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White Paper

Resilience at Work

A Framework for Coaching and Interventions

ADAPT | OPTIMISE | SUSTAIN

Kathryn McEwen
Organisational Psychologist



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An Overview In Five

Are you likely to be replaced by a bot or an algo-rhythm?
Are you part of the gig economy with its job uncertainty? Is your role becoming more complex and your customers more demanding? Are you trying to keep up with industry changes or tasked with leading disruption at an unrelenting pace?

If so, welcome to a new era at work where resilience will be core to your success.

This paper explores how to *create clarity* around what resilience is at work, *generate energy* towards achieving it and *deliver successful outcomes* for our organisations.

We know that if you are tasked with helping build workplace resilience, you will be more successful if you:

Clearly define resilience by:

- » Redefining work resilience as being about strengthening future performance rather than coping better
- » Educating that resilience is a dynamic state and that we can rewire the brain and cultivate it. Fixed traits such as our personality do not define it
- » Having an evidence-based framework that synthesises the complexity of resilience into straightforward language suited to the workplace.

Consider the workplace context by:

- » Understanding the context and customising your approach to address the challenges being experienced 'on the ground'.

Taking a systemic approach by:

- » Creating sustainable change by taking a systems approach to your interventions - recognising that what we do personally, how our leaders behave and what is happening in our environment dynamically interact.
- » Aligning individual, leader and team coaching and support - recognising that it's the interconnections that matter.

Offer relevant evidence-based advice by:

- » Providing practical strategies, within people's scope of influence to change
- » Integrating research on how to manage pressure and challenge with neuroscience findings and evidence around the elements proven to promote thriving at work.

Integrate what you do with business strategy and systems by:

- » Moving resilience training from wellbeing programs to longer-term initiatives that define and build the cultures that we need in our organisations for them to be persistent, agile, and relevant in a changing landscape.
- » Aligning employee actions with organisational resiliency processes promoted in functions such as business continuity, cyber security, risk management and emergency response.

If these possibilities prompt a desire to explore more, then read on for a deeper dive...

Take A Deeper Dive

Why is Resilience a Hot Topic in Workplaces?

The world of work is now fast-paced, digitised and interdependent. Regardless of your job or industry, chances are you are trying to do more with less, please more demanding customers, solve complex issues and stay relevant in a shifting marketplace. The acronym VUCA, a term borrowed from the military, is often used to describe this new environment as one that is Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous.

Whatever is happening in your job, it's likely that you are balancing these demands with a home life full of the usual 'busyness' and curved balls.

How do you meet these life challenges? How do you adapt and perform while still staying physically and mentally well? One of the responses frequently offered is 'build your resilience'.

"A new era of work makes resilience a critical attribute."

Before we can build anything it is useful to understand what it is we are actually building. This means that a clear definition of what we mean by work resilience is a good place to start.

The Impact of a Definition

The power of the word 'resilience' is that it immediately resonates. The downside of its familiarity is we have different versions of what it means.

When I ask people to define work resilience, the most frequent responses are 'bouncing back', 'coping with stress or change', 'being tough or mentally strong' or 'adapting positively'. The research literature adds to this diversity with a myriad of definitions,¹ many of which generate out of mental health or trauma studies.

While we must accommodate the rising rates of mental illness, when we look to build workforce resilience we are generally supporting the 'working well' rather than those recovering from trauma or major setback. These people want to manage and thrive in the *everyday* challenges they are facing. To create clarity of purpose we need a definition of work resilience that resonates with their needs.

A good place to start is to align our definition with what people want when they request resilience. Leaders want employees and teams that can manage the challenges of the work itself, whether it's the high emotional labour, workload or physical or psychological hazards. They seek people who can manage uncertainty and adapt and grow through setbacks. Ideally, these employees are also proactive and anticipate the future needs of the business. They are agile enough to anticipate and implement these – whether it's designing new systems or products or realigning resources

to address shifting external or internal demands. On the flip side, employees themselves want to enjoy and feel productive in their work – after all, they spend on average, 1737 hours a year there.²

Our definition of personal work resilience is:

Personal work resilience: The capacity to manage the everyday stress of work while staying healthy, adapting and learning from setbacks and preparing for future challenges pro-actively.

If we extend these principles to a group of people we can define team resilience as:

Team resilience: The collective capacity to perform optimally while maintaining wellbeing, adapting to change and setback and positioning for sustainable success in challenging work.

Is Resilience Static?

Can we claim to possess resilience? Is a trait that we have or do not have?

If we combine systems theory³ with neuroscience⁴ the answer is a resounding 'no'.

