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# PsyRes: Developing a Concept of the Psychologically Resilient Leader

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## **Abstract**

The concept of leader's psychological resilience (PsyRes) is offered as a key in filling the need in today's highly complex and fast-paced world to be able to handle problems, ambiguity, change, and a host of other demands while still maintaining a focus on the people in the organization that work to make the things happen each and every day to keep the organization viable. Resiliency dictates whether a disruptive life event will result in a digression of that person's life or transform it in a positive manner. The author posits that, based on the concepts of resiliency in the literature, PsyRes consists of three major components: emotional intelligence, authenticity, and meaning in life.

**Keywords:** resiliency, organizational development, human resource development

## **Introduction**

*“The gladness of the heart is the life of a man, and the joyfulness of man prolongeth his days”*  
(Ecclesiasticus. 30:22)

Leadership theory has evolved considerably over the decades since the Great Man theory was first proposed (Yukl, 2013). Today, we know that leaders can be developed (de Vries & Korotov, 2010). Though there is no consensus on the best leadership model or the best methods for developing leaders, there are some universal skills that serve to make a leader effective. For example, no matter what theory one subscribes to, there is a need in today's highly complex and fast-paced world to be able to handle problems, ambiguity, change, and a host of other demands while still maintaining a focus on the people in the organization that work to make the things happen each and every day to keep the organization viable. In other words, a leader needs to be able to handle high levels of constant stress.

How can one remain a strong and effective leader in the face of all of this stress? Psychological resiliency seems to hold the answer. The American Psychological Association [APA] (2014) defines resilience as “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors” (para. 4). While this definition looks toward the ability to “bounce back” from difficult experiences, it is more than that as it is growing or adapting as a result of those difficult experiences (Richardson, 2002). Whichever conceptualization one chooses to accept, resiliency is a powerful construct that is multi-dimensional and consists of three major components: emotional intelligence, authenticity, and meaning in life.

### **Psychological Resiliency (PsyRes)**

The U.S. Military notes that resiliency is a highly desirable trait as it has been a deciding factor in countless wars and other military operations (Gravitt, Long, & Hutchinson, 2015). This would stand to reason as resilient people are “characterized by high positive emotionality and by the capacity to rebound from negative circumstances despite threats to the individual” (Tugade, Frederickson, & Barrett, 2004, p. 1168). Psychological resiliency is a “process involving interaction among and individual, that individual’s life experiences, and current life context” (Meredith et al., 2011, p. xiii).

Psychological resiliency is a component of what Luthans, Youssef-Morgan, and Avolio (2007) termed psychological capital (PsyCap) which they define as “the capacity to rebound or bounce back from adversity, conflict, failure, or even positive events, progress, and increased responsibility” (Luthans, 2002, p. 702). PsyCap represents a set of positive psychological resources, which contribute to one’s motivational propensity to accomplish tasks and goals and include such attitudes as hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and efficacious (Wang, Sui, Luthans, Wang, & Wu, 2014). It is a key in the promotion of psychological well-being. In keeping with their abbreviation schema, psychological resiliency will be referred to simply as PsyRes.

As defined earlier, resiliency is a process of “bouncing back” from difficult experiences (APA, 2014) and growing or adapting as a result of those difficult experiences (Richardson, 2002). Community psychologist and a research professor Norris, in an interview with Colvin and Taylor (2012) considers resiliency to be a process “through which, after a disturbance, a set of adaptive capacities is linked to a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation” (p. 44). The positive trajectory seems to align with Kaminsky’s (2006) notion of life transformation. Colvin and Taylor (2012) note that this definition maintains focus on functioning and process, consists of three layers (adaptation, adaptive capacities, and intervention), and can be applied to individuals, communities, and organizations.

The benefits of the process of PsyRes are explained in Richardson’s Metatheory of Resilience and Resiliency (2002). Richardson (2002) proposed that adversity, or what he describes as disruptions that occur in one’s life, can result in one of three outcomes based on the resiliency of the person experiencing the adversity: life digression, life stagnation, or life progression. Kaminsky (2006) observed “important distinctions between life stagnation and life stabilization” (p. 19) as well as between digression and deterioration and expanded on Richardson’s model finding that there were actually five potential outcomes: life digression, life deterioration, life stabilization, life stagnation, and life transformation. Thus, A psychologically resilient person will experience transformation as a result of the adversity as it will serve as a catalyst for personal growth while a person with little or no resiliency will see their lives stagnate at best or digress at worst (Richardson, 2002).

