

# Building Resilience

## INTRODUCTION

On 27 July 2018 I was advised that my management role with a global mining company was being made redundant and, as there were no other open positions that suited my profile in the company, my employment would end on 31 August. On reflection, I think this is my fourth redundancy. In this essay I will endeavour to analyse my response to being told I was no longer needed, and suggest ways in which leaders, and others, can build resilience in the face of the increasing rate of change in the business world, and therefore probably more redundancies or career changes.

## WHAT IS RESILIENCE

Resilience is generally thought of as a positive adaptation after a stressful or adverse situation.<sup>1</sup> So resilience is not only about overcoming a deeply stressful situation, but also coming out of the situation with competent functioning. Resiliency allows a person or organisation to rebound from adversity as a strengthened and more resourceful entity.

The literature appears to suggest two views on strengthening resilience:

1. Optimistic - seek the silver lining in every dark cloud;
2. Pessimistic - have an exit strategy and get out while the going is good.

The most appropriate approach is probably to be as realistic as possible, but that's generally easier said than done if like me you are busy delivering a project and head down in the heat of moment. Perhaps more environmental scanning and awareness are worthwhile.

## APPRAISAL

Klein (2018) suggests that appraisal is the key to resilience.<sup>2</sup> This approach consists of reflecting on **why** an adverse event has occurred, **what** it means and **how** positive responses can be developed to circumvent or deal with the consequences.

---

<sup>1</sup> Resilience. (2018), In *Wikipedia: The free encyclopedia*. Retrieved 31/07/2018, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>.

<sup>2</sup> Klein, J. (2018). *Resilient Leadership*. Melbourne Business School Victoria, Australia.

## THE WHY - ATTRIBUTION

Why was I made redundant? The first time, back in 2005, was because I didn't want to change location and as a single parent I put my children first. The second and third times were because I did move and got separated from the structural changes going on in those organisations. This last time was due to decentralisation (this tends to be cyclical) and I didn't want to change location again. I could probably have avoided all of them by being more careful about my choice of job location and by staying closer to the office politics, but again that's not always possible and personal circumstances don't always align with the requirements of the job. Of course, initially I simply thought it was because I wasn't good enough and that the ones making the decisions didn't appreciate my abilities or my individual approach to work. I wasn't the only one leaving by the way!

At its Global Employer Forum in 2017, Baker McKenzie (the second largest law firm in the world) advised its members that:<sup>3</sup>

*“Globalisation and technological forces are disrupting traditional work models. The job-for life-model is over, and non-standard employment has become a feature of labour markets around the world. Similarly, employees are switching jobs more often, making it difficult to build a stable talent pipeline. HR leaders are looking at new ways to build loyalty, from flexible working and leadership opportunities to strong values and a sense of purpose.”*

The traditional form of job is becoming increasingly irrelevant, and the following trends have been predicted by expert commentators:<sup>4</sup>

- *Creation of a global workforce that, according to future work experts like Lynda Gratton (London Business School), will have ‘profound impacts on the way we work.’ It will mean continual growth in outsourcing, enabling companies to ‘figure out who their essential people are and simply outsource the rest’. Gratton says the past few years have been marked by the ‘hollowing out of work’ ... by which she means that the*

---

<sup>3</sup> Baker McKenzie. (2017). *Global Employer Forum: Future Works*. Retrieved 21/09/2018 from [www.bakermckenzie.com/-/media/files/expertise/employment/the-global-employer-forum\\_2017.pdf](http://www.bakermckenzie.com/-/media/files/expertise/employment/the-global-employer-forum_2017.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Luu, V. (2015). *The future of Work: 4 Trends to Look Out For*. Retrieved from [www.careerfaqs.com.au/news/news-and-views/the-future-of-work-4-trends-for-2015-and-beyond](http://www.careerfaqs.com.au/news/news-and-views/the-future-of-work-4-trends-for-2015-and-beyond).

