



Resilient Leaders Shine Despite Adversity

BY MARCIA HUGHES

Emotional intelligence skills enhance leaders' ability to recover from setbacks.

President Abraham Lincoln remains a model of transformative leadership more than 150 years after he served as the 16th president of the United States. Lincoln led the United States through its Civil War—a great constitutional and political crisis. Throughout his presidency, he was focused on his vision of maintaining the unity of the nation with unwavering passion, yet was able to exert high flexibility and impulse control in the strategies he employed. He took time to listen well, seek out and consider diverse feedback, and was willing to shift his strategies. No one had time during the Civil War to talk about change management, yet that was the order of the day. Lincoln is one of our best resilience teachers.

Challenges prevail

Leaders in all forms of organizations—whether it's a large technology company, an international financial company, a CEO leading a bank, or a third-generation farmer running the family's agricultural operation—must respond to demands for change due to fluctuating market conditions, difficult interpersonal relationships in the workplace, personal attacks from opposing forces, and strategic failures. What's the difference between those who succeed and those who struggle? Resilience is one of the critical differentiators.

I've found it helpful in leadership training to point out the challenges Lincoln faced. He battled depression, his son died, and his wife was deeply bereaved. He was constantly attacked politically, and was strategically second-guessed by the minute. He grievously suffered from the loss of so many American lives under his watch. Yet, Lincoln actively related to those around him.

He listened and sought out diverse feedback. He made changes while keeping focus on his vision, resulting in the Emancipation Proclamation, and maintaining the union of the states as one nation. We all need role models. It helps today's leaders to know that others struggle, to understand that they aren't alone, and to see the possibility of success amid adversity.

Promoting self-awareness and resilience

In Collaborative Growth's work with leaders across the world, we are finding a growing need for expanding resilience, which is defined as the dynamic capacity to modify one's level of personal control in response to environmental pressures. Resilience calls for the ability to develop reserves and the knowledge of when to tap into them, to overcome challenges or recover from setbacks.



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One young leader brought a current challenge into our training. She was easygoing, but also was a high achiever and wanted things done right. She had an important deadline on a creative project and had worked hard to build innovative solutions. Her solutions were in place, but she missed her deadline because she wasn't provided the data she needed in time. Her loud, angry response earned her a few days of administrative leave. She didn't shine; instead she lost ground.

It turns out that not only had this leader worked tirelessly on the project; she also had significant family and personal health issues happening concurrently. Not getting the data was the proverbial "straw that broke the camel's back." We characterize her situation as being out of resources to draw upon. Remember, resilience is about being able to bounce back. She couldn't bounce back right then because her resources were tapped out.

We created a visual metaphor called a Resilience Meter as a way of building self-awareness, allowing the establishment of a process to regularly check in. Leaders need to be aware of how they are being perceived, and have the courage to stop and refill their personal well of resourcefulness to prevent derailing. On a range from beginning potential (0 percent) to full potential (100 percent), we ask leaders to estimate where they are at the moment and to reflect on what that indicates.

As they watch their status change over time, a light dawns when they recognize the difference in their behaviors at differing levels of resilience, such as when their resilience is at 25 percent compared with 75 percent. There is no substitute for the value of such concrete feedback.

Too often people don't know the impact of their emotions on themselves

and on others. Self-management is only possible with self-awareness.

Behavioral habits can change, but not accidentally

Six emotional intelligence skills are pivotal to building one's reservoir of emotional reserves: emotional self-awareness, self-regard, impulse control, stress tolerance, optimism, and flexibility. Each skill can be developed or tuned up when the awareness and motivation are present.



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Gaining data about one's overall capacity in these skill areas can be quite helpful; we use the Emotional Quotient Inventory 2.0 (EQ-i 2.0) to do so. Applications of one's skills shift given circumstances and stresses, and we advise clients to regularly check their emotional pulse with tools such as our Resilience Meter. This immediately boosts self-awareness, especially when paired with writing down behavioral outcomes reflected by their current emotional state.

Self-regard is deeply influenced by internal dialogue. Thus, we have our clients write a few short positive and directional messages to give themselves—for example, "I care, pay attention, and seek to be kind." Often they find themselves interrupting negative, even berating, self-talk and replacing it with the resourceful message. This changes how they treat themselves and others.

Research shows that impulse control deeply affects how well we use

the rest of our emotional intelligence skills. Personal intervention begins with stopping and reflecting, taking a deep breath, and then choosing how to respond.

We ask leaders to ask questions such as, "Is it the right time to show irritation? Will it help get the desired results?" This helps them strategically manage their impulses.

Stress tolerance and flexibility can be addressed together. We find that when our clients face a challenge, stepping back and looking at the bigger picture enables them to gain perspective that helps build alignment. When they gain perspective on the big-picture goal and put the current challenge in perspective, they build resourcefulness and let the creative juices flow.

This strategy helps support optimism, a competency that is best developed through effective language patterns. Much of optimism is based on how we frame a matter.

It's the difference between "We just don't know the answer" and "We just don't know the answer yet." The yet establishes the hope-inspiring presupposition that we'll find the answer.

An essential skill

People weren't specifically training in resiliency 150 years ago, yet Lincoln harnessed the skill and led the nation masterfully. Today, we know how essential this skill is and benefit by learning from those who have displayed resiliency in the past.

By combining this awareness with current neurological, motivational, and leadership research, we can proactively build emotional intelligence skills that support our resilience resources.

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