Resilience

One of the topics that always seems to come up when talking with leaders is *resilience*.

People want to be resilient themselves and they also want the people in their organisation to be resilient, so I have spent a fair bit of time thinking and reading about the subject. Unfortunately much of what I read was either a description of what resilience looks like (but not about how to achieve it) or another 5 point plan seemingly designed primarily on the basis of how catchy the resultant acronym would look.

However I was determined to prove resilient myself in finding something useful to say to people on the subject and finally started to make some progress (at least in my own mind) by dividing the topic of resilience into two parts.

The first is the ability to be *resilient in the face of failure*. The second is the ability to be *resilient during unrelenting change*.

Resilience in the face of failure

Despite what we like to think, or what Hollywood films and HBR strategy case studies would like to portray, when we try to do something difficult, brave or new we are likely to fail most of the time and succeed only rarely.
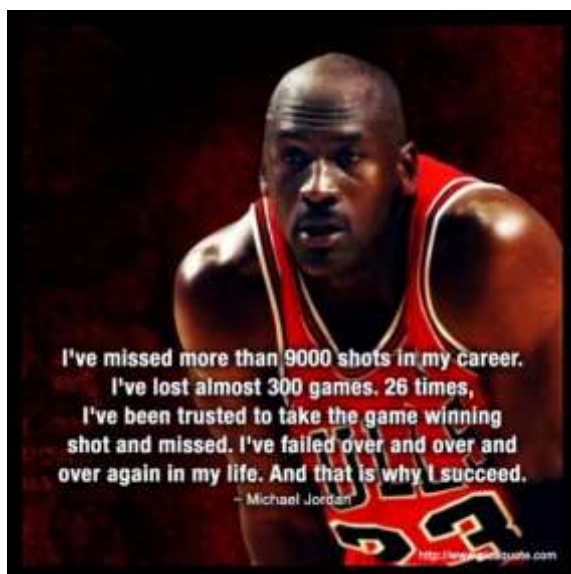
We all agree however that if we don't continue in the face of impending failure then we will never achieve anything worthwhile.

The resilient person in this context is the one who is willing to ignore the likelihood (and previous instances) of failure and try to do that worthwhile thing anyway. This is a person we can esteem and would like to be.

The thinker I admire most in this field is Martin Seligman and his concepts of Positive Optimism and Authentic Happiness. Seligman is very generous with his research and as well as his books much of his work can be found on the web including this youtube clip and his Authentic Happiness website.
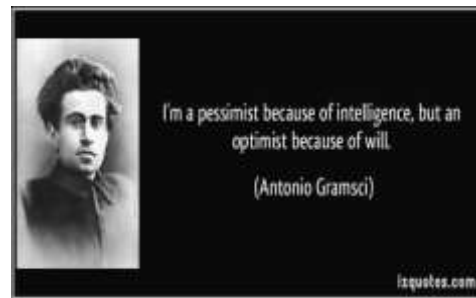
The key that I personally take from Seligman's work is that while we are all somewhat pessimists or optimists by nature that we can alter this (within limits) by how we manage what he calls our *explanatory style*. This is determined by whether we tend to explain the good or bad things that happen around us in the following ways:

- Is the reason for this permanent and ongoing, or temporary and once off (*Permanence*)?
- Is the cause general and likely to affect all areas of my life, or specific to this one instance and unlikely to repeat (*Pervasiveness*)?
- Is it because of me or is it because of some external factor I can't be blamed for (*Personalisation*)?

The optimistic person gives the good things in his life (and not the bad things) the attributes of Permanence, Pervasiveness and Personalisation – the pessimist does the reverse.

The challenging thing (at least for me) about Seligman's research is that the optimist is generally going to be better liked, more successful and less stressed even though it is the pessimist who is more likely to have an accurate and realistic view of their chances of success!

What I like to emphasise when talking to leaders about this is that they can do something about their own degree of resilience, and influence those around

I'm a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will.

(Antonio Gramsci)

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them in the same way, by explicitly managing their explanatory style to become more optimistic.[1]

Resilience during change

The other area where resilience seems to be a constant topic of conversation is in the face of unrelenting change.

In this area I turn to the understandings of change and how it affects people which arise from the work of Claes Janssen and his Four Rooms of Change®.

The Four Rooms of Change is most often used as a tool for helping individuals and groups understand how change is a process of moving through the four rooms of Contentment, Denial/Self-Censorship, Confusion and then to a new state of Renewal/Inspiration. At this level simply understanding the change process better can build resilience to the impact of change – people no longer feel helpless in the face of a process that it mystifying and yet still profoundly painful for some. Seligman's work on positive optimism also has a place here in understanding how optimism

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[1] Teaching natural optimists to use some risk management techniques when they embark on their brave and perhaps quixotic choices is another topic.

can help people transit from one room to another – particularly from Confusion into Renewal via a willingness to make a courageous and realistic choice about the way forward.

The Four Rooms of Change (using the Personal Dialectics Instrument) can also be used in a more individual and reflective way to looks at the tension (or dialectic) between two fundamental human instincts

- Firstly, the desire to *belong and fit in*, to be accepted by our society, and
- Secondly, the desire to be *true to ourselves* and our convictions despite the views of society

In terms of resilience during change it is the person who is able to successfully integrate these two points of view that is most able to navigate through the change without becoming stressed, without getting "stuck" in either Denial/Self-Censorship or Confusion and also without seeking to autocratically impose their preferred point of view on others.

Janssen refers to this as the *magnificent both/and* and the Personal Dialectic instrument allows people to both understand this possible conflict within them and also to find ways to better integrate their own personal response to change.

So Resilience –

- In responding to the inevitable failures we all have we should manage our explanatory style to become more optimistic, and

- In dealing with change we need to be aware of, and find a way of better integrating, our own personal dialectic.
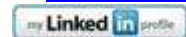
Best Wishes

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