



# RESILIENCE: LEARNING TO BOUNCE BACK



In the past few years, the concept of resilience has become increasingly relevant to the workplace. In response to the turmoil that has marked the last decade or so, HR professionals have developed a set of initiatives and tools for managing change. However, they are not enough...we must dare to push the envelope even further. And that's where the concept of resilience enters the picture.



By RENÉE RIVEST,  
CHRP, Founding President,  
ReGain Inc.

#### Conference

*Maître à bord en période de turbulence:  
la force de la résilience*

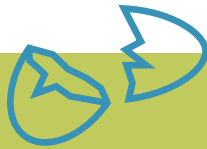
**R**esilience is the ability to bounce back and “rebuild” ourselves after a traumatic event. Knowing how to resist and absorb the shock is of course commendable, but genuine resilience means changing the way we are and the way we act in the wake of a trauma.

Research has shown that resilience is harder to achieve (i.e. there is a greater risk of future problems) when the trauma involves other people, is deliberate and long-term. For example, employees will find it easier to recover, despite their strong feelings about the situation, if they lost their jobs because of restructuring than if they had to quit because of long-standing psychological harassment. They could also become extremely sensitive to certain situations, such as having to face blustering authority figures for instance. The appropriate support strategies would be different in each case.

#### RESILIENCE: A DYNAMIC CONCEPT

Why does the concept of resilience transcend the notion of change management on an individual level? Because it proposes a mode of behaviour and a specific attitude towards life. Not only does resi-

## EXAMPLES OF TRAUMATIC SITUATIONS



- Job loss
- Demotion
- Missing out on a promotion
- An unsuccessful promotion
- A disappointing performance assessment
- A move as a result of a transfer
- Unhealthy competition
- Interpersonal conflicts
- Physical and/or moral violence and harassment
- Loss of a co-worker, a boss
- Personal illness or illness of a parent or co-worker
- Death of a parent or co-worker

Resilience help us cope with the bad times and adapt, but it also enables us to see a situation clearly and handle it without blowing it out of proportion. It presents us with the opportunity to turn traumatic events into personal change drivers.

Resilience also implies confidence in our extraordinary potential for recovery, which is possible at each and every stage of our lives. Our resilience potential, which hinges on our emotional state and our relationship with our social and factual environment, essentially depends on the following three factors:

- our personal characteristics (background, personality);
- the actual trauma (what happened); and
- the organization of post-trauma support.

### CONDITIONS CONDUCIVE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF RESILIENCE

Most researchers agree that certain conditions are necessary for resilience to develop, i.e.:

- the ability to feel and to express what has been experienced;
- and access to social support.

We also can rely on certain defence mechanisms to help us adapt to threatening situations, although, as will be seen from the list below, some are more effective than others in promoting resilience.

“IN LEADING US TO REGAIN POWER OVER OUR LIVES AND TO REJECT THE ROLE OF TRAUMA VICTIM, RESILIENCE DRAWS ON OUR RESOURCES, ON SOMETHING THAT ALREADY EXISTS WITHIN US.” SYLVIE ROUSSEAU (TRANSLATION)



**Denial** – In the short term, minimizing the actual danger or refusing to remember or recognize it can help us absorb a traumatic shock and shield us from suffering. We could say: “It doesn’t matter. He’s entitled to treat me like that. After all, he’s the boss.” However, maintaining this attitude over time does not contribute to resilience.

**Hyperactivity** – According to Boris Cyrulnik, keeping busy to avoid thinking about a trauma prevents us from fixating on distressing images and is a strategy that keeps the mind occupied. Nonetheless, like denial, it does not encourage genuine resilience.

**Intellectualization** – By generalizing what is happening, we can avoid having to accept our personal involvement. We may convince ourselves that because we’re going through a major change process, our reaction is normal and there’s nothing to get upset about. Like denial and hyperactivity, this defence mechanism enables us to maintain a certain degree of emotional stability, but prevents us from getting in touch with our emotional response to the trauma and impedes the resilience process.

**Anticipation** – By exploring different potential scenarios, we can mentally and emotionally prepare for a risk situation. For example, when Monica decides to go back to work after a month’s leave following her husband’s death, she first anticipates her own and her co-workers’ possible reactions. This anticipation prepares her psychologically, reducing the risk of another trauma and helping her maintain her emotional balance. The challenge is to stay grounded in reality despite the various scenarios she’s imagined, which are often totally unrelated to how events actually unfold.



“THE ABILITY TO LIVE AND DEVELOP POSITIVELY, IN A SOCIALLY ACCEPTABLE WAY, IN THE FACE OF STRESS OR ADVERSITY NORMALLY INVOLVING THE RISK OF A NEGATIVE OUTCOME.”

BORIS CYRULNIK, *A MARVELLOUS MISFORTUNE*


**Sublimation** – This mechanism is intended to transform the “injury” into creative action that has some social value. We focus our energy on organizing a new life to vanquish the pain and learn another way to live. We develop a new awareness and use our experience to do something useful for others. For example, Mark, an IT professional, was harassed by his boss for over five years. After a number of therapy sessions, he decided to go back to school and become a manager himself so that he could pass on a management style that would reflect his values of respect. This strategy raises the question: “What do I want to do about my injury,” which in turn encourages resilience.

**Humour** – This approach defuses at least part of the tension by highlighting the absurd or comical side of the situation without being cruel or hurtful. In Boris Cyrulnik’s view, sharing humour in stressful situations can signal the emotional closeness of those involved and create favourable conditions for resilience.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF STAYING IN TOUCH WITH REALITY

From 1980 to 1987, the city of Naples was hit by four major earthquakes. Researchers were interested in the fate of three different groups of citizens. The first group was evacuated to a safe distance from the initial quake; the second received assistance on site and helped organize rescue operations; while the third stayed in place but received no support. The second group is the one that was the least affected. The individuals who were most able to overcome the trauma of the 1987 quake were those who were given something to do in 1980.

To promote resilience it is therefore essential for survivors to remain active and in touch with reality, no matter how hard it may be, and for others to guide them along the road to recovery. Since interpersonal relations (social support) are a key condition for resilience, HR professionals, in their role as resource persons, are eminently suitable to act as “resilience coaches” in certain situations. However, this role can only be played when a relationship of trust, empathy and mutual respect has been established between the survivor on the one hand, and the coach on the other. In viewing the situation through another’s eyes, words and experiences, the survivors will find the courage and inspiration they need to cultivate their resilience.

The fascinating story of Jill Bolte Taylor, a renowned neuroanatomist at the University of Indiana, clearly illustrates the importance of remaining in the moment. After suffering a stroke, she closely studied how it affected her before expanding her research and discovering that it takes just 90 seconds for a chemical reaction in the brain to dissipate all the organism’s reactions (physical pain, fear, joy, disappointment, etc.). What is interesting about her discovery is that she makes a clear distinction between pain and suffering. In her view, not all physical pain is accompanied by emotional suffering; pain is involuntary, suffering is not. 

---

The bibliography of this article is available in the electronic issue of *Effectif* [[www.portailrh.org/effectif](http://www.portailrh.org/effectif)].