

# Key Elements: Developing a Culture of Resiliency in Business & Organizations

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Here are key elements of developing a culture that promotes and values resiliency:

## ***Choose Resilient People***

Hire based on attitude and character. Learn about prospects' and current employees' achievements, their values concerning teamwork, and their track records in finding alternatives when Plan A fails. Ask behavior-based interview questions such as:

1. "When you had a major setback at work, how did you feel and what did you do?"
2. "Do you sometimes feel powerless when management makes decisions or something bad happens? Please give me an example of such a situation you've experienced." After getting the response, ask, "What did you do next?"

## ***Leadership***

What top people in any organization say and do are critical in building trust and commitment. Having myths (mostly true) of conquering the monsters has built confidence in both the strong and the frail, the young and the mature for thousands of years. Ethics and values need to be both espoused and modeled at the top and supported by stories that lodge in our memories.

One's supervisor is the most important person in helping employees believe in themselves and their shared future. Having a kind and effective boss who is committed to a vision of caring achievement inspires us.

Whether you are in management or an influential staff person, make your and your organization's values explicit, but use the "Seek first to understand, then to be understood" approach. Ask the employee his or her work values. You might give the person a list of many values to provoke consideration. If you try to assign work to employees with thought to their strengths, preferences, skills and values, they will see you as an important ally.

## ***Motivate Employees***

Every employee has needs for security, caring/belonging, feeling important, and variety or flexibility. Ways leaders meet those needs with employees (as well as suppliers, partners and customers) include:

- Keeping employees well informed about matters that may affect them. Waiting until the last minute to reveal unpleasant surprises undermines security.
- Building trust by being open, vulnerable (admit weaknesses and mistakes) and reliable with employees.
- Being conspicuously fair when making employment and budgetary decisions.
- Pro-actively listening to their ideas and concerns — asking with sincere interest for input and feedback well before the employees feel the need to share.
- Resolving conflicts in a measured, win-win style so employees feel empowered and supported rather than victimized.
- Giving praise frequently for effort and consistent performance as well as special achievements.
- Collaboratively setting goals for the individual and team and tracking progress.
- Holding all employees accountable, especially for following through on agreements.

In a series of extraordinarily well crafted and in-depth research studies, perhaps the finest ever done concerning how to engage employees, the Gallup organization determined that positive answers to twelve statements correlate strongly with higher productivity, profitability, retention and customer loyalty. Six of the twelve include the following:

1. “I know what is expected of me at work.”
2. “At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.”
3. “There is someone at work who encourages my development.”
4. “This last year, I have had opportunities to learn and grow.”
5. “My supervisor, or someone at work, cares about me as a person.”
6. “The mission/purpose of my company makes me feel my job is important.”

Many organizations track how employees rate these statements and take action to improve their leadership’s scores. When employees see their feedback leads to constructive action, they feel more trusting and respected.

### **Engagement**

Even more fundamental to developing positive attitudes in the workplace is the perceived focus of the supervisor. Gallup researchers measured three levels of engagement: *engaged*, *not engaged* and *disengaged* that were related to three options of how the employee related to the supervisor.

Of those who choose option #1, “My supervisor ignores me,” 44% were disengaged. Disengaged employees tend to be unproductive, combative, sullen, and more likely to cause many problems in the workplace.

Of those who chose option #2, “My supervisor focuses on my weaknesses,” only half as many, 22%, were disengaged, presumably because at least the supervisor was paying attention and communicating.

But in dramatic contrast, of those who chose option #3, “My supervisor focuses on my strengths,” only 1% were disengaged. Immense amounts of follow up studies have confirmed: *Focusing on strengths is contagious, counters negativity, and increases productivity.* When we are valued for our strengths, we bring our best to the workplace — including a spirit of resiliency.

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### *How do we develop a Resiliency Culture?*

*By choosing and motivating positive people, learning from the best and worst of our experiences, and thriving on challenges.*

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### **Consider Developmental Capability**

Invite employees to the next level of resiliency by considering their readiness. Big changes in cultures are often expected and rarely achieved. We move into greater resiliency in stages and phases rather than jumping from a “life sucks” view to a “life is great” status. (This contrasts with what Hollywood suggests can happen in a two-hour movie.) Workplaces may move up a stage and then regress before mastering that stage. We rarely leap-frog a stage of development individually or collectively.

