



Resilience and Mental Toughness

BY RICHARD MARTIN

Resilience is one of those buzzwords that appears every so often. We talk of resilient companies, resilient organisms, resilient ecosystems, resilient people, etc. The term comes from materials science and refers to a substance or structure that can absorb shocks and stresses to retain its original form or spring back to shape quickly.

Resilience has become popular in positive psychology and behavioural therapy, where it encapsulates a person's capacity and ability to endure and overcome hardship. On the business and political fronts, the importance of resilience has also risen as leaders and managers develop a growing awareness of risks and threats in systems and organizations. In a nutshell, in all fields and all circumstances, people in general, but especially leaders, have a growing appreciation of the capacity to absorb shocks and stresses and to spring back quickly from them.

This is fine as far as it goes, but what about situations where a return to the original form is either impossible, highly constrained, or even undesirable? Say a company has weathered a shock and stresses from attempting to grow into a new market or introduce a new product. Is it really a good idea to go back to square one? Status quo ante may be necessary temporarily so management can learn from the adventure and figure out what to do going forward.

But ultimately, the company's leaders must take the message of the market to heart. What does the failed attempt

signify? Was the plan undertaken too quickly with too little preparation? Were there insufficient reserves and resources to implement it properly? These are just some of the questions that must be considered before deciding how to move forward. What is certain though, is that something must change to keep growing and thriving.

The same logic applies to any individual who has endured a shock or stress that has pushed them outside of their original configuration or comfort zone. If someone's looking for a job for a long time and not getting results, sure, they need resilience

to get back on the horse and keep looking. But, it's also an opportunity to consider the reasons why the job search isn't working. That

person needs to look at reality head on and ask herself if the same old approaches are sufficient.

Resilience is good and needed, then, but it's not the only thing that people and organizations need to survive, much less thrive. You can keep your nostrils clear by treading water, which is what resilience is for, but you don't get anywhere. So far so good, but that only buys time to figure out where and when to go to the next destination, and how to get there. That's where an even more important characteristic comes into play, which I call "mental toughness."

We all face setbacks, obstacles, opposition, and even attacks as we move forward in life. I say move forward, because if our only objective is the status quo, to

try to keep our nose above the waves, we may succeed for a time, but we won't be accomplishing much in the way of growth, innovation, and development. The truth is that growth and challenges puts us "in the arena," as Teddy Roosevelt once said. If you're trying to accomplish something, great or small, or in whatever field of endeavour, you're going to stir up things.

This may—no, this WILL—cause setbacks, raise obstacles, encourage opposition and counter-attacks. Naysayers will say "Nay" and plans will go awry. Resilience is fine, but when things get hard, it can be tempting to fall back on the tried and true approaches and go back to what worked in the past. It's mental toughness that comes into play at that point. How much do you want to achieve your goals? Why are you doing what you're doing? What does it mean to you and to others? How will things be different—better, the same, or worse—if you continue to reach for your destination or if you don't?

Mental toughness therefore encompasses resilience, but it goes beyond it. Absorbing shocks and regaining a previous form are always options. But there are others, such as preventing the shocks and stresses in the first place, anticipating them, finding a way around obstacles, setbacks, and opposition before they arise in the first place. You can also launch pre-emptive strikes, spoiling attacks, or other manoeuvres that avoid trouble spots and get you quickly to your objective. Mental toughness is the key.

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