



Unlocking the core antagonists of resilience: The personal realm

How self-awareness and self-mastery are paramount in C-suite leadership

Editor's note: Second article in an on-going series that examines the different elements of resilience at work and how they can be leveraged by C-suite executives.

A wave of volatility has brought the new normal of constant disruption in the business world into stark relief. As a result, executives have come to understand that a new type of leadership is likely needed to enable their organizations, teams, and themselves personally to not only weather these changes, but flourish and grow in response to them. Enter resilience: a core human way of being that determines how we respond to life's slings, arrows, and opportunities.

Consider that even prior to the events of 2020, barely one-quarter of CXOs felt entirely ready to lead through potential disruptions, according to a [Deloitte global survey](#) of more than 2,200 C-level officers. Now, more than one-third of these organizational leaders say they're prepared to guide their organizations through disruption, ambiguity, and rapid change—a sign that a growing share of executives are building resilience habits to meet the needs of the moment.

Many of those habits were explored in Deloitte's recent Executive Resilience Academy, a six-week virtual series that immersed cross-role C-suite leaders in the latest science of resilience at work and laid out the foundational pieces of "whole-person" resilience. And, as part of the curriculum, participants were introduced to the Three Realms of Resilience, an interdependent framework that captures the full depth of resilience conditions. We provided an overview of this framework in the first article in this series, "[Building Resilience: A roadmap for the modern C-suite.](#)"

In this follow-up, we explore the personal resilience realm, the central foundation of resilience. Comprised of the core “moves” (i.e., ways of being) of Meta-Cognition, Self-Command, Realistic Optimism, and Character Strength, optimization of the personal resilience realm ultimately gives rise to the powerful self-awareness and self-mastery that are paramount in this new kind of leadership.

Understanding personal resilience

The actions within the personal resilience realm comprise both the subconscious and conscious forces that determine our experience of and reactions to life. The personal resilience realm is defined by sage-like self-mastery, such that we can command how we'll respond to life's events, rather than these events having their way with us. This realm embraces unfaltering realistic optimism. It also encourages us to have a life and work aligned with our deepest core values, providing our most authentic sources of meaning, purpose, and magnetism in leadership.

Self-mastery begins with the move of **Meta-Cognition**, the cultivated habit of standing in awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, and (conscious and subconscious) reaction patterns. This includes the ability to access “observer consciousness,” watching one's own mental, emotional, and physical responses to life events large and small in real time, rather than being unconsciously “lost” in reactions, thoughts, and feelings.

Highly coupled with Meta-Cognition is the move of **Self-Command**, the ability to exercise agency over one's thoughts and emotions, conveying optimized well-being, positive emotional states, and greater perspective and wisdom.

Leaders who wish to build personal resilience at work also should demonstrate **Realistic Optimism**. This mindset helps explain the past productively, while expecting positive future outcomes no matter the circumstances. It is rooted in a strong sense of self-efficacy, a belief in one's own abilities to affect positive change, as well as confidence in the realization of any vision, even one that seems impossible.

A fourth resilience move comprises exercising **Character Strength**—building personal and career meaning, engagement, and achievement, guided by one's innate, authentic values in action. We explore these values using the VIA Survey of Character Strengths model and assessment, which is comprised of 24 strengths, such as creativity, perseverance, and zest. In comparison to talent strengths, which articulate what a person is great at and loves doing, character strengths reflect who a person *is*, defining what values in life are most important. Designing a life aligned with both types of strengths is a key resilience move.

The moves: Action in the personal realm

One can imagine how differently leaders “show up” when they're strong in these four moves versus when they're not.

Meta-Cognition and Self-Command are the wellspring of wisdom, instinctive right decision-making, seeing the forest and the trees—unclouded by negative emotion or distorted thinking. Realistic Optimism describes the core leadership task of leading an organization, team, or industry toward a positive vision, with deep belief in its possibility, taking honest stock of the challenges and not being deterred by them. Building deep Character

Strength means a leader is fully aligned with and living out their most human, core values. This trait is the source of the authenticity, passion, and engagement that create the personal magnetism that builds followership.

The moves described above are not mere actions, but instinctive ways of *being*. And for most people, they don't come naturally. They must be exercised, practiced, and built to the point that they become instinctive.