Meredith et al. (2011) determined that there are four levels of factors that influence a person’s resiliency. They consist of individual-level factors, family-level factors, unit-level factors, and community-level factors. Within each level there exist several dimensions. The dimensions at the individual-level include: positive coping, positive affect, positive thinking, realism, behavioral control, physical fitness, and altruism. At the individual level, Everly, Srouse, and Everly (2010) determined that resilient people have six qualities in common: optimism/faith, integrity, social

support, decisive/take responsibility, perseverance/tenacity, and self-control and Wicks and Buck (2013) note that resiliency is “both recovering and deepening as a consequence of encountering stress in the right way with adequate inner strength” (p. 4). The family-level consists of: emotional ties, communication, support, closeness, nurturing, and adaptability. The unit-level consists of positive command climate, teamwork, and cohesion. The community-level consists of belongingness, cohesion, connectedness, and collective efficacy.

Whichever model one subscribes to, the result is that disruptive life events and exposure to stress can have either adverse or positive effects on a person depending on how a person handles it. Some may choose a maladaptive method to address the life disruption such as drug and alcohol use, harming practices (i.e. cutting), domestic violence, inappropriate and unhealthy eating habits, risk-seeking behaviors such as reckless driving, and suicidal intentions (Wicks & Buck, 2013). These methods will result in the life digression or deterioration that Richardson and Kaminsky refer to. A psychologically resilient person will chose different more positive approaches.

### **Resilient Leadership Model**

Duggan and Moyer (2010) created what they’ve termed the Resilient Leadership Model that focuses the attention of the leader outward toward the organization’s members as well as inward toward the leader him/herself. Their model focuses on the leader relating to the organizational members in their emotional states. It gives attention to what they term the “hidden chemistry” or the emotional process of the organization. The model “emphasizes that how a leader is present to the emotional system he/she is a part of is far more important than the leader’s personality, any management techniques he or she may employ, or how well s/he functions as a role model to be imitated by others” (Resilient Leadership Model, n.d., para. 3).

The focus on the members does make sense as in leadership there is the necessity for the leader to always consider the followers. Everly (2010) describes this follower-focus in her definition of resilient leadership as “those leadership behaviors that help others with stand crisis, adapt to, or rebound from, adversity” (p. 27). “It is the type of leadership that relentlessly searches for the opportunity in hardships and in crisis” (Everly, 2010, p. 29) That definition looks outward rather than inward and may be particularly well suited for those leadership models that focus on the follower such as servant leadership or transformational leadership.

However, PsyRes is being proposed as a personal process as the definitions offered earlier state and research has demonstrated that resilient people (including leaders) not only cultivate positive emotions in themselves, but also naturally cultivate them in others (Demos, 1989; Kumpfer, 1999; Werner & Smith, 1992). Thus, rather than the focus being on the leader’s interaction with the emotional state of the organization, the model proposed here focuses on the psychological aspects of resiliency and building it in the leader who then uses it to develop PsyRes in his/her followers.

### **PsyRes in Leadership**

In the past, the tradition was to look as the leader as the person with all of the answers and skills one would ever need in any situation. In today’s highly complex and technical world, the leader cannot be expected to know it all or to have all of the answers as it is just not feasible. This

heroic model of leadership is frequently regarded as ineffective and not a model that builds resiliency, especially in those fields infused with chaos, decisions made under time constraints, and high cost for failure as a normal course of a day (Arond-Thomas, 2004). Instead, it leads to burnout and cynicism or, at its worst, depression and suicide. Resilient executives, on the other hand, “set a positive tone for their organizations and energize their employees by fostering high staff morale and professional development while driving sustainable performance improvement and quality” (Wicks & Buck, 2013, p. 4). In other words, a leader’s PsyRes positively affects both the leader and the employees.

In a qualitative study of eight successful organizational leaders, Reid (2008) extrapolated three themes related to what makes for successful leadership without consideration of which leadership philosophy they subscribed to: a) a creative vision and strongly lived values, b) a need to create leaders who make change happen, and c) the need to enable a competency in being resilient and emotionally intelligent (para. 4). Regarding the third theme, Reid (2008) notes that “resilient leaders draw on emotional intelligence competencies” (para. 14) framing an interconnectedness between the two constructs.

