



ALL THINGS WORK

Why Resilient Executives Are Better Leaders

Feedback

Leaders must model resilience if they want their organizations to thrive even during challenging times.

By Susan Ladika | March 25, 2023

Jay Baker has seen a lot in more than two decades as head of Jamestown Plastics. For example, when the COVID-19 pandemic took hold three years ago, the company pivoted almost overnight and began producing face shields for emergency responders that were sold worldwide.

"Attitude is what I think separates successful companies that make it for the long run," says Baker, whose family has run the Brocton, N.Y.-based business since the 1970s. He notes that resilient CEOs believe "there's nothing we can't overcome."

And these days, there is plenty to overcome. A recent survey by the Conference Board found that the top external concerns of CEOs in the U.S. are an economic downturn and inflation. Internally, CEOs are worried about driving revenue growth and attracting and retaining talent. In addition, a recent survey by consultancy Deloitte found that roughly 4 in 10 C-suite executives were feeling stressed and overwhelmed.

But business leaders and experts agree that leaders must model resilience if they want their organizations to thrive even during challenging times. And one of the top priorities for U.S. CEOs is to "build a resilient workforce to prepare for future challenges," the Conference Board survey found.

"Given the level of disruption we are facing, [resilience] is the skill set of our time [needed] to be successful," says Ama Marston, CEO and co-founder of Type R Partners, a San Francisco Bay Area boutique consultancy that works with organizations, leaders and firms. She calls this skill set "transformative resilience," which uses "change, disruption and stress as a catalyst for learning, growth and innovation."

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Steven Stein

Resilience hinges on the "ability to deal with adversity and withstand stress," says Jan Bruce, CEO of meQuilibrium, a Boston-based firm that offers digital resilience-building tools. Successful leaders need to be able to "adapt and accelerate in a crisis," she says.

Thriving in the Storms

At one time, Jamestown Plastics was the largest supplier of packaging for Fisher-Price toys. But when Fisher-Price moved its manufacturing abroad in the 1980s, Jamestown Plastics had to adjust. "That was something we had to rebuild from," Baker says. The company began to focus more of its efforts on working with clients in the medical and automotive industries.

Jamestown Plastics also readily shifted gears with the pandemic. It was already an essential business providing supplies for health care clients, so it never shut down, but it had to put new safety protocols in place to protect its workers.

One Friday evening, Baker got a call from the Chautauqua County executive, who is a local government official, saying the county's emergency services workers lacked face shields. He asked Baker if Jamestown Plastics could produce some. While the company had never made personal protective equipment before, it immediately rose to the task. The first face shield rolled off the production line four days after that phone call. Within a week and working around the clock, the company was producing 60,000 face shields a day.

Jamestown Plastics has about 200 employees, with a team of 15 to 20 workers focused on producing the TrueHero face shields, which were shipped around the world.

To be resilient and effective, CEOs "need to be flexible, open to new opportunities and take risks," Baker says. "Nobody is going to be able to write the perfect playbook for every situation. Try not to sweat the small stuff, and don't be a jackass."

Self-Awareness, Learning Are Key

Some people say leaders are born, not made, but experts agree that resilience can be learned.

"For some people, it's fairly well-baked. It comes almost naturally," says Steven Stein, a clinical psychologist and founder of Toronto-based Multi-Health Systems, a publisher of scientifically validated assessments. But "with the right training and practice, it can improve."

Bruce agrees. "The science is clear: [Resilience] is a learned behavior," she says.

