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Exploring Individual Resilience

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Some people seem to have been blessed with a natural tendency to “bounce back” from adversity. They have a strong sense of self-belief, positive energy and an optimistic outlook regarding often daunting circumstances. In other words, they are resilient. These are the people and organizations that thrive with a renewed sense of enthusiasm when examining the future and are energized with the possibilities.

A 12-year study of employees in the communications industry which experience great upheaval in the late 1980s found that two-thirds of study participants experienced performance issues, leadership, and health declines as a result of the stress from deregulation and downsizing. These employees experienced heart attacks, stroke, obesity, and depression. However, one-third of the employees maintained their health and happiness and experienced renewed enthusiasm and actually thrived in the face of adversity. Organizations need resilient employees who can adapt quickly, work well with others, succeed at reaching goals, and constantly learn and improve.

The Good News about Resilience

Resilience is the ability to adapt and change when faced with new and often stressful circumstances. However, being resilient doesn't mean that one doesn't experience stress. Rather it is an ability to face adversity with a strategic advantage.

The good news is that resilience is an ordinary trait commonly exhibited in people facing life-changing events such as disasters, trauma, or job loss.

Resilience involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be learned and developed in anyone.

Learning the elements of resilience is the first step. Dr. Salvatore Maddi, a world renowned psychologist and author of “Resilience at Work: How to Succeed no Matter what Life Throws at You,” believes that resilience has three basic elements: challenge, commitment and control.

Challenge

According to Dr. Maddi, if a person is strong in the element of challenge, they view stress and change as a learning opportunity. Resilient people expect adversity and have a “bring it on” mentality when faced with obstacles. In fact, the most resilient people tend to seek out challenges and

may even feel a bit restless within the status quo.

Healthcare providers may be adept at managing change, but the degree by which they welcome and positively utilize the opportunity varies greatly. For example, healthcare leaders are frequently evaluated based on their staff turnover rates and are held accountable for a predetermined percentage of staff they retain. Longevity, above all, is often commended. In fact, conventional wisdom teaches leaders to hire only staff that will be “owners” and not “renters” of job positions thus discouraging hiring staff that will only stay at the organization for a short period of time.

However, organizations who implement successful promotion or advancement programs expect that their star performers will move on. They hire successful “renters” and, if their leadership provides the opportunities, they will find other avenues within their own organization to increase their skills and populate other

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departments with the efforts of their mentoring.

Commitment

The second element of resilience – commitment – relates to the ability to engage fully in the matters at hand. It helps individuals understand and interpret events affecting them and stay involved in the process. Committed individuals strive to be involved in ongoing events, rather than feeling isolated.

Perhaps it is within the area of conflict that healthcare providers demonstrate their lack of practice with the element of commitment. It is not surprising that the number one strategy by which providers manage conflict in the workplace is to avoid it altogether. When healthcare providers do not have the ability to enhance their communications, the end result has a negative impact on patient safety and workplace satisfaction. Some healthcare providers will even admit to leaving a position instead of confronting the reason for their consternation. Rather than stay committed to the problem, process or their own potential growth, they quietly resign and walk away.

Resilient individuals and organizations accept conflict as a part of daily life and embrace it in a constructive manner. They recognize that not all conflict results in a specific resolution, but understand there is a significant advantage to utilizing a process by which conflict can be engaged and lead to healthier work environments.

Control

Control is the third element of resilience. Resilient individuals exhibit control in the face of adversity by trying to influence outcomes, rather than lapse into passivity and powerlessness. Believing that there always remains a means to influence difficult situations can be a powerful impetus to allow people to cope with whatever comes their way.

During this economic downturn, healthcare providers are doing more with less. They have less time, less staff, and fewer resources to respond to more complex situations. Maintaining some control over work demands allow individuals to “declutter” and eliminate processes that no longer contribute to the organization’s goals. For example, is it value-added to

maintain both electronic and paper charting to accommodate one physician who is reticent to acquire the new skills to manage electronic medical records? This is one example of how an economic downturn can give individuals and organizations more control as they evaluate what they no longer can afford to tolerate.

All three elements work together

Maddi contends that to be truly resilient, you need to demonstrate all three elements of challenge, commitment and control. If an individual ranks high in commitment, but has no control or sense of challenge, they may lose the perspective of what their goal is and may be overwhelmed by the rate of change. Individuals high in challenge, but low in commitment may frequently abandon new processes. Control without patience (or commitment) to a process or a person will also garnish few results.

Successfully managing stressful conditions and life-changing events require personal resilience. Learning the elements is the first step to developing a strategy that increases resilience. Keeping in mind that resilience is a skill it takes time to practice and gain the competence and confidence to improve and entrench into one’s mindset. The results of gaining the skill for resilience can be transforming.

References

Maddi, S.R. (2005). Resilience at work: How to succeed no matter what life throws at you. New York, NY: Amacom.

For more information on resilience and conflict engagement, please visit the Center for American Nurses website at www.centerforamericannurses.org.

About the Author

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