

Organizational Resilience – Read Ahead

From Tip Fallon

This is a recommended read-ahead for the June 10th session. This provides ideas and questions you can begin using in your organization to identify ways to cultivate greater resilience. During the session, we will explore these further and you will have time in small groups to discuss the application of these in your organization.

You may submit questions about this topic in advance of the session via Survey Monkey. Please submit questions by **June 8th**. Survey link: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/CQWSH2S>

Introduction

There are a variety of definitions, models, and frameworks related to organizational resilience and I include a couple of references for further reading at the end of this document. In this document, I am providing some principles and key questions that leaders and teams grapple with when fostering more resilient organizations. I hope this provides us with some common language and concepts to discuss further in the session and I would look forward to your survey responses with questions and any other specific hopes you would like for the session.

What do we mean by organizational resilience?

I conceptualize *resilience* as **the ability to intentionally and meaningfully endure and thrive.**

Often, people hold varying visions of what success looks like for an organization and what types of decisions should be made in difficult times. We also often hold **assumptions** about what can or cannot be changed in an organization. The status quo of our cultures and norms can greatly bias what we believe we can or can't do as an organization. Thus, it is usually helpful to share our thoughts as a team about these questions (see the box on the right) regarding our visions and beliefs about how to keep our organizations relevant and resilient.

Resilience can be subject to interpretation. To some, a decision to change a program may be seen as wise and necessary to keep the organization going; while to others the same decision may be seen as deeply compromising to the mission of the organization. While there is no single answer or formula on how to be resilient, *organizations that are resilient (i.e., can endure and thrive) engage in reflecting on these questions and getting clear about where they stand with regards to what they are willing and not willing to change, and what the vision for success and resilience looks like for the organization as a whole.*

What do we mean by resilience?

- Do we all have the same vision of success for the organization?
- What would we be willing to change?
- Is there anything we are not willing to change? And why?
- What assumptions are we holding as we make decisions about our organization?

What is most important to our organization right now?

How can we nurture and tend to those areas?

Do we need to say “no” or do less of anything so we can focus more on what’s most important?

What is most important?

Resilient organizations are also able to prioritize and shift their focus between the big picture and tactical aspects of their work.

I have found that asking this simple question about what is most important and listening without judgment to voices of members inside and outside of our organization helps us gain new perspectives, brings our attention to areas of the organization we have neglected, and generates creativity toward what we can do to ensure we are tending to the areas that are most important.

Having a conversation around this can also help us to correct assumptions we have about what we believe *others* think is most important.

We make hard decisions all the time in organizations. Clearly communicating to others about what is most important can help people focus their efforts in the same direction and help us make decisions that are congruent with one another and understand the hard choices along the way.

What impact do we need to be making?

Constituents’ needs continuously change; as do the various ways they can get their needs met. This means we need to be responsive not only to deciding what needs we are working to address, but also how we design our services to go about meeting those needs. The clearer we are on these, the greater and deeper the level of our impact can be and the more relevant our organization is to constituents and our partners.

One of the most powerful ways to explore these questions is to engage directly with constituents and stakeholders. Engaging external parties in this process is a natural way to foster resilience and support for your work as well. They can provide you with insights and data you may not have awareness of and serve as potential champions and supporters for your efforts. As the adage goes, “People support what they help create.”

Resilient organizations continually examine the relevancy and quality of their current programs and operations to identify the greatest impact they can be making, including taking input from those outside of the traditional “top” of the organization.

How are our constituents’ needs changing?

What other ways to do constituents have to meet their needs?

Is the impact we have been seeking to make still relevant?

Are our desired outcomes and organizational goals clear, including how we measure impact?

Who do we need to be in conversation with to answer these questions?

Are we cultivating a mindset that can hold unpleasant aspects of change while focusing energy on positive opportunities?

What new opportunities are present or emerging?

How can we test the feasibility of those opportunities? What's one small step we can take?

What unique opportunities are present?

Another trait of resilient organizations is finding opportunity amidst challenges and change. While change can be scary and difficult, leaders and teams who cultivate a mindset of finding opportunity have a better chance at keeping people engaged, focused, and innovative.

Not only can focusing on opportunities improve staff engagement, it can lead to innovation and greater impact which enhances the reputation of your organization, potentially leading to more partnerships and resources and opportunities -- all enhancing resilience.

Meanwhile, going after new opportunities can be scary as well. Thus, I recommend practicing small steps to socialize ideas for change, get feedback, prototyping change in small increments, and iterating them. Once you have an idea about a new opportunity to try, think of one low-risk activity you can try to get feedback on the idea or involve others. It may be as simple as sending an initial email or bringing it up with someone in a meeting.

What risks and uncertainties do we need to anticipate and manage?

Resilient organizations dedicate time to anticipating risks and uncertainties. Risks can come from both internal (shortage of staff availability, loss of infrastructure) or external (e.g., funding, changes in demand).

For risks that would have a severe impact, you can conduct **scenario planning**. COVID-19 is a key example of an external risk many people probably would not have imagined several months ago. Organizations may be creating plans that cover multiple potential outcomes for variables such as:

- When offices or operations can re-open in person
- Funding levels
- Limitations or changes to staff availability
- Travel regulations
- Ability to provide programs and services to online

It is impossible to predict everything, of course. I recommend looking at the trends in your ecosystem. What are you seeing with peer or partners organizations? What changes are you seeing from funding streams or priorities of funders? What shifts are you seeing in your constituencies and the utilization of your services and programs? What is happening at policy level that is impacting you? What are these various signals telling you?

What are the biggest risks and uncertainties we face?

What are our response and mitigation strategies for them?

What specific scenario(s) do we need to be ready for? How can we prepare for that?

What can we learn here?

One of the best ways to cultivate resilience includes taking a **learning mindset**. For example, if a staff person makes a mistake or if an initiative does not achieve great results, instead of being punitive and shaming ourselves, we foster greater resilience by using those moments as learning opportunities.

Cultivating a learning mindset helps staff feel more valued and helps enable a culture in which people can be honest about concerns when things are not going well (as opposed to pretending everything is going well when it isn't).

When we are forced to adapt, instead of fixating on a lack of skills, we also cultivate resilience by focusing on the opportunity to learn new skills or develop more cross-training in the organization. Greater professional development is also linked to employees staying longer at an organization, which typically can enhance resilience as well.

How can we take a learning mindset?

What is this situation teaching us?

How is this an opportunity to develop our capabilities?

We are already resilient.

Final reflections

1. By nature of us being here, especially those of us who navigate systems that are not designed for us, we are resilient. The wisdom and life experience to be resilient is within us. How would you characterize the resilience you already have? How you can tap into your resilience to provide guidance to the organization?

2. The change associated with resilience almost inevitably brings loss. Being resilient also means tending to the losses – honoring the past and processing emotions to help ourselves find peace so that we may move forward.

Questions?

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Further resources:

- ICOR: International Consortium for Organizational Resilience
<https://www.build-resilience.org/>
- How Businesses can Brace for Catastrophe, by Yvette Mucharraz y Cano
<https://hbr.org/2020/02/how-businesses-can-brace-for-catastrophe>
- Organizational resilience: A capability-based conceptualization, by Stephanie Duchek
Duchek, S. Organizational resilience: a capability-based conceptualization. *Bus Res* **13**, 215–246 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40685-019-0085-7>