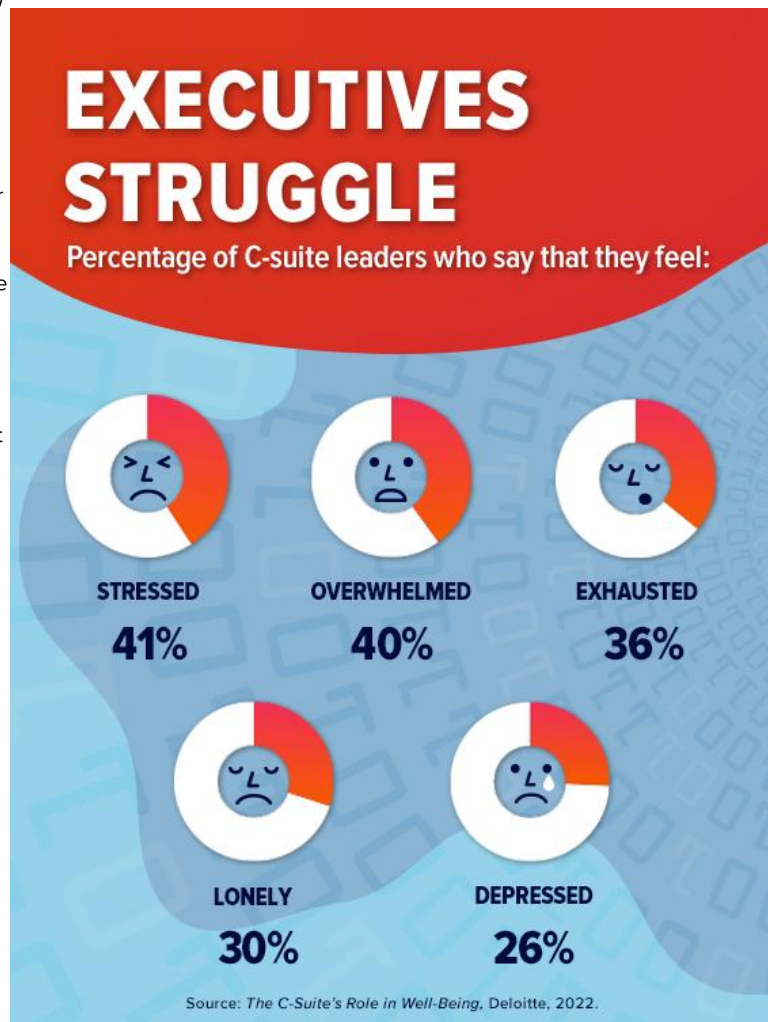
S This means senior executives should "learn how to learn," says Allison Bailey, managing director and senior partner with the Boston Consulting Group in Boston.

"The pace of change is so great," so establishing a peer network to learn what others have done can be helpful, she says. "Hearing from other peers tends to have more resonance."

It's also important to note that "[t]he way we look at resilience has changed," Stein says. "We used to think it was grit, being strong, getting through it. Now it has shifted to more self-awareness and responsiveness to the people around you."

Marston adds that resilience can be empowering. "It builds a mindset that we are able to rise to the challenges placed in front of us, reframe, and find the necessary internal and external resources," she says.

To learn resilience, a leader should "shelve your ego" and get ideas from others, adds Dian Griesel, a New York City-based communications consultant. They can be "a sounding board for you. Not necessarily tell you what to do, but help you think it through."



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Dian Griesel

Executives can also turn to coaches to help them develop and strengthen their skills. Stein suggests leaders focus on the three C's:

- Commitment, or purpose: Focus not just on the day-to-day but on larger goals.
- Challenge: Look at things in different ways.
- Control: Know what you can and can't control. For example, you are not able to control what others do, but you can control your own reactions to situations.

While it's possible for organizations to be resilient in these ever-changing times, experts say it all begins with the CEO.

"Organizational resilience starts at the top," Stein says. "You need to model it all the way through."

Baker adds, "If the attitude isn't at the top, it's virtually impossible for the organization to have that attitude. You have to figure out how to communicate it through the organization."



The health and well-being of employees—and executives—has taken on new prominence since the start of the pandemic, and a new generation of leaders is starting to drive change.

"Individual health has worsened" with the pandemic, says Arthur Mazor, global human capital practice leader in the Atlanta office of the consultancy Deloitte. That can affect employees' productivity, as well as their social and mental well-being.

Those in the C-suite are not immune: About 40 percent said they felt stressed and overwhelmed, 36 percent were exhausted, and 30 percent were lonely, according to a recent Deloitte survey.

Almost 90 percent of executives in the survey said improving their well-being was a top priority. But among their top struggles are trying to start or stop work at a reasonable time, exercising, and taking at least a 30-minute lunch break.

However, change may be coming. "Young leaders seem to be creating pathways and opportunities for workforce well-being," Mazor says. And as they prioritize their own well-being, they are setting an example for the rest of the workforce.

Around 90 percent of Millennial and Generation Z leaders say they are increasing their focus on well-being benefits, consider themselves health-savvy and have taken steps to help employees disconnect—far higher percentages than older leaders, the survey found.

In contrast, less than 55 percent of Baby Boomer leaders are increasing their focus on well-being benefits, and less than half say they are health-savvy.

"The most effective leaders are being incredibly intentional about what they need," says Tierney Remick, vice chairman and co-leader of Korn Ferry's global board and CEO practice in Chicago.