*middle-skilled jobs traditionally taken by graduates have been outsourced (or automated) ... leaving only low- or high-skilled jobs.*

- *A continuing increase in the age of retirement. Between 2008 and 2013, in Australia this rose dramatically to sit between 61 and 63 years for men, and around 60 years for women. And it's going to continue. In the over 45 age brackets, almost two-thirds of people intend to retire at over 65 years of age, while 17 per cent expect to work till they are 70 or older.*
- *A strong cultural shift in the workplace as Gen-X take control and millennials flood the job market resulting in a focus on increased productivity, freedom and flexibility;*
- *Many experts like Gratton say businesses need to play a bigger role in combatting global issues to attract top talent, remain relevant and stay competitive. 'The issue of poverty and inequality is changing work, it's changing organisations,' said Gratton at the Future of Work conference. Society is placing increased pressure on organisations to pull their weight and help solve big global problems like climate change and extreme poverty. A global PWC survey found that 65 per cent of respondents wanted to work for an organisation with a powerful social conscience.<sup>5</sup>*

To stay employed and in-demand (to have a job), I believe that adaptability, flexibility, an inquisitive mind and continual learning are important to a long, fulfilling and productive life.

## THE WHAT - MEANING

My first thought was “does a sudden redundancy mean the end of my work life? Who employs older people? Are my skills still relevant?” Redundancy forces us to re-evaluate our work-selves and the meaning of our lives (trying to find the singular ‘meaning of life’ seems a pointless and rather arrogant exercise, unless you are the brilliant Terry Jones of Monty Python fame of course). Anderson (1992) indicates that work has meaning that relates to a social framework and goes beyond organisational boundaries.<sup>6</sup> A job on the other hand is viewed (by Anderson and others) to be the result of an interplay between situational and organisational dimensions, and the value and relevance of those to an individual. They

---

<sup>5</sup> PWC. (2018). *Workforce of the Future*. Retrieved from [www.pwc.com/gx/en/services/people-organisation/workforce-of-the-future/workforce-of-the-future-the-competing-forces-shaping-2030-pwc](http://www.pwc.com/gx/en/services/people-organisation/workforce-of-the-future/workforce-of-the-future-the-competing-forces-shaping-2030-pwc).

<sup>6</sup> Anderson, M-L. (1992). *The Meaning of Work and Job*. International Journal of Value-Based Management. New York, NY.

suggest that making a distinction between work and job meaning will encourage more productive comparisons between groups that are of different employment status (i.e. in this case, the redundant and the non-redundant).

According to Cartwright and Holmes (2006), the essence of meaning is “connection”, linked to positive outcomes for both the individual and the organisation.<sup>7</sup> Further, whereas life is characterised by ongoing change and anxiety, meaning is regarded as a tool for imposing stability.

So, it seems important to firstly separate the work (what we do) from the job (our current employment), and to find meaning in the work we do not just the job/s we have. Detrimentally perhaps, as highly social animals we tend to find a lot of meaning in the social aspects of our jobs, perhaps more so in many cases than in the intrinsic value of the work itself. Certainly, in the future the social dimension of our jobs will be more virtual / on-line and supported by social media rather than face to face. Organisations and individuals or course need to be careful about the use and misuse of such platforms.

(Terkel, 1972, taken from Cartwright and Holmes, 2006):<sup>8</sup>

***“Work is about a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor, in short for a sort of life rather than a Monday to Friday sort of dying.”***

## THE HOW - COPING

Our initial coping responses can be healthy or unhealthy. Mine initially leant towards the unhealthy, but Matt Golinski’s story of recovery after the devastating house fire that resulted in the deaths of his wife and two children provided the impetus for me to take my own action and change that.<sup>9</sup>

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), the primary factor contributing to resilience is having caring and supportive relationships that create love and trust, provide

---

<sup>7</sup> Cartwright, S. & Holmes, N. (2006). *The Meaning of Work: The Challenge of Regaining Employee Engagement and Reducing Cynicism*. Human Resource Management Review. Manchester, UK.