The book *Tribal Leadership* gives us a useful picture of how work cultures think, feel and behave. The effectiveness of a “tribe” or workgroup is measured by observing patterns of language and relating. There are five stages:

5. Life is Great
4. We are Great (and you’re not)
3. I am Great (and you’re not)
2. My Life Sucks
1. Life Sucks

*Tribal Leadership: Leveraging Natural Groups to Build a Thriving Organization*, by Dave Logan, John King, and Halee Fischer-Wright (© 2011, HarperCollins)

Work groups tend to fall in such a normal distribution with the bulk in the “I am great” category. Adjust your leadership invitations to the stage where the group is and encourage people to step into their next “doable” level of achievement/excellence/capacity. For growth into the next level to be successful it is crucial that the right coaching and support be made available. This sends the message that the leader is invested in the success of the team or employee.

### **Promote the Five Levels of Resiliency**

Here are five levels of resiliency described by Dr. Al Siebert in his book, *The Resiliency Advantage*, along with suggestions of how to strengthen employees at each level.

**Level One ~ Health/Wellness:** Leaders at all levels can encourage people to prevent and address illness, to exercise regularly and strengthen their immune systems, to rest and play, to focus on the positive and to respect each others’ emotions. Physical, emotional, mental and organizational health are intertwined.

**Level Two ~ Problem Solving:** Organizations that train on and value analytical, creative and practical problem solving build confidence that any downturns, missteps and even disasters are just

challenges they are ready to face — preferably together. Cultures of continuous improvement are common in the best organizations, focusing on prevention and systems. Poor leaders are reactive and blame individuals for screw ups rather than getting at root causes. Wise leaders foster inclusive problem solving by refraining from presenting their own ideas first in order to encourage honesty and variety rather than conformity. In addition, it is crucial to consider how any one change is likely to affect many other people/programs/processes and the impacts beyond the immediate circle.

**Level Three ~ Self-Concept, Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence:** When we encourage people to define themselves in terms of strengths, they see themselves, others and their organizations as valuable partners in rising to the occasions. They feel proud in their own and others' accomplishments and view defeats as temporary delays in the long-term journey to meaningful success.

**Level Four ~ Balance and Complexity:** A bureaucracy that emphasizes rules over values breeds black and white thinking and a lack of flexibility and judgment. Mature people see the advantages of contrasting characteristics and a minimum of rules. Sometimes strictness and toughness are wise, while other times compassion and supportiveness make more sense. Pessimism prepares us for the worst, but optimism is essential to committing to the best. Believing that we are at least in part “the masters of our fate” leads us to more powerful, broad-based solutions.

**Level Five ~ Serendipity:** Part of bouncing back involves the determination to make our worst experiences our most valuable lessons. When a path is blocked, leaders strategically capitalize on other openings that allow us to change, grow and ultimately thrive. During World War II, Allied leaders made decisions that led to thousands of deaths on all sides, but after the war those same leaders were forgiving and supportive of rebuilding the destroyed societies. Changing the warlike cultures of Germany and Japan into the ones that they have become today is impressive in so many ways. But those were extreme situations.

Training is a culture carrier. At Nike, every new employee learns of the early company struggles and intense commitment put forth to overcome obstacles and pave the road to greatness. In any organization, senior people can tell the stories of personal and organizational disasters that turned into welcome opportunities. The onboarding process is the perfect time to communicate the strengths of one's organizational culture and lessons learned.

Every challenge has the potential for growth. Dr. Siebert encouraged frequently asking questions such as, “What did we learn from this? How has it changed the way we see things and future decisions? What is different as a result of this experience? What is the upside of this bad experience? What opportunities does it give us?” Downsizing, for example, is painful and often damaging, but it can also stimulate tough decisions on priorities and values.

Begin by visualizing overcoming the most daunting of obstacles and the most rewarding of successes. Set a goal of being resilient, commit to a plan, and celebrate your progress.

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~ Prepared by Glen Fahs, Ph.D., with contributions from Michelle Atlas. Glen is a board member of the Al Siebert Resiliency Center who trains on leadership and certifies resiliency facilitators and trainers. [ResiliencyCenter.com](http://ResiliencyCenter.com). Michelle also certifies resiliency facilitators as well as helps people successfully navigate transition. [Trust-Change.com](http://Trust-Change.com).