Resilience is not a fixed trait but a state that is dynamic and can change.⁵ This means it is not an attribute we can claim, or say we lack, but a state that we strive to maintain or build.

The evidence from neuroscience is that the adult brain is plastic and we can rewire it to cultivate resilience, particularly in the amygdala and the medial pre-frontal cortex (MPFC). It also tells us that the wider our repertoire of strategies the more likely we are to find the right approach for the presenting circumstances.⁶

I think of resilience-building as developing a toolkit of actions and ways of thinking. The more tools we have at our disposal, and the more skilled we are at using them, the better our chance of staying in a resilient state.

"Resilience is a life-long journey. None of us can claim it as a permanent state."

Does Personality Matter?

When I debate the relationship between personality and resilience in workshops, people often assert that personality traits have a big impact.

The most widely accepted model of personality, the five-factor model, describes our personality as having five dimensions. Included in these are openness to experience, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.⁷ Intuitively, we would expect that high scores in these, apart from neuroticism, would be helpful for our resilience.

The reality seems to be more complex and my experience is that we can overuse these traits in a way that detracts from our resilience. Too much conscientiousness, especially combined with perfectionism, can overlay unrealistic personal standards on top of high job demands. Being very open can mean embracing and taking on too much. Agreeableness is a key attribute in teamwork, yet over-accommodating other's needs at the expense of your own is not sustainable. Relationship-building can be easier when you are extroverted yet the downside is too much socialising. Lastly, even neuroticism can be useful as it can be linked to creativity and the capacity to be the innovative disrupter. Steve Jobs is a good example of this.⁸

“It’s not your personality that matters but how you use it.”

It is useful to consider personality as a resource much like your networks, experiences and other assets. The key is to embrace who you are but understand how your attributes can help or decrease your resilience in the face of different challenges.

Is Resilience-Building a Band-Aid?

Elastoplast sponsored the recent Commonwealth Games in Australia with a ‘get back up again’ resilience message. One criticism sometimes touted at work is that resilience-building enables organisations to abdicate responsibility for job stress by getting people to cope better. In other words, it ‘band-aids’ the real issues by implying that employees simply need to toughen up.

There is no doubt that the best way to deal with pressure is to remove or modify its source. The literature on psychosafety work culture adds substantial value in this regard.⁹ Unfortunately, though, many of the job pressures experienced can be outside our scope of influence to change. Technological advances, economic pressures and even the people we work with are good examples. Added to this is the fact that our perception of a situation is very individualised. Something that can be stressful for one person can be motivational to another and the experience of what constitutes stress is complex.¹⁰

Applying the terminology used in health services, we could consider resilience as a ‘secondary’ intervention. We still need ‘primary’ interventions that remove the sources of stress, where possible, and ‘tertiary’ activities such as employee assistance programs yet resilience-building sits between and complements these. It helps us strengthen our future performance through better managing the challenges we are facing while acting as a protective mechanism against mental illness and other outcomes of not coping.

“Resilience is about strengthening future performance.”

Now that we have explored what we mean by resilience at work how do we go about building it?

How Do We Build Resilience at Work?

Resilience is a concept not unlike others we promote in the workplace such as engagement and leadership. We know it when we see it but the elements that comprise it are complicated, especially when we define it as a dynamic and individualised state. Each person, team, and organisation is unique and requires a customised systemic approach.

Taking a Customised and Systemic Approach

Workplaces are comprised of dynamic, evolving and interconnected systems. This means it makes no sense to coach just individuals. To sustainably build our workforce's resilience we need to invest in our people, the teams they work within, the leaders that support them and organisational structures and processes that foster the desired behaviours.

The evidence that organisational change needs a systemic approach is long-standing. Why then is there a continued emphasis on individuals? Part of the reason may be the origins of resilience research, with much of it stemming from therapeutic or positive psychology studies which generally focus on individuals.^{11,12}

“If systemic interventions are best it makes no sense to coach people in isolation.”

Therapeutic approaches often have limited appeal to the ‘working well’ and do not easily translate to workplace settings unless people are working in vocations with exposure to trauma, such as police or ambulance drivers. In any case, should it be the organisation's role to provide interventions that really sit in the counselling space?

Is it time to review the use of clinical strategies with their inherent remediation and mental illness focus?

