The changing nature of work

Leadership

Why resilience is critical for today’s leaders

Continual change, increasing demands and the pace of work means that leaders in today’s organisations must not only build new and different capabilities, but actively manage their capacity for exercising leadership. Developing resilience in both the body and mind to handle complexity is not a luxury, but a strategic advantage.

There has never been an easy time to be a leader in business, but the challenges facing organisations today – from technology and disruption through to customer demands and the 24/7 work cycle – are putting even more pressure on those at the forefront.

“One of the really interesting factors impacting on leaders’ capacity is the interconnected nature of work,” says Dr Jane Gunn, Partner, People & Change, KPMG. “Once leaders were able to focus on leading a division in an organisation where they achieved outcomes through authority and position in the hierarchy. Now, ability to ‘just do your job in silo’ doesn’t work anymore.”

Gunn explains that it is more common to be connecting with other people, both within and external to your own organisation, to get work done.

“But the reality is that it is harder and it takes considerably more time and energy than sitting at a desk producing a discussion paper, for example.”

Add to this ever-growing email inboxes, social media, 24/7 business cycles, and family commitments, and finding ways to maximise capacity becomes critically important.

“One of the core dimensions of building capacity is resilience, Gunn explains.

“Resilience is a central component of one’s capacity to lead. It’s the ability of leaders to manage their own personal responses and reactions in a fast-paced environment.”

Cognitive overload and the productivity myth

A problem for leaders in this complex and competitive environment is the need to ‘multi-task’, with technology demands adding to the ‘cognitive overload’, explains Andrew May, Partner, KPMG Performance Clinic.

“This can impact their memory and processing capacity by 15 percent,” he warns.

Gunn adds that leaders, and no doubt their teams, are working without the opportunity to “stop, think, pause, not react, and deal with strategic issues – and not just deal with emails”.

“There’s a myth that we are productive if we have cleared our inbox – therefore we’ve been effective as a leader,” she says.

Cultivating resilience

In this whirlwind of pressure, resilience is not just about stoicism and pushing through with sheer might, but rather a combination of three areas – body, brain and organisational preparedness, May explains.
1. Physical fitness and energy levels

“The first piece of resilience is moving your body. Get 10,000 steps today. This is not for fitness, it’s for mitochondria – little powerhouse energy cells. That wakes the body up and gets the system working properly,” May says.

In addition, he advises that at least 3-4 hours of physical activity each week should be a priority.

“That’s to increase VO2 Max [maximum rate of oxygen consumption], which also increases our ability to switch between stress and recovery. Movement gives you energy, and physical activity helps us regulate emotion,” he says.

In addition to movement, May says good nutrition is vital, with sugar consumption moderate.

“Eat regular meals including protein, which has dopamine to fuel the body, and lots of fresh vegetables and fruit,” he says.

2. Psychological fitness – flexibility in thinking

Leaders with ‘fixed mindsets’ will struggle to execute fast-paced, proactive and reactive thinking. However, May says “you can change the way you think.”

“With thinking skills, 50 percent is genetic, 40 percent is trainable and 10 percent is lifestyle. You can work on your thinking skills to become more flexible.”

May says having the mindset to switch gears, see things differently and seize opportunities sets resilient leaders apart.

“Business plans used to be for 5 years. Now they are for 12 months. And 3 months into that, you often need to adapt. If leaders don’t have flexible thinking, it’s tough,” he says.

3. Organisational resilience – a focus on culture

If leaders are building their own resilience, they can also cultivate this in their teams to nurture a more resilient organisation, Gunn explains. She suggests that leaders have to “visibly and loudly do things differently.”

“Talk about what you’re doing differently and why you’re doing it differently. Link it to the organisation’s success, and build the narrative in the organisation. If you take time out to pick up your kids put it in your diary; don’t hide it. It’s part of how we maintain our capacity for leadership.”

If leaders role-model resilience, the impact on company culture and sustainability could be strong. However, May says when making time for health and fitness, blocking time to brainstorm, or working at home to focus, leaders could face initial cynicism.

“You’ve got to give people permission to work differently,” he says.

Time matters

An undercurrent of these three factors is the issue that modern leaders are time poor. He says to build resilience, time must be allocated to make it happen.

“You have to shift from talking about this to doing it. Even if it’s small steps. You’ve got to put space in your diary,” May says.

Permission to pause

In addition to body, mind and organisational change, cultivating resilience also requires reflection and recovery, May says.

“The best innovation lab we have is our brains. And what underpins that is cultivating free space to think,” he says.

Gunn points to the overall return on investment for the business from cultivating resilience.

“If we can’t think strategically, how are we going to sense disruption in our industry?” she says.