Why Resilience is Key to Workplace Competency

by Claire R. Baldwin

“Resilience is not a commodity you are born with, waiting silently on tap. It is self-manufactured painstakingly over time by working through your problems and never giving up, even in the face of difficulty or failure.”

(Lori Myers, No Excuses, The Fit Mind-Fit Body Strategy Book)

This quote no doubt echoes all too well with the leaders and employees of the New York utilities having faced a wide variety of crises over the last decade and painstakingly worked through the problems toward a brighter future. From climate change, to employee turnover and new regulations, the importance of having an adaptive, creative and ready staff is increasingly a metric that organizations must meet in order to be able to handle all these external changes, often in tandem to each other!

As an industry, our conversations have altered over the years, from dialogues centering on environmental stewardship in the 1970s, to sustainability since the 1990s, to resilience within our systems today. Thinking about utilities’ need to create or, in some cases, rebuild resilient infrastructure (after such natural disasters as Superstorm Sandy) has evolved so as to reflect and adapt to the pace of change in the world; yet, seldom do we think about the needs of our most important assets – the employees who are the caretakers of this infrastructure, and their need also to be resilient and adaptive to rapidly changing conditions.

Consider this scenario:

As Julie walked back to the office from the construction trailer, she felt exhausted and crestfallen from the meeting with the construction team. The general contractor had clearly missed key items in the master schedule which would no doubt lead to delays and the subcontractors had unwittingly followed suit, thus multiplying the effect to the schedule. Even her resident inspector had missed this mistake in his initial review of the program, and this was only the second week of Julie’s tenure as the construction manager on the job.

Slumping at her desk, she rested her head in her hands and wondered, not for the first time, if she was in over her head on this one. What was she thinking – the burn rate on this project was roughly half a million a week for the next two years. She privately wondered – did she really have what it takes?

Sighing, she decided to take a walk back to the site to try one more time to see if there was somehow a creative work-around that might magically emerge. As she walked the half mile to the site, she started to think about her recent success in Oneida County where the pace of construction was much more rapid and through the use of formal partnering the team had beaten the deadlines. Her steps picked up as she dialed up her deputy CM to start brainstorming about the applicability of those tools to this project which, perhaps when combined with contractor incentives, might be able to provide the push for creativity that was needed here. As she reached the site and hung up her cell, her mood had visibly shifted and ideas for change began again to flow. Yes, she was the right woman for this job and had the right team to make this vision a reality!

As highlighted by Julie in this situation, personal resilience reflects an individual’s or team’s tendency to cope with stress and often unexpected adversity. Yet it goes beyond the ability to “bounce back,” as current research is showing. It is believed that the process of facing adversity can actually have positive growth effects that allow employees to learn from, and better cope with, future challenges based on past experiences (Masten, 2006), much in the manner that a vaccine gives you future protection from a yet uncaught illness. Thus, it is important to be aware that this ability is at its core a process and not a personal trait as once thought, leading to the exciting possibility that personal resilience can be improved and enhanced!

History of Resilience

Resilience is not a new term in the workforce. In fact, historically resilient people have been said to be hardy, resourceful or even mentally tough – yet we have more often than not attributed those qualities to their personal characteristics rather than the processes that enabled them to demonstrate these strategies on a routine basis. In the workplace, change and daily stressors can have the cumulative effect of draining employees’ motivation, resourcefulness and even their job enjoyment. By enhancing the processes that build employee resilience, a leader can enrich employee work experiences while simultaneously gaining bottom-line benefits of better, more creative outcomes.

Optimism and hope are said to be key to resilience in nature (Riolli, Savicki and Cepani, 2002), but they must be bounded by reality in order to be effective (Coutu, 2003).

For those interested in developing or enhancing this key workplace competency, the art of navigation might make a good example. Building resilience is a process learned over time and to improve skills in ship navigation one must also spend time training and...
gaining experience and utilizing technological forecasting tools skills to “bounce back” and learn from mistakes as well as successes. Imagine sailing by the night sky - with a little effort, even difficulties can be an exhilarating experience.

Workplace Skill Development

Few things are more exciting than a team creatively working to solve a complex problem. However, the brainstorming and creative process can be a demanding and often exhausting one, calling on participants to tap into their “bounce back” skills in order to remain present and committed to problem solving.

Researchers have identified several strategies that individuals or teams can combine holistically to support and build on individual levels of resilience. They are:

- **Being Connected:** Using the power of contagion (Ross, 2006) – just like laughter and yawning, resilient thoughts and feelings jump from one person to another. Having a resilient core group on a project can have the added benefit of building a resilient and resourceful program – so choose teammates wisely and build a high energy team that can renew itself.

