the difference between being the *victim* and being the *victor* rests on one question: "Why me?" The victim of hardship feels beaten down by adversity, burdened by misfortune and despair: *Why me? Why do I have to struggle? What did I do to deserve this? I can't do this.* In contrast, the victor transforms challenge into opportunity and asks, "Why me?" *What lessons does this situation hold? How can I turn this experience into a benefit for me and my team? There is a reason why this is happening to me; what am I being called to do?* Leaders who develop the ability in the face of a high-stakes challenge to notice, pause, get grounded, breathe and regulate their emotions can tap into that drive to survive, and flow strategically through the difficulty, while empowering others to join in. Resilient leaders face adversity as a call to action to give what only they can give in that moment of their life.

Ether: What Is Really Going on Here?

What if you knew why something difficult was happening, what to do, how it all fits together, and how it would all turn out? Ether is the element that fills the space in between. When we listen deeply, the "primary focus is to listen below the surface of the conversation. Listen for

the undercurrents and be curious about what's happening underneath at the emotional and (team) dynamic level'[11]

How does it all fit together? Ether is the element calling us to integrate our rational mind and intuition. That integration enables resilient leaders to see the big picture in order to strategize, communicate, act decisively, and empower others. Resilient leaders trust that they are where they are supposed to be and have what it takes to face the challenge and make it through. Resilient leaders' educated 'gut' informs them about what is happening, what is likely to emerge next, and how to show up. They put their egos on hold to see the bigger picture and the part they are being called to play.

Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky[12] referred to this perspective as putting oneself “on the balcony” to avoid being so swept up in the action that you can only react. Dan Goleman refers to “the ability to maintain perspective in the midst of action” so that it is possible to ask and assess ‘what is really going on here?’ There is a triad of awareness – focusing on yourself, focusing on others, and focusing on the wider world.

Every leader needs to cultivate this triad of awareness in abundance and in the proper balance because a failure to focus inward leaves you rudderless, a failure to focus on others renders you clueless and a failure to focus outward may leave you blindsided.[13]

There is no way of knowing who will be resilient or what the future holds, but humans can tap into their inner five elements – Earth, Air, Water, Fire, and Ether – because they are part of our human nature. Practicing the five perspectives during difficulties will increase the odds that leaders and their teams will emerge stronger, wiser, and better prepared for the next, inevitable challenge.

Beth Masterman, PCC, JD, MA, is a certified executive coach and President of [Masterman Executive Coaching](#). She is a Fellow of the [Institute of Coaching](#), McLean, Affiliate of Harvard Medical School, and President-Elect of the [International Coach Federation of New England](#).

With a background in leadership, law, and psychology, Beth works with senior leaders and their teams to increase their self-awareness, impact, value, and enjoyment at work.

Fernando Morais has a background in Systems Engineering and over 40 years of experience as an executive and consultant. Fernando has worked in large multinational and national companies, corporate governance, transformation management, operations, and mergers and acquisitions. His successful management of the challenges forms the basis of Fernando's coaching with CEOs, senior executives, entrepreneurs, and boards. Fernando is a Fellow of the [Institute of Coaching](#), McLean, Affiliate of Harvard Medical School.

End Notes

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[4] Situational awareness is the ability to identify and process environmental cues to accurately predict the actions of others; it involves equal measures of comprehension, planning, and intuition to elicit a high-level understanding of critical elements of a complex environment. Quesenberry, Gary, *Spotting Danger Before It Spots You (Head's Up)* (p. 39). YMAA Publication Center, Kindle Edition; Faaiza Rashid, Amy C. Edmondson, Herman B. Leonard *Leadership Lessons from the Chilean Mine Rescue*, HBR, From the July–August 2013 Issue, retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2013/07/leadership-lessons-from-the-chilean-mine-rescue>

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