RESEARCH REPORT

TEAM RESILIENCE

An exploratory study on the qualities that enable Resilience in teams

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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 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

Teams in the Singapore Public Service grapple with a wide spectrum of challenges in their daily work. From sudden, intense situations of crisis which demand quick response, to situations of sustained ambiguity and constant change which demand protracted processes to sense-make emotional and cognitive responses to change. This report shares findings from an exploratory study on the qualities that contribute to team resilience.

Section One presents a review of literature on the qualities of resilient teams. Such teams typically demonstrate a learning orientation, positive relationships amongst members, possess a clear sense of purpose and feature diversity amongst members. The literature also suggests that managers play an important role in facilitating a team’s development and sustaining of resilient behaviours. Specifically, managers provide direction and structure, nurture an environment of safety, facilitate sense-making and facilitate learning. To develop resilience, it is suggested that teams should focus on building its learning capabilities, strengthening team relations, maintaining a clear sense of purpose and developing sense-making capabilities.

Section Two presents evidence from interviews from a sample of teams in the Singapore Public Service. Analysis of the data indicated that good team relationships, open communication, the presence of trust and psychological safety, the existence of team processes that facilitate synergy and cooperation, and a clear sense of purpose all came together to enable resilient behaviours amongst these teams. The key areas where intervention could yield augmented benefits in terms of team resilience and effectiveness are to set an enabling space for team members, develop skills which facilitate open communication, maintain a sense of purpose and the ability to sense-make and to encourage and facilitate teams to maintain positive relationships.
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1. Introduction

Teams in the Singapore Public Service grapple with a wide spectrum of challenges in their daily work. From sudden, intense situations of crisis which demand quick response, to situations of sustained ambiguity and constant change which demand protracted processes to sense-make emotional and cognitive responses to change. Many teams are able to maintain a high level of functioning under these persistent pressures. However, little is understood about how these teams develop the ability to recover from setbacks and maintain high performance against such difficult circumstances. Arriving at an understanding of the 'whats' and 'hows' of team resilience is important because it will allow us to take specific steps towards developing teams capable of adapting to challenges and sustaining performance over time.

Literature suggests that resilience is not a fixed process or quality. Resilience emerges and changes in response to specific circumstances and challenges (Standinger, Marsiske & Bolton 1993 cited in Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). This paper contextualises the examination of team resilience within specific settings where resilience occurs, specifically, ‘slow burn’ contexts which require teams to maintain energy and performance over an extended period. While there are “highly dynamic action teams” in which team members have to constantly adapt to changing circumstances as though in a perpetual state of crisis (Weiss et al, 2014), such slow burn contexts are likely to be more akin to the day-to-day reality of most teams in the Public Service, where the negative effects of small but constant pressures persist considerably longer and in a cumulative fashion (Garmezy, 1985).

The focus on “most teams” rather than “exceptional teams” is an intentional decision. Just as every organisation has its rhythm, so do the teams that function within. What is a crisis for one team may be just-another-day-in-the-office for another. Therefore, examining team resilience within the day-to-day context of most teams will allow us to identify insights applicable to a larger section of more organisations. Moreover, to truly understand how a group of people work well together, there is a need to examine team performance beyond the overcoming of exceptional situations, to look at how they sustain effectiveness over a longer timeline. The team’s ability to sustain performance is one of the foundations to the longevity of organisational success.

2. Defining Team Resilience

Within the context of the organisation, a team is a “group in which people work interdependently to accomplish a goal” (Levi, 2011). While the nature of tasks executed by teams are varied (e.g. management, service), literature suggests that such tasks have become increasingly non-routine, complex, interdependent and without clear answers. Such an environment requires a high degree of co-ordination amongst team members, so they can bring together the range of expertise and perspectives available within the team (Levi, 2011). What distinguishes a team from a group is that a team is “empowered” and has “some authority to act on its own” (Hayes, 1997 cited in Levi, 2011).

Team resilience has been described as a team’s capacity for positive adaptation (e.g. Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003), which refers to a team’s collective potential to innovate and change to meet the demands of a difficult or novel situation. Examples of such potential include diversity within the team (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003) and the ability to sense-make situations and a readiness for change (Hamel & Valinkangas, 2003). Taking a developmental view of resilience, such authors believe that where such dormant resources are present, these can be activated and mobilised as challenges arise (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003).