Such leaders aim to remain strong, focused and calm "in the midst of all the volatility," Remick says, and they do so by being deliberate about getting proper exercise, rest and nutrition. That helps their physical and mental resilience and allows them to "show up and be there for everyone else," she says.

It's a different strategy compared to a decade ago, when many CEOs prided themselves on how many hours they worked, how few hours they slept and how much they traveled for work, Remick says. Now, younger leaders are much more focused on "what they need to show up and be their best selves."—S.L.

Be Flexible and Ready for Anything

Like Baker, Adam Coughran, president of Safe Kids Inc. in Costa Mesa, Calif., has the attributes of a resilient leader. Safe Kids develops curriculum to help kindergartners through 12th-graders prevent and survive violence in schools. But when schools closed their doors because of the pandemic, Coughran says he wondered, "Do we still have an industry? Can we out-survive our competitors?"

Coughran drew on his previous experience as a police officer to get through the challenge. Like other first responders, police are "always prepared for the next thing," and they know "the situation can change very rapidly," he says.

Initially, Safe Kids offered virtual live workshops focused on topics such as the pandemic lockdown and law enforcement. The company provided other new content, including an interview with an emergency room doctor, and workshops in fun areas such as dance and creative writing.

As schools began to reopen, Safe Kids offered virtual and in-person training on subjects such as talking to children about the pandemic. It later expanded to provide training on school reopening and content on mental health concerns, Coughran says.

While some leaders now are worrying about a possible recession, Coughran takes things in stride. "We've had those before," he says. "We have time to prepare for it."

By preparing in advance, leaders can "get ahead of a problem, not respond to it," Coughran adds.

Griesel, who specializes in external and internal corporate communications, started her own business in 1997 and has kept going through the dot-com bust, 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Great Recession and the pandemic.

"Know this, too, shall pass," she says. "Know that things are going to happen outside your control. When you have to shift, you have to shift."

In times of crisis, Griesel adds, leaders need to make a plan, test it and adjust it as needed.

In other words, they need to be resilient.

ADOPTING RESILIENCE AND CHANGE

Leaders are focused on building strong cultures that embrace resilience and change. The **top three human capital management issues** CEOs said their companies will act on in 2023:

- 1 DEVELOP WORKFORCES CAPABILITIES.**
- 2 STRENGTHEN ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE.**
- 3 BUILD A CULTURE THAT EMBRACES CHANGE.**

Source: *The Conference Board C-Suite Outlook 2023.*

Susan Ladika is a freelance writer based in Tampa, Fla.

Explore Further

SHRM provides resources and information to help business leaders better understand and foster resilience in themselves and their organizations.

Executive View: Mental Health Suffering in the C-Suite (www.shrm.org/executive/resources/articles/pages/executive-view-leaders-mental-health.aspx)

Much has been written and discussed lately about employees' mental health, but there are challenges in the C-suite, too.

The Biggest Surprises Executives Face When They Reach the C-Suite (www.shrm.org/executive/resources/articles/Pages/ceo-surprises-.aspx)

Landing in the C-suite doesn't come without a shock or two, and many executives learn valuable lessons in their first few days on the job.

Arianna Huffington: The On-Demand Quality We All Need Is Resilience+

(www.shrm.org/executive/resources/articles/Pages/arianna-huffington-on-demand-quality-resilience-plus.aspx)

This article is part of a series from Arianna Huffington that focuses on the importance of workplace mental health.

SHRM Research Report: Organizational and Employee Resilience (www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research-and-surveys/pages/organizational-and-employee-resilience-research-report.aspx)

SHRM Research and Gap International partnered to study key factors related to organizational and employee resilience during the pandemic.

Toolkit: Developing Organizational Leaders (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pages/developingorganizationalleaders.aspx)

The ideal leader is flexible, proactive, analytical, strategic, culturally competent and adept at competitive positioning.

Bouncing Back from Adversity (www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/all-things-work/Pages/bouncing-back-from-adversity.aspx)

The pandemic that disrupted life around the globe has brought into focus attributes that help individuals and organizations rebound from unexpected challenges.



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Your Professional Development

Many Recruiters Are on a Path to Burnout

Here's How Managers Can Make the Office Holiday Party Recovery-Friendly

Supporting Mental Health in the Post-Pandemic Workplace

HR DAILY NEWSLETTER

News, trends and analysis, as well as breaking news alerts, to help HR professionals do their jobs better each business day.

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