- **Creating a Habit:** Much like physical fitness, the best way to build a habit is to do it daily. Anyone who has undertaken an athletic event or overcome a personal handicap, knows this lesson: realistic, daily practice typically results in a better outcome (Costa, 2003). Please note that these types of habits - those that require a change of mind - can be hard to accomplish and, on average, take over 60 days to achieve (Lally et al, 2009).

A good example of changing a mindset is the scenario that often occurs when managers are faced with a complex business situation, like resourcing a job with limited staff. If a manager who complains to his/her peers about a lack of staff tried instead to look at a matrix approach that uses untapped talent – such as interns, part-time workers from another field, or even other internal disciplines – he or she would be changing from a habitual negative outlook to a positive paradigm which would allow for the creation of greater options.

- **Line Up to a Goal:** All too often we lose the forest for the trees as the daily pressure of work crisis management distracts us and draws our attention away from our vision of the future. Resilient teams are those that are able to clearly articulate goals and continually re-orient themselves to this vision as part of their daily habit. Thus, when crises arise – as they always do – a steady focus and push toward a goal and vision of the future remain the center of the team’s actions. This is very different from the all too common practice of “putting out fires.”

*Having a sense of being able to control, if not the situation, but the response or the environment around the incident, is also prevalent in those considered more resilient.* (Riolli, Savich and Copani, 2002)

Application of the values and vision that drive your team allows it to make swift and correct decisions, even when disruptive events occur, and help the team to follow principles for an incident management approach.

One easy way to increase skills in this area is to “take five” each day. In other words, at the end of the day take five minutes and assess your work for the day to see if, in fact, you have advanced toward your goals. If not, then review the things that distracted you today and evaluate their worth in the wider setting – could you have handled them differently?

If you did make progress toward a future vision – write it down to both note and celebrate it – but also so that, in the morning, you will start your day with a strong reminder of your resilience and success!

“You can’t stay in your corner of the forest waiting for others to come to you. You have to go to them sometimes.” (A. A. Milne, [1882-1956], author of Winnie the Pooh books)

- **Team Up with a Support System:** Professional groups, such as the New York Water Environment Association, exist throughout the industry – and for good reason. The value of having peers and connections to others is well known. As a team leader at any level, encouraging staff to build its own informal professional support networks inside and outside the organization increases the likelihood of resilient attributes as they effectively increase their resources.

Further, through having a broader network, leaders will have a greater sense of control as these networks most often create trusted sounding boards for their opinions and experiences (Jordan, 1992) especially in times of crisis. Thus, supporting and advocating for staff to build their own support networks, be they industry-based or simply socially-based, and to actively participate in them, should be encouraged as part of normal business. It is known now that such relationships facilitate workplace productivity and can be a key element in success during pressurized times.

Cost Benefits

Often at work, we notice and comment on those employees who seem to be having the hardest time with stress and managing their daily lives. Yet, it is these very barriers that can be crossed in building resilience skills. Disproportionate stress in the workplace can lead to high costs, such as poor decision-making, increased use of short or long-term sick leave and, typically, higher attrition rates. With an average cost for employee turnover ranging from 1 to 1.5 times the position’s annual pay, that is a very high cost indeed!

More resilient staff members are superior at making things work during emergency events and times of complexity. It is through these successes that they rebound and, in the process, enhance their loyalty and dedication to the organization (Siebert, 2005). As many in New York State recall, while the impact of Superstorm Sandy was in many ways immeasurable, so were the friendships and loyalties formed by those teams and companies who responded to support their neighbors, community and industry!

Finally, adaptive staffers who can be nimble under stress are also rare commodities in this rapidly changing world. They are often among those employees who are highest in creativity and flexibility and more likely to make sound decisions at critical moments. Further, as they are hardly (in every sense of the word), they typically cost less money per person in the long term. This is because, as a result of these traits they’ve adopted and strengthened, they are less likely to be ill or cause additional recruitment costs by leaving the company during or following critical periods (Jackson, Firtko and Edenborough, 2007). Thus, they are a winning asset in today’s tight business climate.

Perhaps the most impressive tenet about resilience is its high return for a low cost, as building these workplace skills is about time, leadership and personal effort more than finances. Small actions that incur little or no financial cost – such as choosing to visibly identify positives in a situation, networking, and verbalizing the...
team’s vision when conducted on a regular basis – can make a huge difference to the resilience levels of staff, helping both you and your team build this vital skill for a brighter future.

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References