Team resilience has also been conceptualised as a psychosocial process where positive adaptation occurs gradually and often requires numerous shifts of thought and ways of getting things done. These involve the mobilisation of a variety of personal and social resources (Morgan, Fletcher & Sarkar, 2015). According to Morgan et al (2015), this is a dynamic process. In other words, there are peaks and troughs in the process. There may be days when a team is not as effective under stress as they have been under similar situations in the past. The psychosocial process also serves a protective function by influencing team members’ “challenge appraisal and meta-cognition” which in turn “promote facilitative responses” which lead to improved performance. In short, team members are able to evaluate and reframe challenge and obstacle as positive occurrences and thereby enabling their focus on moving forward as a team despite setbacks (Morgan, Fletcher & Sarkar, 2015).
3. Qualities of Resilient Teams

While the specific manifestations of behaviours may vary from team to team, a review of the literature suggests that there are 4 main qualities of resilient teams.

3.1 Team learning orientation

Teams which are resilient tend to adopt a learning orientation and perceive setbacks and challenges as part of growth. Because their approach to challenge is one of learning and improvement, such teams are able to extract positive takeaways from the group’s negative experience. Rather than doing work for the pure sake of learning, resilient teams are able to reframe challenges into opportunities to learn something they never knew before (Interview transcripts, 2015).

Team members who maintain an “outward focus during adversity” increase a team’s creativity and reduce regression to unhelpful-but-familiar practices in adverse situations (Blatt, 2009; Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). As a result, team members develop “an improved learning resourcefulness and behavioural preparedness in adverse conditions” (Lengnick-Hall, Beck & Lengnick-Hall, 2011). Examples of such behaviours include refusing to give up despite setbacks, digging deep when facing challenges, sustaining high levels of effort in difficult situations and not dwelling on setbacks.

In effect, teams with a learning orientation are more likely to overcome challenges and be higher-performing in the long term because “groups who have honed their competencies are more likely to register and handle the complexity of dynamic decision environments and may be more motivated to persist in the face of obstacles and adversities” (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003).

Figure 1: Qualities of resilient teams

- **3.1 Team learning orientation**: Resilient teams are able to reframe challenges into learning opportunities and extract positive takeaways from negative experiences.
- **3.2 Positive relationships within a team**: Positive relationships lead to an environment of trust and safety which augments the team’s capacity for resilience.
- **3.3 Clear sense of purpose**: Resilient teams have positive aspirations and are able to envisage a positive future which energises and motivates perseverance.
- **3.4 Diversity within a team**: Resilient teams acknowledge the “value” each member brings and considers these differences as a strength to be leveraged.
In general, teams learn according to the process outlined below. The events in the learning process may not occur in sequence and may be iterative. The main point here is that team learning is a shared experience and members’ participation can reinforce the team’s orientation towards learning.

Team learning process

3.1.1 Interpretation

Interpretation is defined as explaining an idea through words or actions to another (Kostopoulos, Spanos & Prastacos, 2013). It involves finding meaning, refining thoughts and behaviours, as well as building a common language for communicating the idea. This allows for the development of shared understanding amongst team members. When more members in a team share an understanding of new knowledge or routine, the more likely this piece of knowledge will be retrieved and applied in the future. At the same time, the greater the level of detail is shared amongst team members, the more defined these “retrieval cues” become (Wilson, Goodman & Cronin, 2007).

3.1.2 Knowledge codification

This involves documenting and reflecting on a team’s work procedures and decision-making so that tacit knowledge can be converted into explicit knowledge for future use (Gibson & Vermeulen, 2003). Knowledge codification ensures that learning persists and leads to desired outcomes (Hood, Bachrach & Lewis, 2014). In today’s context, much of this codifying is done on written documents or storing information in electronic databases. When made easily accessible to team members, these documents facilitate team learning through reflection and application of new knowledge and skills (Hood, Bachrach & Lewis, 2014).

3.1.3 Integration

As soon as the team has established a shared understanding of the knowledge or routine, it can be translated and integrated into team activities (Kostopoulos, Spanos & Prastacos, 2013).

3.1.4 Storage & Retrieval

The storage and retrieval of team knowledge “enables learning to persist over time by retaining knowledge and facilitating team members to find and access them for future use” (Wilson, Goodman & Cronin, 2007). Team members serve as important cues for recall and retrieval, so groups with more stable memberships have more reliable knowledge retrieval processes compared to groups which experience regular changes in membership (Wilson, Goodman & Cronin, 2007).

3.1.5 Reflection

Reflection is an extremely important part of learning because it allows members to critically think about “what they are doing while they are doing it” (Knapp, 2010). Given the time and cognitive space to reflect, team members can “test assumptions and discuss differences of opinions openly in order to discover gaps” (Kukenberger & Mathieu, 2015) and distil lessons from their experiences of success and failure.