### **Emotional Competency**

Arond-Thomas (2004) explains that, at its core, resilience is “built on a foundation of emotional competence” (p. 19). An emotional competence is defined as “a learned capability based on emotional intelligence that results in outstanding performance at work” (Goleman, 2000, p. 27) and they are the components of the larger construct of emotional intelligence (EI). Since being introduced in 1990 by researchers Salovey and Mayer, EI has been shown to be directly related to leader effectiveness (Anand & Udaya-Suriyan, 2010; Dulewicz, 2000; George, 2000; Palmer, Walls, Burgess, & Stough, 2001; Rosete & Ciarrochi, 2005) and it continues to grow in popularity. Though this popularity has resulted in many various definitions of the construct all of the definitions “center on a mix of emotional and cognitive abilities” (Thor & Johnson, 2011, p. 18).

Reid (2008) offers that resilient leaders draw on the emotional intelligence competencies and explained that “emotional competence represents our brain’s ability to integrate cognition and emotion” (p. 4). Kaminsky (2006) concluded that emotion, and emotional self-management (EI) played a significant role in resiliency. Emotions experienced by the study participants could be categorized as either positive emotional content or negative emotional content and the findings indicated that the subject’s ability to manage the emotional content “strongly influenced and had a determinant quality in the selection of which of the two routes he or she took toward initial dilemma resolution” (Kaminsky, 2006, p. 29). When positive goal pursuit and achievement focus were observed, the participants experienced a variety of affective emotions such as hope, optimism, faith and gratitude thus keeping them in a positive emotional attractor loop and “in so doing, away from an external orientation toward an internal orientation which motivated the shift from one resiliency level to another” (Kaminsky, 2006, p. 31).

So it would stand to reason that recent studies are also linking emotional intelligence to resilience in leaders (Bumphus, 2008; Kaminsky, 2006; Maulding, Peters, Roberts, Leonard, & Sparkman, 2012). Maulding et al. (2012) concluded there is a “strong correlation between the factors of emotional intelligence and resilience and leadership success” (p. 27) while Bumphus

(2008) not only found a strong positive relationship between a leaders' EI and his/her resilience, but found that a leader's mood was a significant predictor of resilience.

Goleman (2000) pointed out that all of the identified models of EI revolve around the ability to recognize and regulate emotions in ourselves and others. One particular model consists of four domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management, which are made up of twenty emotional competencies (Boyatzis, Goleman, & Rhee, 2000). The first domain of self-awareness consists of the competencies of emotional self-awareness, accurate self-assessment of one's strengths and weaknesses, and self-confidence or a sense of one's self-worth. The second domain is self-management and also consists of several competencies: emotional self-control, transparency or the maintaining standards of honesty and integrity (otherwise labeled as trustworthy), adaptability or being flexible to change, achievement orientation, initiative, and optimism. The third domain is social-awareness and consists of the competencies of empathy, organizational awareness (reading a group's emotional current and power relationships), and service orientation (understand and provide for others' needs) (Goleman, 2000).

### **Authenticity**

Trying to be someone you are not requires the exertion of energy that can lead to burnout (Grandey, 2003) while authenticity "creates a platform for resiliency" (Pulley & Wakefield, 2001, p. 16). Kernis (2003) defines authenticity as "the unobstructed operation of one's true, or core, self in one's daily enterprise" (p. 1). O'Connell's (2014) definition is similar but adds a bit of simplicity, "authenticity is defined as knowing one's self and one's beliefs, then expressing and behaving according to one's convictions and one's unadulterated, pure, true self" (p. 195). In other words it is rooted in a strong sense of personal identity (Kegan, 1994) and a person acts with authenticity when "one acts in accord with the true self, expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings" (Harter, 2002, p. 382).

Authenticity is central to the field of positive psychology and has several psychological benefits such as higher levels of self-esteem, greater positive affect, and more hope for the future (Harter, 2002), efficacy, optimism, hope, and, most applicable in this case, resilience (Snyder & Lopez, 2002; Stajkovic, 2006). While researchers include both hope and optimism, a hope for the best outcome in the future is the definition of optimism (Optimism, 2015). Seligman (2011) concluded that optimism is "the key" to building resiliency (para. 4) and Pulley and Wakefield (2001) offer that resiliency "taps into your ability to adapt even as it relies on your own knowledge about yourself – your values, confidence, and optimism" (p. 7).