Fortunately, there are numerous evidence-based practices that support this journey from knowing to doing to *being* the moves. We explore more than 20 of them throughout the Academy, and group them into two broad imperatives—*knowing* and *growing* the self.

Knowing the self

Within the personal resilience realm, *knowing the self* refers primarily to building deep self-awareness around two critical areas: one's thinking style and one's true character strengths.

Building awareness of one's thinking style (i.e., cognitive habits) is critical for a very human and existential reason: thoughts form every human being's version of reality, and thus, how they respond to it. As Ash Robinson, co-leader of the Executive Resilience Academy puts it: "It isn't the adverse events of life themselves, but the stories we tell ourselves about those events (even in an instinctive instant), that determine our experience of them—and our outcomes."

Unfortunately, it's also true that throughout our lives, most of us have acquired some suboptimal thinking and reacting patterns—some conscious, some deeper in the subconscious—that can send us down an emotional and behavioral consequence pattern that we wouldn't logically choose.

Thus, in order to break out of these limiting patterns, it's necessary to first drill down on one's own thinking style, limiting beliefs, and default reaction patterns (and what triggers them). We engage in several practices to help executives begin to build this thinking style awareness, but they boil down to three key aspects of consciousness:

- Identifying the most common triggers of negative emotions and responses;
- Uncovering the deep, limiting beliefs about the world and about people who comprise our version of reality (e.g., "People can't be trusted" or "I must be perfect or I'm nothing.");
- Detecting our most common in-the-moment "thinking traps" (e.g., catastrophizing by assuming the absolute worst outcome is going to occur).

In the constant cycle of complex demands facing C-suite executives, it's easy to allow one's thoughts about obstacles to determine the entire experience of life. But leaders aren't automatically destined to fall into this trap. Instead, they can take seemingly insurmountable problems, envision their ultimate destination, and activate long-term thinking to shift their behavior to capture the complete and transformative powers of personal resilience at work. Whether a crisis is looming or already underway, the challenge for leaders is to recognize the reactive patterns that can undermine personal growth—and convert those habits into constructive responses.

Building awareness of one's character strengths, fortunately, is a bit more straightforward. We utilize the VIA assessment to help executives re-evaluate and engage with their character strengths. With their results in hand and confirmed as correct and authentic, leaders can begin to build greater awareness by reflecting on why each strength is so important to them—and on how much their life and work is fully aligned with and bringing forth each strength.

Growing the self

Growing the self encompasses numerous practices that begin to strengthen the four moves of the personal resilience realm. The most important meta-practice we espouse is daily somatic mindfulness practice that builds the brain “muscles” behind Meta-Cognition and Self-Command and Realistic Optimism.

In this practice, individuals bring mindful awareness to physiological sensations, such as their own breathing, thereby neurologically retraining their own reaction systems in a process of positive neuroplasticity. In fact, studies have shown that eight weeks of daily 15-minute practice makes observable changes in the brain, with grey matter decreased in the survival-based fight/flight regions of the brain (the limbic system, where the negative reacting patterns come from) and increased in the prefrontal cortex, the region of self-command and positive emotion.

Other ways to grow the self include specific methods for realizing gratitude (another proven and fast resilience booster and brain changer), adopting a more directly optimistic thinking style, and building more of one's character strengths into one's life (and recognizing them in others).

Resilience: Assurance against unpredictability

Resilience can be taught, and it has dramatic positive effects on the brain: mindfulness exercises can help rewire one's brain to boost personal performance, build mental awareness, and even change the substance and style of one's thinking—as well as that of their teams.

In today's business world, resilience can also offer some reassurance against a tide of unpredictability. The conditions that foster this core personal strength, the hardships we face, and the capabilities we bring to bear to overcome these adversities act interdependently as we respond to our biggest challenges. If we peel back these factors and take a closer look at the self-mastery skills needed to overcome these obstacles, we can approach optimum resilience.

“We can absolutely regulate our own emotional response, turning stress into opportunities to reframe our thinking and build long-term resilience,”

says Jennifer Veenstra, co-leader of the Executive Resilience Academy. These skills and personal conditions can be directly assessed, learned, and developed by an individual. Our adversities can use us, or we can use our adversities.

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