<sup>8</sup> Terkel, S. (1972). *Working*. Avon Books. New York, NY.

<sup>9</sup> Australian Story. (2018). *Running from Empty*. Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

role models and offer encouragement and reassurance.<sup>10</sup> The more forward looking and action-oriented factors noted by APA are:

- *The capacity to make realistic plans and take steps to carry them out;*
- *A positive view and confidence in your strengths and abilities (perhaps appropriately modified by a realistic view of the situation);*
- *Skills in communication and problem solving;*
- *The ability to manage strong feelings and impulses;*
- *Maintaining flexibility and balance.*

Sonnenfeld and Ward (2007), in research analysing more than 450 executive successions and transitions at large companies, found that *“leaders who cannot recover have a tendency to blame themselves and are often tempted to dwell on the past rather than look to the future.”<sup>11</sup> They secretly hold themselves responsible for their career setback, whether they were or not, and get caught in a psychological web of their own making, unable to move beyond the position they no longer hold”*. The authors suggest a rather more combative approach involving taking pre-emptive action, ensuring people know and can deal with your situation, then creating and telling a consistent and powerful story focused on personal recovery and a bright future.

In the same article, Sonnenfeld and Ward discuss getting beyond rage and denial and suggest that one of the most important coping mechanisms is simply to confront and acknowledge failure. *“This can be as simple as understanding the Machiavellian politics of others.”*

*“Some CEOs, such as Ford’s Jacques Nasser, Hewlett-Packard’s Carly Fiorina, IBM’s John Akers, United Air Lines’ Richard Ferris, and Apple’s John Sculley have similarly failed to return to lead major public firms. They were considered brilliant leaders by many and were never accused of plundering the shareholders’ wealth, like some rogue*

---

<sup>10</sup> American Psychological Association. (2018). *The Road to Resilience*. Retrieved 31/07/2018, from <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx>.

<sup>11</sup> Sonnenfeld J. & Ward A. (2007). *Firing Back: How Great Leaders Recover After Career Disasters*. Harvard Business Review. Boston, Ma.

*CEOs of recent years. But they never fought back, and they disappeared from the corner office.”<sup>12</sup>*

## A RESILIENCE FRAMEWORK – TWO KEY FACTORS

### DEVELOPING A SUPPORTIVE NETWORK

Strong resilience of course starts well before any adverse event. The creation of a supportive network of family, friends, colleagues and acquaintances takes many years of careful nurturing. Most if not all adverse events have an impact on our supportive networks, and the event may in fact be or may result in the withdrawal of part of that network (e.g. the work colleagues that are seen and support us every day). The broader and more diverse the network, the stronger the web left behind is likely to be when part of it is removed. My recommendation therefore is to work hard at building a diverse network across multiple dimensions, supported by high emotional intelligence.

### IMPROVING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

The essential factor supporting career resilience is likely to be a high degree of emotional intelligence, and this gathers together much of what has been mentioned previously. *“Emotional intelligence (is) a different way of being smart, is a key to high performance at all levels, particularly for outstanding leadership.”<sup>13</sup>* Goleman (2017) defines a 12-element approach to building emotional intelligence organised under the headings Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness and Relationship Management. A high degree of emotional intelligence appears crucial to building resilience.

One element in Goleman’s set of emotional intelligence building blocks is worth mentioning, and that is Positive Outlook:

*“Positive Outlook is the ability to see the positive in people, situations and events. It means persistence in pursuing goals, despite setbacks and obstacles. You can see the opportunity in situations where others would see a setback that would be devastating,*

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Goleman, D. (2017). *Building Blocks of Emotional Intelligence*. Key Step Media.

*at least for them. You expect the best from other people. It's that glass-half-full outlook that leads you to believe that changes in the future will be for the better."*<sup>14</sup>

Goleman and his colleagues suggest that a positive outlook can be learned and strengthened with practice. I suggest you act to strengthen your positive outlook.

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.