

Submission by Dr. Beate Planche

Abstract:

Leadership resiliency is increasingly a needed personal attribute as well as an organizational necessity. This article suggests several strategies that may assist leaders as they seek to stay resilient while supporting others. Resiliency is related to a growth mindset and certainly an optimistic habit of mind. Emotionally intelligent leaders model a frame of mind which values the development of resiliency in others as well as maintaining a strong sense of self-efficacy. Leaders influence a working culture in tangible ways including how they deal with adversity and constant change.

Leadership Resiliency – A Personal Attribute and an Organizational Necessity
(First Published in Ontario ASCD's The Trillium Newsletter, Fall 2013)

Hectic days, busy timetables and organizational challenges are part of the reality of Ontario's school leaders. Add the stress of students or staff facing major illness or the challenge of angry community members regarding program, bus or school plant problems and stress levels rise significantly. A leader's reality then moves from hectic days to dealing with significant adversity. It is rather daunting that leaders such as Principals and Vice Principals must accept that their roles come with uncertainty as a constant. And yet, leaders who are successful stay focussed and find a way to rise above daily challenges and keep their eye on the ultimate goal of student success.

What is a leader's recipe for success in the face of the unpredictable nature of every school day? Why are some leaders able to model resiliency and build strong school cultures while others are less successful? First, I think it is important to remind ourselves that adversity is a part of life and it finds its way into both our personal and professional lives. Every day brings challenge on some level. A strong sense of self is paramount as is optimism, perseverance, and the ability to influence others through brokering strengths and building solid relationships. A sense of resiliency, to my mind, is foremost and underpins one's ability to stay focussed, stay optimistic in the face of difficulties and be a role model for others. Resilient leaders are able to adapt to their circumstances in a way that moves an organization or a relationship forward. Resilient

leaders appear to have inner resources which make it possible for them to regroup, reframe and refocus on the real work of schools – learning.

Certainly, the Ontario Leadership Framework for Principals and Vice Principals infers strong skills of resiliency as it charges leaders to set direction, build relationships and develop others, build up their organization through creating collaborative cultures, lead instructional programming and secure public accountability by creating the conditions for student success. Considering the language of the Framework closely, it is clear that it is only with a high degree of resiliency that this work is possible. The Framework talks about leadership practices and competencies including skills, knowledge and attitudes. Leaders need to respond to both environmental and adaptive challenges in their roles. Resiliency is stated in the Framework as an attitude foundational to building relationships and developing people. I tend to think of resiliency also as a leadership disposition. How leaders nurture resiliency in themselves and others is a key but necessary challenge in today’s educational context.

In a 2001 article in *The School Administrator* entitled, “**Resilience in the Face of Adversity**”, Jerry Patterson identified five leadership strengths that he suggests are central for leaders. I found his points very realistic and summarize them as follows:

- (1) **Being positive in spite of the negative** - It won’t be a surprise that there will be distractors to the work to be done but positive thinking is essential for the leader as well as those who look to the leader for support and direction.
- (2) **Staying focussed on what a leader cares about** – Maintaining a strong sense of purpose, true to the mission and vision of the organization is vital. Leaders need a long term perspective on school improvement efforts and in recognizing that learning and leading change take time.
- (3) **Remaining flexible in how one gets there** –While remaining true to the focus, tolerating ambiguity is important as is the ability to refocus quickly if setbacks occur. Predictable outcomes may be a desired state but goals will not be achieved without distraction or disruption in today’s schools.
- (4) **Acting rather than reacting** – Pro-active strategies can mitigate adverse reactions. Defensiveness is counter-productive but taking the offensive can develop more resilience.

Recognize when change is inevitable and respond thoughtfully rather than reacting in haste. Managing conflict involves careful action to obtain positive results.

- (5) **Applying resilience-conserving strategies during tough times** – Don't waste energy reacting to issues that drain resilience rather identify what is important in the face of confusing conditions. Know where to go to get your resilience support as a leader and ask for help and/or constructive feedback as needed.

(adapted from The School Administrator, June 2001

<http://www.aasa.org/School AdministratorArticle.aspx?id=10812>

retrieved July 28, 2013).

