



ILLUSTRATION: DIANA PHAM

Resilience and Beyond

A vital leadership skill that promotes well-being



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Graham Lowe, PhD, is a workplace consultant, author and speaker (www.grahamlowe.ca). This article draws on the revised 2nd edition of his book, *Creating Healthy Organizations: Taking action to improve employee well-being*, which will be published in early 2020 by University of Toronto Press.
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BY GRAHAM LOWE

RESILIENCE IS A BASIC psychological health and safety skill that can be developed by individuals and teams. Resilience is a person's capacity to bounce back from adversity and to find a new and healthy "normal." Positively oriented psychological strengths and capacities, including resilience, can be developed and measured in a workforce. Doing so will help organizations and their members to flourish and thrive.

Team Resilience

Team resilience is more than the combined personal resilience of individual team members. A resilient team

performs well when faced with adversity, perhaps undergoing a small decline in performance, and then becomes stronger in the process. A resilient team takes stock of workplace pressures, assesses the risks of stress and burnout, and identifies actions to proactively address these. In resilient teams, members are mutually supportive, have a clear sense of purpose, and collectively adapt to changing circumstances. And taking a cue from positive psychology, teams also need to identify sources of positive energy and do what they can to strengthen and cultivate these.

Team resilience can be developed and strengthened.

Research has identified unique team-based features of resilience that contribute to higher team performance. Practically, this emphasizes the need to focus on group - as well as individual - resilience. Psychologist Monique Crane offers advice for managers on how they can support their employees - and teams - to be more resilient. This boils down to four actions managers can take:

- reducing unnecessary drains on their resilience
- promoting adaptive workplace behaviours and thinking when faced with difficulties
- supporting the development of personal and social resources
- enabling employees to access these resources.

This advice focuses on developing individuals' psychological resilience. However, it also is clear that drains on resilience include many organizational features, such as unnecessary bureaucracy or administrative requirements, that in themselves are a source of stress for employees.

Connecting resilience and leadership

With this background on resilience, I would now like to share relevant insights from an action-research project that examined how resilience, leadership and well-being are interconnected. I was the research consultant on the Resilience in Leadership Project, which the Alberta School Employee Benefit Plan (ASEBP) conducted in collaboration with educational system leaders across the province. ASEBP administers a province-wide group insurance program offering a variety of health benefits, employee and family assistance, and loss of life and disability insurance to employees and their dependents in the educational sector.

The project's starting point was the recognition that educational leaders face heightened risks to their well-being, given the demands of their role in an educational system defined by rapid change, rising expectations and resource constraints. Leaders are expected to support school system improvements, most notably aimed at making education more inclusive and promoting healthy school communities. Indeed, the project's survey of educational leaders confirmed that resilience and leadership are interrelated, and in turn influence both educational leaders' well-being and school system performance.

Beyond resilience

The study concluded that today's educational leaders need more than just resilience. That's why psychologists have developed the broader concept of "psychological capital" (PsyCap) to encompass not only a person's capacity to be resilient, but also to be hopeful, confident and optimistic. When combined, these positive psychological traits are better predictors of well-being and performance than each attribute on its own.

PsyCap is similar to what educational experts Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan call "professional capital," which combines individual talent, collaboration and sound educational decision-making. Studies link PsyCap to a range of individual well-being and workplace performance outcomes, such as absenteeism, intentions to quit, job satisfaction, commitment, and organizational citizenship

behaviours. The latter attribute is central to inclusive leadership (i.e. encouraging everyone to be a leader), because it refers to employees going beyond their job descriptions to help co-workers or benefit the organization and all of its stakeholders.

An effective way to develop resilience in a workforce is through leadership styles that promote the capacities captured in PsyCap. This requires managers to connect on a personal level with the employees who report to them. Leaders who are positive and authentic, thoughtful and transparent, and who build confidence and commitment among their staff will be actively cultivating PsyCap in others. PsyCap is positively contagious; as described by experts, it "trickles down and ripples out,"¹ leading to positive behaviours by others in the organization.

Among the educational leaders we studied, PsyCap had a significant and positive relationship with their health, well-being and stress. Respondents with greater PsyCap - in other words, who feel optimistic, confident, resilient and hopeful - were far more likely than their colleagues with low PsyCap to report very good or excellent general and mental health and high life satisfaction. They also experienced less stress and reported fewer symptoms of burnout.

