EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TEAM RESILIENCE

An exploratory study on the qualities that enable Resilience in teams

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The Institute of Leadership and Organisation Development (ILOD) promotes and supports the development of leadership and organisational development capabilities in the Public Service, so as to build a pool of leaders, managers and practitioners to lead, support and sustain change and transformation in their organisations. We do so by providing research, assessments and diagnostics; learning and development programmes; and consultancy and advisory services to public agencies with the aim of developing effective leaders, engaged employees, high performing teams and excellent organisations.

Roffey Park Management Institute focuses on working with people to help them develop the abilities they need to succeed in organisational life. These include emotional intelligence, resilience and authentic leadership, amongst others. We take an inside-out approach where developing self-awareness is key to making choices and contributions to the external environment. Our work is grounded in Self-Managed Learning where individuals are responsible for their own learning, and we are leading providers of Action Learning Sets where group facilitations are focused on meeting real business challenges.

ABSTRACT

Across many organisations, teams have had to grapple with increasingly complex and ambiguous tasks and situations that require quick responses. Teams in the public sector face many such challenges in their daily work and are still required to function at a high level amidst intense stress. This executive summary shares findings from an exploratory study on the qualities that contribute to team resilience. The first section presents a conceptual framework, followed by insights on the manager’s role in facilitating team resilience, and will conclude with implications for developing resilient teams in organisations.
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Some definitions

- A team is defined as a group in which people work interdependently and with a high degree of co-ordination to accomplish a goal or manage complex tasks.
- Team resilience has been described as a team’s capacity for positive adaptation, which refers to a team’s collective potential to innovate and change in the face of challenges. Team resilience has also been conceptualised as a psychosocial process where positive adaptation occurs, often requiring shifts of thought and ways of work.

**QUALITIES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO TEAM RESILIENCE**

Below is a conceptual framework on the qualities that contribute to team resilience.

![Conceptual framework on the qualities that contribute to team resilience](image)

**Figure 1: Conceptual framework on the qualities that contribute to team resilience**
Learning Orientation and Behaviours

Teams which possess a learning orientation are able to perceive and positively reframe the challenges and mistakes they face as part of a learning process. This helps them be more prepared for future challenges. Engaging in regular reflection individually or as a group acts as a form of knowledge sharing amongst members and allows them to learn from one another's successes and failures. Teams whose members are open to giving and receiving feedback will also find that this aids with the learning process, especially when they are able to find opportunities to actively incorporate the feedback into daily tasks.

Building and Strengthening Positive Relationships

Positive relationships are characterized by a sense of trust and safety which facilitates openness and honesty amongst team members. This honest exchange facilitates learning, enables effective decision-making and sense-making. Teams with strong positive relationships tend to have a strong sense of teamwork which enables shared common knowledge, working styles and language. This also creates a safe environment where members are able to process conflict constructively through open communication and are able to discuss “sensitive” issues without feeling judged. Participating teams in this study credited the strong bonds between team members that helped them tide through difficulties and helped sustain the belief that they would be able to overcome any challenges that comes their way.

Resilient teams also tend to have members who build strong positive relationships with people beyond the confines of the group – extending their network to people within or outside of the organisation. Different networks serve different purposes – some of them could be tapped on for information and resources whilst others could be tapped on for social support.

OPEN COMMUNICATION

The data from the study suggested that open communication played a critical part in facilitating team resilience in three ways. Firstly, by facilitating feedback giving and discussing ideas which allow team members to explore diverse and alternative viewpoints. Secondly, communication allows for sense-making with regards to members gaining role clarity or making sense of complex situations. This sense-making also services to reinforce members’ mental models or their shared understanding of “relevant tasks, team aspects and the environment” (Klimosski & Mohammed, 1994 cited in Marques Santos & Margarida Passos, 2013). Finally, open communication also greatly facilitates team learning. When members engage in reflection and test their assumptions on one another, this leads to the acquisition of new information and abilities.
TRUST

Trust was a factor that was brought up consistently in all our interviews. Trust is one’s confidence that others’ would behave as one hoped and it serves as a motivator in achieving the team’s goals. Consistent with literature, trust was perceived by interviewees as a required condition for teamwork (Erdem, 2003). When members take responsibility for different areas of a task, a mutual obligation is formed and when these obligations are fulfilled, the trust is deepened.

Trust is also said to be a “critical team state” (Berson et al., 2015) that creates a safe environment conducive to learning. Speaking up and having open discussions is integral to learning and interviewees mentioned being able to trust each other more when they are able to voice their observations, concerns and questions freely with little fear of backlash.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

A psychologically safe environment is key to persevering, experimenting and learning, as members feel safe to take “interpersonal risks” (Edmondson, 1999). Psychological safety builds trust and encourages open communication without fear of judgment. It also facilitates proactive behaviours where members go beyond their assigned roles to help others.

The open communication and trust enabled by psychological safety also serves to facilitate more effective team learning. This was particularly important for the teams in this study, all of which were involved in projects where there was little or no precedence to take reference from, and for which their willingness to experiment and quickly learn from experience was critical (Ashauer & Macan, 2013).