As a former Principal and School Superintendent, I agree wholeheartedly with the author that there is no single, magic checklist for developing resilience but there are strategies that help us develop as resilient leaders that are worth noting. Developing a strong sense of self-efficacy is an important foundation for developing resiliency as human beings and professionals. Leaders who are reflective and who have learned how to listen and observe well can respond rather than react impulsively. Resilient leaders manage conflict with a problem solving stance. They can help others build resiliency when they set clear but achievable goals, when they reinforce and validate effort and recognize that people need to recharge at times. It is a wise Principal or Vice Principal who recognizes the value of affirming people and their efforts to manage stress. Bringing in treats for the staff morning recess after a difficult parent/staff meeting or sending a personal note of support to a teacher whose stress level is elevated because of an illness at home sends the message: "I see you, I value you, you are an important member of our team". We tend to respond in more resilient ways when we feel we are a part of something important. A strong sense of community in a school or organization is foundational and is fueled by strong relationships. Feeling personally connected to a collective impacts our ability to adapt to constant change. I personally have great hope in the shift in professional development to more of an inquiry stance because inquiry can reduce isolation and encourage collaborative problem solving. The message of 'we are in this together' is a powerful antidote to complex learning situations.

Leaders must take care of themselves to be able to support others effectively. It is vital that Principals and Vice Principals and all school leaders are able to be a part of a supportive

professional network which helps to buffer the constancy of challenge and change. Experience has certainly taught me that we are at our best when we learn from and with each other. The balance of home and work is tenuous and while family and friends are wonderful supports, professional supports are just as important. As important as emotional and professional support, is our ability to find a way to keep a healthy lifestyle front and center. Leaders model how they face adversity or challenge and how they adapt to the pressures of every-day life.

When we have to dig deep for a personal sense of resiliency, it is often due to the pressure of change. Robert Evans, author of an excellent book, **The Human Side of School Change (1996)**, reminds us that change challenges our sense of competence and can create confusion and conflict. Leaders need to anticipate that change will test the resiliency of staff members and be prepared to buffer the impact through their personal reactions. A recent **Harvard Business Review Blog** posting by George Everly Jr. articulates well how organizational leadership need to invest in all levels of their workforce as a strategy to build resilience into their organization. Coaching and mentoring are strategies that help to build a sense of efficacy and resiliency through supportive learning conditions.

Finally, I think it is also important to address in a transparent way that resiliency in ourselves and in our efforts to help others involves managing our emotions. In their book, **The Emotionally Intelligent Manager**, David Caruso and Peter Salovey, write of developing emotional intelligent leaders who are able to leverage four important skills that would certainly apply to times of added stress, pressure and/or adversity. An emotionally intelligent leader would be skilled in:

- (a) Identifying how people are feeling
- (b) Using these feelings to guide thinking and reasoning efforts
- (c) Understanding that feelings might change and develop as events unfold
- (d) Managing to stay open to the data of feelings and integrating how people feel into decisions and actions.

Resilient leaders do not compromise their passion but incorporate logic into decision making and are able to handle their own emotions and the emotions of others with intelligence. Emotions are information. Reading the emotional reactions of staff, students or the community is a different

kind of data gathering than many of us are trained for but worth exploring as a leadership imperative to build resilient organizations.

Resiliency is a necessary attribute both personally and professionally to thrive in a constantly changing educational landscape. Surviving the challenge of a leadership role is not a sustainable paradigm. We must find ways for leaders to thrive despite difficult roles. A healthy public system is contingent upon educational leaders and educators who are passionate role models, lifelong learners and resilient individuals committed to student success. Resiliency is today's organizational necessity.

References

Caruso, D. R. & Salovey, P. (2004). *The Emotionally Intelligent Manager. How to develop and use the four key emotional skills of leadership*. Jossey-Bass. San Francisco, CA.

Evans, R. (1996). *The Human side of School Change*. Jossey-Bass. San Francisco, CA.

Everly Jr., George S. (Blog posted June 24th, 2011). *Harvard Business Review*: Building a Resilient Organizational Culture.

http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2011/06/building_a_resilient_organizat.html retrieved July 28, 2013

Patterson, J. (June, 2001). *The School Administrator*. "Resilience in the Face of Adversity". <http://www.aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=10812> retrieved July 28, 2013.

Beate Planche Ed.D.

Educational Consultant/Researcher

Beate can be reached at bmplanche@gmail.com or on Twitter @bmplanche