Another key source of resilience strategies is the positive psychology movement. Here the focus is on creating a thriving and happy life through activities such as positivity, flow, gratitude and leveraging strengths.¹³ This movement has been criticised by some for its bias towards the positive without acknowledgment that we need negativity to appreciate what is good in our life.¹⁴ It also does not easily embrace specific strategies to deal with occupational stress. Certainly, I have observed in my work that people will often engage in conversations about thriving only if they know that the obstacles they are facing, such as high workload or values conflict, are also deserving of attention. It's as though the problems take centre focus and there is less inclination to look beyond these unless there is confidence they are being addressed. Interestingly, neuroscience confirms this negativity-bias in the hard-wiring of the brain.⁴

Is there opportunity then to combine the research on occupational stress with evidence on what enables us to thrive at work and findings from neuroscience?

Developing an Approach that is Fit for Our Purpose

As organisational psychologists, we pride ourselves in using evidence-based practice. Unfortunately, the research often lags behind emerging workplace needs. An area can become quite topical before the evidence is established and we fill the void with solutions based on the best information we have available. This has certainly been the case with work resilience as while there is substantial evidence around how to build resilience in clinical or community settings, less is known on how to create resilience in the workplace. The research is only just evolving.

There is also confusion around what constitutes evidence. I have observed that findings from scientific studies are often applied to entirely different cohorts and contexts and labelled as evidence-based. This can lead to a mix of eclectic strategies, all with independent research findings, being collated and promoted to organisations.

I personally advocate the work of Professor Rob Briner who promotes an evidence-based approach as comprising empirical studies combined with internal organisational data, stakeholder concerns and practitioner professional expertise.¹⁵

The Resilience at Work (R@W) Toolkit was devised to address the gaps outlined above. It blends what we know about thriving and occupational stress and provides a systemic framework that considers the complexity of resilience in the work context. The research study behind the toolkit was informed by extensive practitioner experience and considers organisational needs.^{16, 17}

The toolkit's aim is to assist organisations to better communicate and foster the actions needed to build resilience within the workplace. It comprises a set of three inter-related models and measures that explore what we need to do at a personal, team and leader level to build resilience at work. The toolkit, as shown in Figure 1, includes:

- » The Resilience at Work® (R@W) Individual model – Exploring what you need to do to be personally resilient at work
- » The Resilience at Work® (R@W) Team model – Outlining what you need to do collectively to be a resilient team
- » The Resilience at Work® (R@W) Leader model – Providing actions you can take as a leader to foster resilience in the teams you lead.

Each model stands in its own right, but when applied together they provide a powerful way to systemically build resilience at work.

