

## *Review*

# **Understanding resilience through its associated concepts**

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**Resilience is understood as being a person's ability to stand up and positively adapt to stress and adversity, so many researchers have been studying it as a process, a continuum, a phase and a personality trait. Until now there is no clear image of what is resilience, how can it be seen and studied. The aim of the present article is to review the scientific literature in order to offer a better understanding of the psychological resilience process through the concepts used to describe the phenomenon. In a first phase, the article presents a series of definitions of the resilience concept from a historical perspective and in a second phase it presents resilience's associated concepts of resilience used to describe the resilience phenomenon. The article presents also the resilience process across different phases in an individual's life and in an organizational context so that this article has important implications for human resources employees when they want to increase employees' resilience through efficient training programs.**

**Key words:** Psychological resilience, historical perspective, optimism, self-trust, workplace resilience.

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Resilience's definition**

From a wider perspective, resilience is understood as being a person's ability to stand up and positively adapt to stress and adversity. Moreover, resilience is defined as being a person's ability to face adversity without losing the big picture and without losing the elasticity of emotional, cognitive and behavioural abilities (Dryden, Johnson, Howard and McGuire, 1998).

Resilience represents an individual's ability to step back in moments of crisis in order to bounce back later with new forces to fight against adversity. At a cognitive level, resilience represents a person's ability to appeal to cognitive and behavioural therapies in order to change perceptions of threatening situations (Hunter, 2001). At this level it is about a person's ability to offer a positive light to stressful events. It is about the person's ability to see the opportunity behind the difficult situation.

At the level of cognitive and physical costs, resilience represents an individual's ability to quickly learn from

step-back moments without experiencing high mental, emotional and physical costs.

Personal resilience is applied to build personal strength using strategies such as building positive and fruitful relationships, maintaining optimism, developing emotional introspection, maintaining a balance in life and developing reflective abilities (Hunter, 2001).

Over time resilience has been seen as a trajectory, a continuum, a personal development, a system, a trait, a process, a qualitative category and a life circle.

Defining resilience, from the point of view of a continuum process, supposes to imagine resilience as a continuum between vulnerability and high personal resilience (Glantz and Johnson, 1999).

Resilience defined as a personal development is viewed as a process with different stages (Glantz and Johnson, 1999). These developmental stages have at each stage steps of integration and reintegration in the crisis moments (that is, those negative events from each person's life).

Resilience as a personal development means to understand the negative event that appeared in a person's life and to integrate it in his own personal framework of experiences (Glantz and Johnson, 1999). From this point of view, resilience is viewed as a personal achievement at three levels such as emotional, cognitive and behavioural levels after the negative event has passed and has been understood and integrated in the individual's cognitive system.

Resilience has been defined also as a personality trait referring to a person's psychological and physical characteristics. Resilience, from the point of view of being a personality trait, defines the personality and corporal factors that make a person as being a resilient one.

In organisational contexts, psychological resilience has been defined as being the employee's ability to bounce back in a work context in difficult moments without losing his efficiency (Luthans and Youssef, 2004). Warner and April (2012) defined resilience as being the employee's ability to daily face stressful situations in his work contexts. Moreover, the authors define resilience through a person's ability to remain focussed and efficient in solving daily work tasks, to remain connected to the organisation's mission even in tough moments. This fact supposes that the employee has a personal resource to which he can make appeal every time it is needed. The authors state that the presence of this type of personal resource allows employees to efficiently face unexpected organisational changes, to redefine their own professional priorities and to adapt to the new implemented organisational strategies, to the new leadership styles and to unexpected changes in professional status (that is, either as a consequence of promotion or as a consequence of losing a professional position).

Warner (2007) stated that in organisational contexts, it is about two types of resilience: a personal one and an organisational one. Personal resilience refers to employees' inner resources which allow them to efficiently adapt to crises and organisational resilience refers to an institution's ability to adapt to changes without experiencing high financial costs and without losing organisational performance.

## RESILIENCE AND ITS ASSOCIATED CONCEPTS

### Cooper's four component model as presented by Wagnild (2011)

Robertson Cooper presents four components of resilience: self-trust, social support, adaptability and having a clear goal in life. According to this model, self-trust refers to an individual's feelings of competence and efficiency in facing stressful situations, and refers also to higher levels of self-esteem and to a higher frequency of experiencing positive emotions. Moreover, social support is an instrument through which resilient people can build

and maintain positive relationships and have the ability to search for social support in their difficult moments.