3.1.6 Monitoring

Monitoring the team environment helps to develop a “greater understanding of the task and the actions that produce positive results” (Darr et al, 1995; Bell et al, 2012). This is an important part of a team’s learning as it yields information that will refine the process to “successful task completion”, whilst at the same time, allowing team members to communicate and prepare for future situations (Bell et al, 2012). A team with learning orientation and stable learning processes may also be motivated to create feedback mechanisms so that it is able to switch to alternative courses of action when they feel that something is not doing well (Bell et al, 2012).

Just as how individual experiences of success leads to a sense of efficacy, experiences of group success – whether in contexts of learning or practical experience – also leads to a sense of efficacy and mastery amongst team members. “Groups who perceive that they are more efficacious are likely to face challenges with confidence that they will be able to handle whatever comes up. This in turn influences their problem-solving capabilities and enables the group to persist in the face of adversity” (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003).

3.2 Positive relationships within a team

Carmeli and colleagues described the outcome of positive relationships in a team succinctly – good relationships augment the team’s capacity for resilience (Carmeli et al, 2013). Positive relationships within a team lead to an environment characterised by trust and safety (Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2006). This safe environment encourages open and honest interactions amongst team members, which is necessary to facilitate learning from each other and the team’s external environment (Carmeli, 2007).

One way of describing such positive intra-team relationships is that these teams enjoy high quality connections (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). High quality connections are characterised by “high level of openness and generativity” which enables open and honest exchange amongst team members. Because learning is fundamentally a social process, such exchange facilitates learning by encouraging team members to “elaborate on their own thoughts and feelings, and build a new shared understanding” with others (Miller & Stierer, 1997 cited in Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). When people demonstrate care for each other in these relationships, “they create an enabling context, which facilitates the creation of new knowledge” (van Kogh, Ichijo & Nonaka, 2000 cited in Dutton & Heaphy, 2003).

Positive relationships within a team also facilitates decision-making comprehensiveness, where team members can process available information thoroughly,
make sense of issues and identify opportunities for more effective causes of action. It allows group members to perceive diversity and differences in opinions as resources for learning and improvement rather than obstacles or threats to overcome. For example, when team members are able to participate in a collective process of dialogue where members are not perceived as a threat to each other, they “gain access to a larger pool of common meaning” which enables team learning and discovery (Hedlund, Börjesson & Österberg, 2015). This increases successful rebound from adversity (Carmeli, Friedman & Tishler, 2013; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003).

Team members who enjoy positive relationships within a team share the belief that their group is a safe environment for risk-taking and that it will not embarrass, reject or punish its members for speaking up (Carmeli 2007). This notion of safety is particularly significant for experimentation and learning from failures because it allows and encourages teams to reflect on experiences which enable better understanding and adaptation to evolving problems and challenges (Carmeli, 2007; Dayaram et al, 2014; Morgan, Fletcher & Sarkar, 2015). Such teams are able to create an environment that is conducive to critical thinking and open discussion of “sensitive” issues without the fear of judgement or punishment, thereby encouraging members to challenge existing knowledge and assumptions (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009; Kostopoulos & Bozionelos, 2011). Some studies have provided evidence that the number of errors reported in teams which featured good relationships amongst members was higher compared to teams with lower quality relationships (Carmeli, 2007).

Trust and safety and the ensuing open exchange in teams with positive relationships enable teams to process conflict constructively through realistic appraisal, debate and discussion (Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2006). Some degree of conflict can be conducive to team learning and performance (e.g. De Dreu & Weingart, 2003) and teams can leverage on such moments when members are able to consider opposing views open-mindedly, seek understanding and capitalise on the opportunity for creativity and innovative insights (Kostopoulos & Bozionelos, 2011).
3.3 Clear sense of purpose

Teams which are resilient often identify a clear sense of purpose in the work they undertake. Having a sense of purpose is described as having positive aspirations and the ability to envisage a positive future, which energises and motivates perseverance (Verleysen, Lambrechts & Van Acker, 2015). This is distinct from being goal-oriented as defined by goal-setting theory. According to goal-setting theory, goals are specific and attainable within a certain time frame (Locke & Latham, 2002; Bateman & Barry, 2012). These are typically proximal goals which serve as milestones during the pursuit of a more distant goal (Bateman & Barry, 2012). However, the sense of purpose in the context of this study refers to broader goals teams are striving towards which may or may not culminate in measurable outcomes.

Teams and individuals which identify a clear sense of purpose in their work are motivated to persevere despite failures and obstacles because they identify deep meaning in what they do (Coutu, 2002; Hill, Burrow & Bronk, 2016). Purpose serves as “a force that organises and stimulates goals, manages behaviours, and provides a sense of meaning” (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009 quoted in Hill et al, 2016). In other words, resilient teams are more likely to persist in their efforts and engage in adaptive behaviours in service of the overarching purpose behind their work.