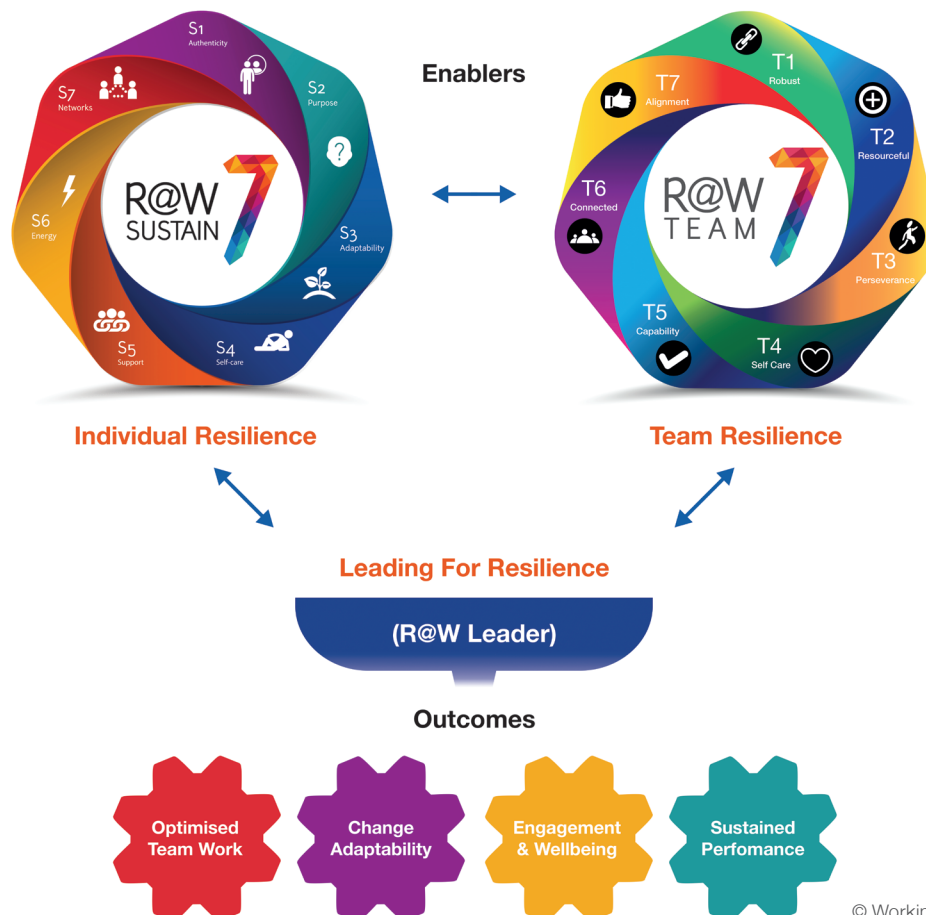


Figure 1: R@W® Toolkit

Before exploring the R@W Toolkit it may be useful to outline the principles that guided its development. You can then assess how these resonate with your own beliefs.

In leading this work with colleagues I wanted to develop a resource that:

- » Is designed for the workplace, with language that makes sense and resonates in all occupations and at all levels of seniority
- » Connects with the organisational drivers of resilience – that is, considers what is needed for people to manage challenging jobs
- » Takes a systemic approach and aligns the behaviours of teams, their members, and their leaders, while considering the context in which they work
- » Recognises that how we achieve a state of resilience is a unique interplay between us and our environment
- » Provides very practical actions that are within the scope of influence of individuals and teams to change
- » Acknowledges that wellbeing at work needs to be considered together with job performance, not for its own sake
- » Takes a holistic approach to resilience by considering the cognitive, emotional, physical and purpose aspects that contribute to it, as well as the impact of our work lives
- » Blends strategies for coping from the occupational stress research together with thriving approaches from the positive psychology literature and neuroscience.

Each aspect of the toolkit is outlined below.

Building Personal Work Resilience – The R@W® Individual

The R@W Individual model, also known as the Sustain 7 (Figure 2), has seven components (resources) that contribute to our personal resilience. Neuroscience tells us the more resources we have, the better equipped we are to manage both adverse situations and everyday demands. The idea is then that we invest in as many of the seven components as we can.



Figure 2: R@W® Individual Model

Over-reliance on one resource can sometimes prove limiting. For example, I have coached people who relied mainly on exercise to manage stress and when injured became depressed. Similarly, I have seen clients who have used mental toughness (grit) to persist despite damage to their health and relationships.

We have found in our international coaching work that the model resonates with almost all occupations and with every level of seniority within organisations. It provides a high-level roadmap that is simple enough to be easily communicated and understood, yet comprehensive enough to guide and facilitate in-depth reflection. What creates resilience in any one situation will be unique to each of us. It's complex but a model is a good way to start the conversation.

Let's now explore the seven components...



Energy

Investing in your physical health

Energy levels have an impact on our wellbeing and performance. Put simply this means that we need to pay attention to our diet, exercise and sleep. Sleep is particularly important as while its impact on job performance is obvious we also know that sleep deprivation is associated with depression. Proper sleep and aerobic exercise buffer stress, improve mood and alter pre-frontal cortex function.⁶

Investing in our energy is straightforward but not easy. It demands establishing new habits.

How well are you investing in your body and what do you expect to get out of it? Understanding your physiology and how to change habits is useful here.¹⁸



Self-care

Developing routines and outlets to sustain you

It makes sense that we cannot be resilient at work without being on top of our everyday pressures and priorities. A key aspect of work resilience is having effective ways to manage the everyday challenges. It's also ensuring that work demands do not overly compromise our home life. Actively engaging with a challenge strengthens the brain's neural pathway for improved future coping.⁶

Self-care involves investing in relaxation, recovery and 'reset' activities both during the day and after hours. It also involves maintaining boundaries so that work does not overly intrude into other aspects of life. Finding activities that allow you to switch off, recharge and get into flow are helpful, as are techniques such as meditation and mindfulness. Good workload management such as prioritising, scheduling or negotiating expectations also assists.

In some occupations, the challenge may not be workload but emotional tension arising from working with challenging or distressing situations. If your work is high in what psychologists term emotional labour, managing compassion fatigue and personal-professional boundaries becomes important.¹⁹ You may also need access to debriefing. Passion is integral to caring work but without boundaries and support your wellbeing can be compromised.

What routines and actions do you have that help you master the challenges in your life?

Understanding your specific sources of pressure, how you respond and what you can do differently may assist here.^{20,21}



Adaptability

Maintaining perspective and positivity

Few jobs are static – whether it's adapting at a micro level with new tasks or colleagues, or at a macro level when the role fundamentally shifts. Adaptability requires problem-solving around the issues, rather than getting stuck in fixed 'should' and 'ought to' thinking.