The third component of resilience, adaptability, defines a person as being resilient if she proves flexibility and adaptability to changes in environment and she recovers quickly from negative experiences. The fourth component of resilience is the individual's ability to have and maintain a clear goal in life. The author states that resilient people have a clear goal in life, have a defined set of personal values, have a clear path in life and spend their own energy in attaining their goal in an efficient manner.

Applying Robertson Cooper's four component model to organisational contexts, it means that the employee has the ability to appeal to his own resources in order to face organisational changes and organisational crises without losing his own productivity. Furthermore, applying this model to organisational contexts refers to an institution's ability to maintain its financial balance without losing its own mission and without decreasing employees' performances.

### Personal resilience and self-knowledge

In general, resilient persons have a tendency to develop a high reflective ability which represents a good instrument to achieving self-knowledge.

In its turn, self-knowledge means to be emotionally self-aware and to have a clear goal in life. The fact of being emotionally self-aware means to have a clear vision for your own life, to be determined, to always be in interaction with other people, to maintain and to build new relationships, to have the ability to solve your problems quickly, to be organised, to be optimistic and to have higher levels of self-trust. Some authors have linked optimism to concepts such as perseverance, success, popularity and positive affectivity.

Having a goal in life can be achieved when the person builds a social network from which she can benefit from efficient social support, when the person perseveres in her daily activities even though she is in a difficult moment, when the person proves having empathy and adaptability to the changes appearing in the environment, when the person is looking for a constant balance in her own life and when she is always eager to change herself and to adapt her own values to the new changes appearing in her life.

In workplace contexts, the employee proves resilience if he has and maintains a clear goal in life and has a good level of self-knowledge which can permit him to maintain cognitive and emotional elasticity in order to integrate the new information in his own pre-existent cognitive system.

### Resilience and having a clear scope in life

Each person has a more or less defined goal in life. The

fact of having a clear goal in life represents the essence of living, the main characteristic of life, and during the life span a person can lose and find her goal in life.

Psychological theories state that the goal in life is always in us; it is the thing that motivates us to overcome difficult moments encountered in our personal and professional lives. Freud's theory demonstrates the presence of a goal behind our conscious life which gives us power to keep on going through difficult moments and to redefine our goal in life. In the moments of crisis, individuals can rediscover their own personal goals in life by asking themselves questions such as: *What do I do so that others appreciate me? In what way can I be daily useful? What aspects of my life are the most meaningful for me?*

These types of questions can be found in Covey's (2011) book in which he talks about the seven abilities of an efficient person: proactivity, starting with the end of your life, the ability make a hierarchy of important things in your own life, to have the ability to think in a win-win manner, to have the ability to understand first and then to demand understanding, the ability to act in synergy and the ability to recover yourself in a balanced manner.

### Personal resilience and perseverance

Perseverance is the determination with which a person continues to fight with life's obstacles and disappointments in order to fulfill her own goal in life (Wagnild, 2011).

From the point of view of persistence, personal resilience can be seen as the person's capacity to resist repetitive failure and to demonstrate post-traumatic growth as a consequence of experiencing repetitive negative life events. Furthermore, resilience is defined as being the individual's ability to quickly recover after a negative life event and that is because the person has the courage to experience positive emotions. She is able to establish new realistic aims in life and to follow these aims daily (Werner and Smith, 1992). In the case of workplace adversity, the employee can address to himself a series of questions in order to test his own level of perseverance in the face of professional obstacles. In general, persons who prove perseverance despite the obstacles are trusty persons and when they say they will do something they will actually do it. Questions such as *Do I usually finish what I have started? How many times do I give up before I try a new thing? Do others talk about me as a person who quickly gives up when things go wrong? Am I capable of maintaining focus even though there are many factors which distract my attention?* are questions that may help a person discover her level of perseverance.