Connecting leadership, well-being and resilience

One of the project's objectives was to illuminate the relationship between educational leadership, well-being and resilience. So the survey also measured transformational leadership (TL) behaviours based on a widely used and validated leadership assessment tool, the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire.

Transformational leaders contribute to the future success of their organization by encouraging their colleagues to see opportunities and challenges in new ways. They also motivate others to strive for higher levels of performance, are admired and trusted, stimulate creative thinking, and are attuned to individuals' growth needs by acting as a coach or mentor. In short, transformational leaders go far beyond a "transactional" or goal-oriented management style by enabling individuals to achieve their potential, find innovative solutions to challenges, and embrace change.

The practical implication is that psychological capital contributes to school system performance by supporting a transformational style of leadership and higher engagement among senior administrators.

Assessing your psychological capital and leadership style

The study and follow-up consultations were a catalyst for reflection and action. The results helped to raise awareness about the importance of connecting psychological skills, leadership style and well-being. The professional association representing educational leaders used the findings in its leadership development program, succession planning, and supporting its members' health and wellness. Leaders themselves were better informed, having evidence-based insights to guide how they could involve other staff in promoting workplace well-being.

If you and your organization are interested in developing the psychological capital and leadership skills just described, see Figures 1 and 2 for the key behaviours that must be your focus.

Teachers and educational leaders who possess strong psychological capital are transformational leaders.

Figure 1:

PSYCHOLOGICAL CAPITAL CHECKLIST

Your co-workers or team members can use this checklist to assess their PsyCap. Do you or your team (check if yes):

- Always look on the bright side of things at work?
- Feel optimistic about your/their future career?
- Manage difficulties one way or another at work?
- Take stressful things at work in stride?
- See yourself/themselves as being successful at work?
- Think of many ways to get out of a jam at work?
- Feel confident contributing to discussions about organizational strategy?
- Feel confident presenting information to a group of colleagues?
- Avoid taking work stress home?

Figure 2:

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP CHECKLIST

Listed below are the behaviours associated with a transformational leadership style. You can assess your own leadership style by asking how frequently (never, rarely, sometimes, often, always) you do the following:

- Articulate a compelling vision of the future for your team and for the organization as a whole
- Express confidence that organizational goals will be achieved
- Seek differing perspectives when solving problems
- Get others to look at problems from many different angles
- Go beyond self-interest for the good of customers or clients, employees and communities
- Act in ways that build others' respect for you
- Consider the moral and ethical consequences of your decisions
- Communicate the importance of having a strong sense of purpose
- Help others develop their strengths
- Teach and coach your staff.

Above all, teachers and educational leaders who possess strong psychological capital are transformational leaders. We've now seen how strong psychological capital and a transformational leadership style set the stage for inclusive leadership, by inviting employees to take responsibility for making the workplace better. It certainly helps in this regard if senior managers signal to others in the organization that through dedicated collective effort, specific improvement goals will be achieved. Senior managers must regularly and consistently communicate the importance of employee well-being to the organization's success, using language that resonates for all staff.

Training for managers is a vital component of a comprehensive strategy to promote overall well-being. That's why the U.S. Centers for Disease Control recommends training supervisors on what they can do to reduce stressful working conditions for direct reports and enhancing workers' stress reduction skills. Furthermore, pooled results from numerous studies show that training can improve managers' mental health knowledge, promote non-stigmatizing attitudes towards mental health, and enable them to support employees experiencing mental health problems. These are all prerequisites for achieving higher levels of workforce well-being.

Borrowing successful practices from occupational health and safety (OHS), we know that mandatory safety training increases workers' awareness of safety issues and reinforces safe work practices. The same no doubt would apply to basic workplace well-being training. Researchers are now recommending providing apprentices and students with broadly-based OHS education, which would include the promotion and protection of psychological as well as physical health. This surely is a worthy mission for schools. **EC**

NOTE

- 1 C. M. Youssef-Morgan and J. L. Stratman, J. L. (2017). "Psychological Capital: Developing resilience by leveraging the HERO within leaders," in M. F. Crane (Ed.), *Managing for Resilience: A practical guide for employee wellbeing and organizational performance* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 60.



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