Optimism promotes resilience. What's more, emotion is contagious and negativity can be toxic to a team. I have met teams physically unwell through working in emotional tension all day. Resilience involves managing our mood, letting go of what can't be influenced and paying attention to what is possible. In essence, it's positivity with a flexible plan.

This frequent need for adaptability in jobs has prompted the concept of an adaptability quotient (AQ). In a similar way to Intelligence Quotient (IQ) and its successor emotional intelligence (EQ), AQ is being touted as important for work performance.

How easily do you engage in optimism and flexible thinking when work is difficult, dynamic and unpredictable? Understanding your level of optimism, the power of positivity and thinking traps you may fall into may help.^{22, 23, 24}

“To do things differently, we need to do different things.”



Purpose

Believing in what you do

Purpose and a sense of belonging promote engagement, performance, and wellbeing. If you believe in what you are doing, have a passion for the job and feel connected to the organisation you will be more resilient. You can test this out yourself by reflecting on whether you see your work as a job or a vocation and the consequences of this.

This impact of the 'purpose' aspect of resilience is sometimes noticed more when it is absent. I have observed that when people have high expectations around adding value in their role, it has a greater personal impact when expectations aren't realised. A good example is my work with charitable organisations. If people join with an expectation of doing good in the world, and their experience is different, it may prompt them to leave. Professionals sometimes talk

of a loss of integrity in the work. When they describe this they often mean that the service standards they have been trained in cannot be realised in their work setting. It's another version of misaligned or unrealised purpose.

Of course, not all of us have the privilege of purpose in our work, in which case using work as an enabler to live the out-of-work life you want takes precedence.

How clear and connected are you around the 'why' in your work? Exploring your purpose may be of value.²⁵



Networks

Creating a 'team us'

We all need a sense of connection and relationships with people who can reciprocate support. Positive social connection alters the brain's MPFC integrity and function and can improve mood and reduce distress responses.⁶ Consider this component as establishing a 'team us' that you develop and invest in differently as your circumstances change. Whether it's practical help at home such as picking up the children, back up at work or access to advice, a network is important. Critical gaps in support or over-reliance on one or two people, especially if these are colleagues or partners who help with both personal and work issues, can be problematic.

Do you have the support network you need to live your life? Are there any gaps in the support you need or are you over-reliant on one or two people? Consider the assistance you need and determine which relationships you can foster.



Authenticity

Finding work that matches personal strengths and beliefs

This proactive element of resilience involves having a good self-awareness of personal strengths and values and finding employment that aligns with these.

This aspect often becomes more noticeable when there is a disconnect between a person and their role. I have found that when my clients have a values clash with colleagues or job requirements it can cause distress. Often people leave, if they can, as it's not emotionally sustainable to work long-term in these circumstances.

Additionally, if you are working outside of your strengths, the evidence from positive psychology suggests that both your wellbeing and performance will be impacted.¹³ A typical example of this is when the technical expert takes on a leadership position when they do not enjoy, or are not suited to, people management.

The ultimate goal is to spend more of your working day using your strengths. If this is out of scope for you, how do you balance this with using strengths in your non-work pursuits?

Can you seek work or craft your current job to better align with your strengths and values? A good starting point is exploring what your values and strengths are.²⁶



Support

Promoting mutual support and open communication

In the research behind the R@W model, we found that how you interact with colleagues is important to your resilience. Promoting a climate of openness and mutual support helps. This means being confident in your strengths but willing to be vulnerable and ask for support when you need it. It also includes offering assistance without being asked and seeking and acting on feedback. Feedback promotes your adaptability as you cannot change without understanding how you are performing.

How well do you engender mutual support with colleagues and ensure that you seek and act on feedback? If this is not possible where you work, who validates and supports you outside of work. Developing effective feedback skills as well as recognising the obstacles to asking for help are a good start here.²⁷

The extent to which you deploy your personal resilience toolkit can be supported or compromised by your team. Team culture matters. It's also the case that a group of resilient individuals will not guarantee a resilient team - this requires attention to collective actions.

This is not to say that coaching people individually does not add value, rather that working with the team as well produces greater dividends.

“A group of resilient people does not guarantee a resilient team.”

Now it's time to explore the concept of team resilience...

Building Resilient Teams – The R@W® Team

Most of us work in one or more teams these days. Saying we are a team is quite different however from being one.²⁸

Changing circumstances are turning team development on its head. Staying up all night and building a raft may build teamwork outside of the work context but the learnings do not necessarily translate to the job. It is time to shift to 'in situ' approaches - investing in developing group behaviours that are specific to the challenges faced?