Maintaining a Clear Sense of Purpose

Having a sense of purpose helps teams “develop direction, momentum and commitment” (Katzenbach & Smith, 2005) to the team’s goals. Successful teams invest time into shaping a purpose which continues throughout the team’s lifespan. A clear sense of purpose also enables team members to adapt a more proactive approach to interpreting and subsequently shaping events (Coutu, 2002), which allows teams to maintain a sense of optimism and control over adverse situations. Therefore, having a sense of purpose, clear goals and meaning encourages teams to persevere through difficult times (Bonanno, 2004). Teams in this study shared that their sense of purpose saw them through difficult moments, gave meaning to their work and was a source of emotional support for them.

Team Processes

Team processes here refers to teamwork, team prosocial motivation, team co-operation and role agility. All these factors work together to facilitate synergy and co-operation within the team. Teams that are pro-socially motivated are more likely to engage in behaviour that has collective benefits. Such teams usually also have a strong sense of teamwork and their behaviour better encourages team outcomes. They are not afraid to voice alternative viewpoints and have strong interpersonal bonds. When team members have worked together for a period of time, they are familiar with each other’s working styles and have a shared understanding.

Possessing role agility is also a hallmark of resilient teams. Members are able to switch roles and adapt quickly. Having shared knowledge and a shared mental model enables a common understanding, allow members to anticipate one another’s needs and facilitate information exchange. Such teams possess greater adaptability.
Managers play an important role in facilitating a team’s development and sustaining of resilient behaviours. They do so by setting the direction and structure for action (e.g. Heldal & Antonsen, 2004); nurturing an environment of safety for team members (e.g. Edmondson, 1999); facilitating sense-making (e.g. Foldy, Goldman & Ospina, 2008); and facilitating learning (e.g. Morgan, Fletcher & Sarkar, 2015).

Manager’s role in team resilience

**PROVIDE DIRECTION AND STRUCTURE**

Managers tend to be the bridge between what is going on at an organisational strategic-level and the team. Hence, they are able to translate these strategic objectives into concrete action plans for the team and guide them towards a shared goal. Managers also set up and maintain a structure in the group with regards to team norms, roles and expectations.

**NURTURING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT**

Managers can nurture a safe environment by being supportive, coaching-oriented and responding positively to questions and challenges (Edmondson, 1999). They play a big role in “reducing power-based barriers” (Kahn, 1990) to enable people to speak freely and engage in difficult conversations without fear of backlash. In such environments, members feel free to ask questions and contribute ideas (Brooks, 1994).

**FACILITATE SENSE-MAKING**

Managers are often the bridge between the management and the team. Hence they are able to provide contextual awareness. They do this by taking in conflicting data and making sense of it for the team. In actively interpreting events, managers help teams derive a sense of meaning of their tasks and environment and they are able to then perceive greater control over shifts in the environment (Coutu, 2003).

**FACILITATE LEARNING**

Managers play an important role in facilitating learning in the team and adopting a learning orientation. They do this by reframing challenges and mistakes as learning experiences and encouraging members to adapt a mastery approach in developing their skills and competencies.
IMPLICATIONS

This section summarises key areas where interventions could yield augmented benefits in terms of team resilience and effectiveness.

Setting up an enabling space

The environment in which the team operates can enable or inhibit the way team members function and relate to one another. This appeared to be particularly true for the team’s internal environment. While team members share the responsibility for creating the environment that works best for them, the manager holds an important role in setting up the space which enables teams to engage in resilient behaviours. One of the key implications for development is to build up managers’ personal resilience through structured interventions, as well as equip them with relevant tools for setting up safe spaces for teams.

Paying attention to communication

Findings from this study suggested that open communication, sense of psychological safety and trust reinforced each other in a loop. In an environment where teams are expected to function for a protracted period of uncertainty, team members need these qualities to sustain their efforts in a mix of experimental and/or monotonous endeavours. The main developmental implication for teams is to equip members with the skills and mind-sets to engage in open communication – to speak openly to one another, to listen with openness and give/receive feedback.

Maintaining a sense of purpose and the ability to sense-make

A sense of purpose gives motivation, direction and meaning to the tasks that the team takes on. Teams must be reminded to maintain and reinforce their purpose over time, and to revisit their purpose consistently to ensure that they are on track to achieving their goals. At the same time, teams need to develop abilities to sense-make in a rapidly changing environment and interpret potentially conflicting information. This same set of abilities will also enable team members to clarify roles and reinforce shared understanding among team members with regard to relevant tasks.

Building relationships

Strong relationships and a great sense of teamwork help in building trust and creating a safe space for members to communicate and deal with challenging situations, such as conflict. Building relationships with contacts outside of the team would also augment potential resources which team members can tap on when needed. Training in communication skills, conflict management, as well as encouraging teams to invest time to build rapport outside of the confines of work would help immensely in strengthening relationships.

CONCLUSION

Resilience is like a muscle – the more it is used, the stronger it becomes. We hope that this executive summary has increased awareness of the qualities that contribute to team resilience, and that these insights may be a useful starting point for managers and organisations to consider possibilities for team development.
REFERENCES