For example, by enhancing self-control, team members are able to persist with tiresome behaviours that require more effort (e.g. physical, mental) but which are vital for achieving results (Duckworth et al, 2011). A clear sense of purpose also enables team members to take a more proactive approach to interpreting and subsequently shaping events (Coutu, 2002). This allows teams to maintain a sense of optimism and control over adverse situations.

3.4 Diversity within a team

Team resilience involves a process whereby team members use individual and collective resources to adapt when experiencing adversity (Morgan, Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Teams which are resilient often report diversity in terms of work experiences, skill-sets and perspectives amongst members. Rather than a handicap, these teams acknowledge the “value” each member brings into the team and considers these differences as a strength to be leveraged (interview transcripts, 2015).

Diversity in a team can facilitate greater situational awareness, which contribute towards better decision-making and increased options for actions. Diversity increases exposure to alternative perspectives regarding situations, thereby allowing members to approach and understand issues from various viewpoints. This enhances the understanding of issues and increases the team’s ability to generate more effective strategies (Nemeth, 1986; Nemeth & Kwan, 1987). Specifically, with each member tapping on his/her expertise and unique pool of resources, the team is able to consider a wider range of information and possible strategies before arriving at a best possible solution (Jehn, Northcraft & Neale, 1999).

At the same time, diversity increases the team’s access to and exchange of a greater range of knowledge to better make sense of situations which enables the team to engage in deeper levels of analysis and consider as many alternate views as possible before arriving at the best possible decision (Mannix & Neale, 2005; van Knippenberg, De Dreu & Homan, 2004). Certainly, differences can lead to conflict (Van Knippenberg, De Dreu & Homan, 2004; Jehn, Northcraft & Neale, 1999). However, teams which are resilient are able to leverage on positive relations amongst members to process conflict constructively (Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2006).

4. The Manager’s Role in Team Resilience

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). This section examines the manager’s role in greater detail.

4.1 Provide Direction and Structure

As the connecting bridge between the team and senior management, managers are in a position to translate strategic imperatives from the top to actions on the ground. From this position, managers provide strategic direction for the team by “directing [the team’s] focus and procedures during moments of uncertainty or choice” (Klein, Ziegert, Knight, et al, 2006). In other words, by setting the direction, managers enable team members to co-ordinate individual efforts towards a shared goal. In doing so, managers enable team members to “achieve a synergistic threshold” (Zaccaro, Heinen & Shuffler, 2009) where collective group effort and decision-making is of superior quality than that of individual efforts.

At the same time, managers play an important role in setting up a structure which provides parameters for how the team will work together. Specifically, managers are responsible for the development and maintenance of norms, role expectations and communication structure amongst team members. Examples of such structures include clear definitions of team goals, functions and roles, guidelines for processing conflict and so on. Such structures maintain a form of stability for the team even during times of uncertainty and can be particularly important for teams who have not had much time working together.
4.2 Nurture an Environment of Safety
Managers create a psychologically safe environment by being supportive, coaching-oriented and responding positively to questions and challenges (Edmondson, 1999). Safety facilitates the development of resilience in teams because it allows team members to be vulnerable without fear of judgement or punishment. When team members feel “safe”, they are more likely to engage in difficult conversations, experiment and reflect on learning from negative experiences, including failure because they believe they will not be penalised for mistakes or for expressing opinions that are different (Carmeli, 2007, Carmeli & Gittell, 2009).

One way managers nurture a safe environment is by encouraging and modelling open communication amongst team members (Hedlund, Börjesson & Østerberg, 2015). This could include encouraging members to ask questions, offering feedback on tasks and being open about needing help or clarification. Another way managers nurture a safe environment is by actively including team members in decision-making and shared tasks. Particularly in high power distance organisational cultures, team members feel empowered and perceive sufficient safety to contribute ideas, take risks and ask questions when encouraged to do so by managers (Brooks, 1994).

4.3 Facilitate Sense-Making
Teams operate in large and complex contexts. Teams which are resilient are capable of continuously adapting and adjusting to shifts in this context (Hamel & Valinkangas, 2003). To be able to do so, teams must have a firm grasp of the situations and issues they face (Carmeli, Friedman & Tishler, 2013). Managers enable this contextual awareness by facilitating sense-making. As the bridge between the team and management, managers take in a constant stream of data, often conflicting, which are associated with ill-defined events and possible problems (Dutton & Jackson, 1987). It is therefore the manager’s role to make sense of the context and offer meaning for others (Foldy, Goldman & Ospina, 2008). In times of crisis, sense-making can become even more complex because managers have to think and problem-solve in the midst of ambiguous situations where there is time pressure and stress (Combe & Carrington, 2015).