In our research and consulting work we have discovered that what we each do contributes to part of team resilience but not all of it.¹⁷ There are additional areas that we need to focus on together.

While accountability for personal resilience rests with us, the behaviours amongst our colleagues will add or detract to our efforts. The outcomes are shaped by the unwritten rules of how things operate. We may, for example, want to ask for more support and feedback but a competitive workplace makes this difficult. We may be clear on our purpose, but others around us may have a different version of this.

To date, there has been limited research on team resilience.

In practice, many practitioners use the aggregate of the resilience of individual group members as a measure of team resilience. The R@W Team model (Figure 3) addresses this gap.¹⁷ It highlights seven factors that assist a team to perform optimally while staying well. Once again, it's about being able to sustain success over the longer term.

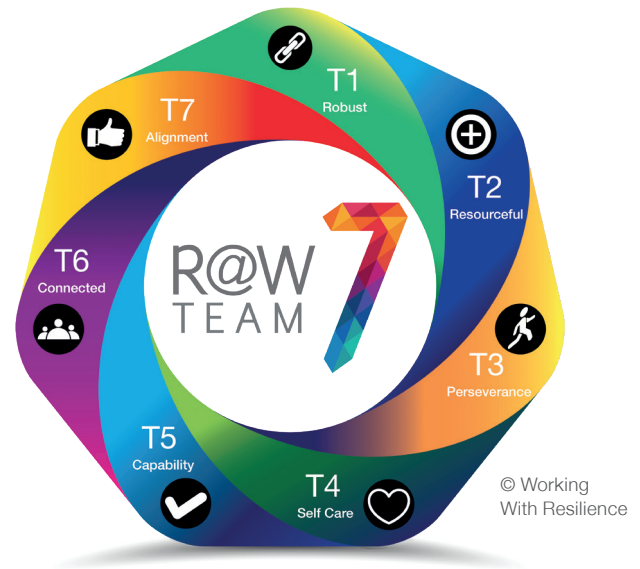


Figure 3: R@W® Team model

Importantly, the R@W Team model focuses on actions that can be implemented by the team itself. While a team's actions are inhibited by external demands, both within and outside of the organisation, the premise is that teams can still create a sub-culture that promotes resilience. How often have you observed two teams with the same challenges vary considerably in their effectiveness?

The R@W Team integrates elements well established as components of high performing teams, such as common purpose, with emerging factors like agility that are becoming more critical.

When developing our personal resilience we advocated investing in all seven R@W components. In teams we need a more strategic approach - but more of that later...

The 7 characteristics of a resilient team are explored below.



Robust

Solid intention with agility

Resilient teams know and share in their purpose, that is, the reason why they exist. What's more, they have clear goals that align with this and are proactive when obstacles arise. In a government department, for example, they are clear on how their role and tasks contribute to serving the public and address issues that inhibit achieving this.

While team intentions need to be solid, frequent change demands agile delivery. While purpose generally remains fixed, goals and the means of achieving them may need flexibility. Bureaucracy, complex processes and fixed mind-sets can be inhibitors here.

The contrast to robustness within a team is hidden or competing agendas and an unwillingness to realign actions with changes that have occurred. You may, for example, appear to have agreement around the table yet people walk away and undermine what was decided or stay married to the way they have always done things. Skills in conflict competence may assist teams with this challenge.²⁹



Resourceful

Optimising resources and processes

An emerging demand for teams is the need to do more with less. Regardless of the industry, expectations of deliverables are often not balanced with resources - for example, the budget and staff provided. This demands that teams better harness team member strengths and resources and build a culture of continuous improvement. It also requires regular discussion on what to prioritise and where to direct collective energy.

The opposite to this is perceived ownership of resources and no mechanism to re-group when priorities change. In fast moving jobs where demands change frequently, reallocation of resources may be needed.

To what extent does your team know what resources it has and do they share in deploying these for a common goal? Does your team have built-in processes for continuous improvement or does it wait until change is imposed and then have difficulty adjusting to it?



Perseverance

Persisting despite setbacks

Set-backs and obstacles seem to be more frequent in organisational life these days. It could be a takeover and change in company ownership, a loss of grant funding or discovering that customers do not like the new product or service. Persistent matters.

Resilient teams regroup when set-backs occur and generate solutions. Everyone contributes to the energy required, rather than relying on the manager to motivate or problem-solve.