Authenticity has been shown to be a significant enough construct in leadership that an entire theory has been devoted to it. McGrath (2013) states very succinctly that, "your true core will always provide you with the most power, insight, intuition, empathy, and overall leadership capabilities" (p. 2). Essentially, authenticity in leadership means that leaders are transparent about their intentions and strive to maintain a seamless link between espoused values, behaviors, and actions (Luthans & Avolio, 2003).

With the link between authenticity and resiliency having been established, in defining authentic leadership, Avolio, Luthans, and Walumbwa (2004) even include resiliency as a component:

authentic leaders are “those who are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others’ values/moral perspectives, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and of high moral character” (p. 4). So there is a clear interrelationship between authenticities as a general concept and when applied to leadership and resiliency whereby each construct seems to enhance the other.

### **Meaning in Life**

Spirituality has been defined in various ways in the research. However, de Klerk (2005) deduced through analysis of the varying definitions that the construct consists of three major elements: meaning in life, a sense of unity with the universe and the awareness of a “life force” (p. 66). Of the three elements, meaning in life is the dominant element (de Klerk, 2005) and has been more clearly and the element that has been more definitively defined in the research. Through over 40 years of research there has been well-established link between meaning in life and psychological well-being which lead Dik and Duffy (2009) to call the meaning in life component of spirituality the hallmark of psychological health and well-being.

de Klerk (2005) defines meaning in life as “a significance of being—a feeling, experience, or perception that one’s existence is of significance” (p. 69). In other words, it can be thought of as a person’s purpose for being on this earth - their calling. Dik and Duffy (2009) explored calling and defined it as a “transcendent summons, experienced as originating beyond the self, to approach a particular life role in a manner oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness and that holds other-oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation” (p. 427). The definition consists of two dimensions. The first dimension involves the extent to which the individual perceives her/his motivation within a particular life role to come from an external source. The second involves the awareness of the purpose and meaningfulness of one’s activity within a particular life role and how his/her efforts may fit into a broader framework of purpose and meaning in life (Dik & Duffy, 2009).

This awareness of purpose and meaningfulness is important to consider relative to resiliency. Steger, Frazier, Oishi, and Kaler (2006) define meaningfulness as “the sense made of, and significance felt regarding, the nature of one’s being and existence” (p. 81). de Klerk (2005) noted that studies have shown that when there is an absence of meaningfulness in people’s lives there are increases in anxiety uncontrollable stress and burnout, suicidal ideations (Harlow, Newcomb, & Bentler, 1986), alcoholism and substance abuse Some of these outcomes have similarities to the negative outcomes that are experienced by people with low levels of resiliency.

Conversely, Steger et al. (2006) also note that people who have a higher degree of meaningfulness in their lives were more likely to consider the outcomes of their lives to be within their control (have an internal locus of control), have higher levels of self-esteem and self-concept report more positive life experiences and greater well-being, successful life changes, and resistance to stress. Harland, Harrison, Jones, and Reiter-Palmon (2005) found that leaders who communicated a sense of higher purpose and common good influenced staff to focus on positive outcomes, self-actualization, and adaptive coping. If psychological resiliency is a “process involving interaction among and individual, that individual’s life experiences, and current life context” (Meredith et al., 2011, p. xiii) and one’s level of resiliency dictates whether a life

disrupting experience will result in life degradation, life transformation, or something in between, then the meaning that one places on those experiences will.

## Conclusion

Psychological resiliency is a powerful process that can serve to strengthen a leader regardless of the specific model/theory of leadership that one subscribes to. Resilience “transforms hardship into challenge, failure into success, helplessness into power” (Reivich & Shatte, 2002, p. 4). However, resiliency is not developed overnight (Duggan & Moyer, 2009) nor is it developed linearly but rather over time and in a variety of cycles (Kaminsky, 2006). It is a construct that consists of three major components that each need built separately in the leader: emotional intelligence, authenticity, and meaning in life. But it can be developed and holds great potential to increasing leadership effectiveness, especially over the “long haul.” A leader who has developed a higher level of PsyRes will be a leader who can not only sustain good leadership over time, but will also serve to develop this quality in his/her followers leading to a psychologically resilient organization.

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