### Personal resilience and personal balance

In general, resilient persons do not offer extreme

responses, do not promise a lot of things just to obtain what they want and do not make extreme affirmations when life seems to be against them. Even though they are experiencing difficult periods, resilient people tend to be more balanced in their own opinions and will always say that even though life's tough it will not be tough all the time (Wagnild, 2011). Balanced people always learn from their own mistakes and can laugh at their own person.

Resilient people maintain their own personal balance through strategies such as optimism in cases when success opportunities are small and always are looking for new opportunities even in the smallest things in life. Questions such as *Do I see the full half of the glass or the empty half? Do I look at my own life with regrets which I can overpass? Do persons from my life consider me a pessimistic or an optimistic person?* are meant to test a person's levels of resilience in tough moments of her life.

Personal balance can be a useful internal resource to which the employee can appeal during experiencing adversity in his own workplace and can turn his attention to the good aspects of his life in order to maintain his strength.

### Personal resilience and self-trust

Self-trust is based on a very clear image of our own tough points and weak points of our personality. Personal trust forms through experience and through practice and can develop without experiencing difficult moments in life (Wagnild, 2011).

Persons with high levels of self-trust quickly learn from their mistakes, develop new abilities of solving their problems, frequently use these new strategies and constantly adapt them, strengthen them in order to face life and use them in order to increase their own personal trust.

Answers to questions such as *Am I aware of the things I am doing right? Do others who know me describe me as a capable person? When I have a problem am I capable to think clearly and to find a good solution? Can I do all that is necessary to maintain my integrity of thoughts and to face all the difficult situations?* (Wagnild, 2009) can reveal a person's level of self-trust.

During a crisis period at the workplace, the employee can apply the technique of tough and weak points of his own personality in order to increase his knowledge about his own person and about his own professional competencies. Through this technique the employee can evaluate his own level of self-trust and apply it in order to overcome his difficult period.

### Personal resilience and existential independence

Resilient people are accepting of their own person, they

are their own best friends, are facing alone life's situations, they have high self-awareness, they are accepting of themselves with their good points and weak ones and they are aware about their own personal value (Wagnild, 2011).

Persons who are used to living alone are asking themselves questions such as *Do I have the courage to assume a behaviour even though I know this one will differentiate me from others? When I look at my own life, do I know what makes me different? Am I comfortable with what I am?*

Assuming your own life means to have a good acceptance of the changes appearing not only in your personal life but also in your professional one and can contribute to increasing your personal subjective well-being and the quality of your personal life.

### Personal resilience and personal recovery

Personal resilience is different from personal recovery in that personal recovery implies a period in which the person doesn't normally function anymore.

Resilient persons are those who, despite the fact that they are in a difficult period in their life, they are continuing to live their daily life without any disturbances (Wagnild, 2009).

### Personal resilience and personal resistance

Personal resilience has been defined also through the resistance concept in face of life's adversity but these two concepts are different in that resistance implies only resisting in the face of adversity while resilience implies a developing and personal development process at the end of which the persons experience post-traumatic growth (Carle and Chassin, 2004).

If, in the resistance period of a person, the individual maintains only his normal rhythm of life when he faces adversity, a resilient person is in a continuum developing process in which he becomes stronger, wiser and more socially skilled. The resilience period allows the individual to transform himself and to adapt her own ego in order to overpass the negative event. Resilience is different from resistance in that it implies the person's ability to reinvent herself and become a new person after the adversity has passed (Wagnild, 2011).

### CONCLUSIONS

No matter what the theoretical perspective, all the definitions offered to the resilience phenomenon reveal a series of similarities: the existence of past experiences which are the building blocks of personal resilience, personal characteristics of each person which give a

person a type of personality and uniqueness, a person's ability to be an independent, reflective and free thinker, a person's ability to manifest an influence over the environment, a person's ability to be flexible to changes in the environment, a person's ability to recognise her own level of self-knowledge and her own tough and weak points and a person's ability to take care of herself no matter how bad is the situation in which she may find herself at one point in her life.

Bonano (2004) states that a person becomes resilient when she remains engaged with finding a goal in her life, when she believes she can influence the environment and when she can influence the results of a post-traumatic event. Another specific characteristic of resilience is that the person always has the ability to constantly learn and constantly develop as a consequence of experiencing not only negative events, but also positive events during his life span.

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