In your team what happens when a problem arises? How do you respond? Where does the energy come from and how do you generate solutions? Is there collective effort and ownership or are people left to solve their own problems?

Drawing on principles from appreciative enquiry and its emphasis on the possibility³⁰ as well as solution focused coaching can be useful here.³¹



Self-Care

Ensuring sustainable performance

We have already emphasised the need to take personal accountability for our self-care. If we don't it can impact adversely on our colleagues. This aspect of the team model supports our personal attempts by focussing on developing a culture of self-care within the team. Self-care

will mean different things to each person, to the profession and to the organisation. We can have the best intentions of implementing breaks and work-life boundaries, for example, but if these are not agreed it can cause dissension or conflict.

Within teams, it is very useful to discuss and agree on how self-care will be fostered, whether it's supporting immediate debriefing with colleagues after a gruelling incident or agreeing on after hours contact. The more these strategies are agreed within the team the easier it is for members to look after themselves without it being perceived as inequitable.

To what extent are self-care strategies agreed and supported within your team?



Capability

Delivering in a changing landscape

In a landscape of frequent change, teams need to ensure they have the capability to continue to deliver as goals shift. Resilient teams seek feedback on how they are performing and build on what works well. Feedback sources could include coaching, learning sets, mentoring, peer review or surveying of stakeholders.

It's also useful for members to be well networked within and outside of the organisation as these networks extend team capability through access to knowledge, skill, and advice. In a way it's extending the team without acquiring new staff.

In the R@W Individual model we emphasised the importance of our personal support networks. The team 'capability' component recognises how strategic networks help teams deliver on outcomes.

As the skill and knowledge requirements change, teams need to build capability to stay relevant.

How well is your team connected with people that can support it in achieving its goals? Where are the gaps and how well are existing relationships maintained?



Connected

Having a sense of belonging

Most of the team components so far have focused more on tasks. The 'connected' aspect explores the emotional glue in a team, that sense of being cared about and feeling like you belong. It's part of the foundation that establishes trust and rapport.

If we are valued as a person, not a function, and work in a climate of co-operation we feel psychologically safe and better able to take risks and make mistakes - activities essential if we are to adapt and grow as a team. A sense of belonging within a team also links to the 'purpose' aspect of personal resilience.

What does support and co-operation look like in your team? What happens that demonstrates people are cared about and valued?



Alignment

Sharing motivation for success

Along with having the energy for perseverance towards our goals, a sense of optimism is becoming more important as jobs become more difficult. Positivity promotes our personal wellbeing and our performance as a team. Tangible ways of doing this are noticing and acknowledging progress and celebrating success.

How is negativity managed in your team? To what extent are successes acknowledged as being a team effort and celebrated as such? How do you manage individual egos and agendas that can interfere with a sense of collective effort and recognition?

Strategic Team Resilience-Building

When building team resilience, a strategic approach is more realistic as it is difficult to invest in all of the R@W Team components simultaneously. This means identifying what elements are most important to the challenges you are facing that also have a likelihood of being changed. As an example, if workload has peaked and will remain that way for some time, attention to early signs of overload (self-care) and regular re-grouping on priorities (resourceful) may be necessary. In times of organisational change, collective proactivity (robust) and accessing external support (capability) may be of greater importance. It's a case of regularly assessing the challenges staff are operating under and determining which aspect of the model is most relevant at that time.

While you may not need to be performing well in all R@W components, a significant gap in one aspect of the model may overshadow the team's strengths and even create disharmony and dysfunction. For example, self-interest by individuals or a clash of why people are there (aspects of robust) can overshadow existing group strengths in areas such as 'capability' and 'self-care'. This deficit may be temporary and part of a team's growth, for example, constructive conflict around purpose and goals. If persistent it may be a key obstacle to success.

Finally, while each component is addressed separately here, each inter-relates in some way. Focusing on 'resourceful', for example, requires putting in place planning and problem-solving processes that are also useful in aspects of 'robust' (shared goals) and 'self-care' (addressing sources of work overload).

Leading Resilient Teams - The R@W® Leader

One of the main drivers of team culture is leadership.³² How a manager leads can either foster or decrease their team's resilience.

I believe that leaders have two responsibilities in this area.

Firstly, they need to 'walk the talk' and role model resilience without invulnerability. It helps if they maintain a calm demeanour, look like they are on top of pressures yet remain humble enough to share that this takes energy and effort. If our leaders aren't managing we perceive that we can't either. Maintaining this can be a big ask of managers who may be leading change in addition to considerable workload pressure.

Secondly, leaders need to act in a way that fosters the resilience of others. This means providing the support and structures that facilitate this.

"Effective leaders role model resilience and foster it in others."

These two responsibilities do not necessarily co-exist. How often have you seen managers who are resilient and thriving at the cost of their staff? These people seem able to move up through the organisational ranks unscathed while creating fall-out behind them.

The R@W Leader model comprises the same seven components that build team resilience but focuses on the extent to which a leader enables these in their teams. Does your manager, for example, develop systems and processes to optimise resources and do they encourage the building of capability and networks? Are they creating a culture of belonging and self-care?

Why Use an Assessment?

Each of the R@W models has an associated scale, with the R@W Leader having both a self-rating and 180-degree version (self and team assessment).

Measures are useful for evaluation, providing pre and post-intervention quantitative assessments.³³ They also provide a benchmark of the status quo, allowing assessment of development goals. In an international review,³⁴ the R@W Scale was assessed as being one of two scales suitable for workplace interventions because of its contextual relevance.

Beyond evaluation, we have found that there is something about a rating that prompts action – especially when that rating generates from a self-assessment. As one person commented "My children have always told me I am too negative and I've ignored them. Now I've seen how low I have rated myself I can see that I really need to do something about it."

Positioning Interventions

If we take the position that resilience is about strengthening future performance, then it is important that any program is introduced as enabling organisational strategy. If programs are positioned as occupational health and safety initiatives, they can be viewed as employee wellbeing, or psychological and physical health risk management strategies, rather than a plan to build organisational culture and performance. If

we focus only on individual resilience, without the systemic approach proposed here, this increases that perception.

If your resilience intervention is positioned around employee wellbeing, you also run the risk of being confined to stand-alone workshops or educational presentations that are valuable but do not have the same impact. Resilience-building takes time. To maximise impact, it needs a longitudinal approach that is aligned with leadership development and is integrated with other people and culture strategies around organisational performance. Who within your organisation facilitates the alignment and holds the resilience ‘antennae’?

“Resilience-building needs a longer-term approach connected to business strategy.”

Building Organisational Resiliency

A final note of caution. Building the resilience of its people will not necessarily guarantee a business organisational resiliency. This will be dictated by an organisation's capacity to anticipate and respond to change and disruption. Market restructuring, cyber-attack, technology innovation and climate change are just some of the factors that can have a major impact on operational viability. Consideration of these aspects often forms part of an organisation's plans for business continuity, cyber security, risk management and disaster recovery. There is an emerging discipline of specialists in organisational resilience focussed on integrating these disciplines to provide a framework for this area. Is there scope to further extend this framework to include employee resilience?

“Resilient employees do not create organisational resiliency.”

Other related aspects to consider are organisational structures and processes. Organisational resilience may demand the capacity to be nimble and quickly realign or respond to changing circumstances. Bureaucracy can be the enemy of this desired agility.

In closing it is important to reinforce that resilience is not a ‘fad’, nor is it fashionable. It is integral to all that we are and all that we do at work.

About the Author



Kathryn McEwen leads Working With Resilience, an international consortium of practitioners and researchers passionate about creating resilient employees, teams and leaders.

An organisational psychologist, executive coach, and mediator, Kathryn has used her wealth of experience in the field to inform research into how we measure and build resilience at work.

Kathryn has authored three books on this topic - *Building Resilience at Work*, *Building Personal Resilience: How to Thrive in a Challenging Job* and *Building Team Resilience*. She has also led the development of the R@W Toolkit.

Based in South Australia, Kathryn is a Fellow of the Australian Psychological Society, serves on several of boards and collaborates closely with the University of South Australia.

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Interested in Reading More?

Kathryn has authored three books on this topic. All are written as practical resources and contain a wealth of strategies, case studies and anecdotes.

Building Resilience at Work. Published by Australian Academic Press

Building Personal Resilience: How to Thrive in a Challenging Job. Published by Mindset Publications. (Also in French).

Building Team Resilience. Published by Mindset Publications

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Who are we?

Working With Resilience is an international consortium specialising in evidence-based solutions for systemically building people's resilience at work.

Australasia and New Zealand

Kathryn McEwen
www.workingwithresilience.com.au

United Kingdom

Paul Chudleigh
www.workingwithresilience.co.uk

Europe

Pierre Naquet
www.iwd-europe.com

USA

Professor Craig Runde
www.iwdamericas.com

Canada

Dr Catherine Carr
www.workingwithresilience.ca



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PO Box 440 North Adelaide SA 5606
Phone: (08) 8342 1797

Email: contact@workingwithresilience.com.au
www.workingwithresilience.com.au