In actively interpreting events, managers help teams derive meaning from experiences, which enable them to gain perceived control over shifts in their environment (Coutu, 2003). The impact of such sense-making becomes evident during times of adversity because managers can work with teams to reframe their interpretation of the situation by presenting such events as developmental challenges that the team can overcome (e.g. Morgan, Fletcher & Sarkar, 2015).

4.4 Facilitate Learning
Teams which are resilient tend to adopt a learning orientation and perceive setbacks as part of growth (Morgan, Fletcher & Sarkar, 2015). Managers play an important role in developing and maintaining this learning orientation, as well as facilitate learning for teams. Part of this work of facilitating learning includes reframing challenging situations into learning opportunities for team members. By reframing an adversity into a surmountable obstacle, managers remind teams to adopt a learning mind-set and reduce stress levels in the team (Harland et al, 2005). Even the way in which they word their instructions to the team makes a difference in determining if any learning would take place (Ashauer and Macan, 2013).

When managers frame tasks and challenges from a mastery point of view, where “attributes can be developed and a non-judgmental” (Ashauer and Macan, 2013) approach is taken, this allows individuals to master skills. Managers also create opportunities for learning which helps to build mastery (Kozlowski, Gully, McHugh et al, 1996, Kozlowski, Gully, Salas et al, 1996), by shaping collective experiences with team members, providing direction and socio-emotional support, managers also build a sense of collective efficacy in their teams (Chen & Biesie, 2002; Morgan, Fletcher & Sarkar, 2015).

In addition, it is common for teams to make mistakes when working on new tasks and poorly-structured ones. These errors may be “embarrassing or threatening to their self-image” (Ashauer and Macan, 2013) and these image costs may be a barrier to learning. However, these adverse feelings are reduced when leaders approach goals from a mastery perspective, as the focus would be on mastering the process. From a mastery perspective, problems are seen as a “natural part of the learning process to master” (Dweck, 1986 in Ashauer and Macan, 2013) one’s competencies and serve as a form of “diagnostic information” where solutions to the problem can then be found.

5. Taking Steps Towards Resilience
Taken together, evidence from theory and literature offers some guidance on the steps teams can take to develop resilience.

5.1 Focus on learning
“Team learning is an on-going process of action and reflection that leads to a better understanding of team processes and task performance” (Mathieu et al., 2008 cited in Levi, 2011). Therefore, team leaders and members must work together to embed group processes so that learning and knowledge sharing is an everyday activity and team knowledge can be easily retrieved. One of the key learning behaviours of resilient teams is reflection, whether individually or as a group. Reflection allows teams to distil shared lessons from success and failure. At the same time, teams also need to incorporate feedback as part of its learning process. Effective collection and processing of feedback is more likely to be followed up by effectual follow-up actions.
5.2 Strengthening Team Relations
Organisations and team leaders need to provide opportunities for team members to strengthen their relationships and build trust, and this should take the form of both structured (e.g. team building retreat) and unstructured (e.g. “drinks” after work) events. Encouraging team members to interact beyond the confines of projects will not only facilitate relationship-building, but would also aid in providing new perspectives and resources when members faced issues they had difficulties solving. Teams that have built up a strong sense of teamwork would have also developed a shared understanding and language, as well as a familiarity for each other’s working styles. More targeted approaches may also include training in communication skills such as effective listening and conflict management (Levi, 2011).

Stronger team relations will also augment members’ appreciation of diversity amongst themselves, so that they are more ready to take advantage of this range of expertise and perspectives (Levi, 2011). Developmental interventions can focus on improving a team’s group process skills to equalise participation amongst members and to ensure that members are aware of one another’s contributions.

5.3 Maintaining a Clear Sense of Purpose
It is important to note that defining purpose is not a one-time activity for a team. The team’s sense of purpose needs to be maintained and reinforced over time, particularly when situations change. A clear sense of purpose provides direction and motivation, which facilitates re-evaluation of working goals and adaption of strategies when the team is required to overcome a challenge (Levi, 2011). Having a sense of purpose also helps create an emotional support network within the team, which members can tap on when they are faced with challenges.

5.4 Sense-making
Being able to continuously adapt and adjust to changes in the environment is a mark of a resilient team (Hamel & Valinkangas, 2003). With or without a manager, teams need to be able to make sense of situations, take in and assimilate conflicting data, as well as actively interpret and make meaning out of them. The ability to do so enables teams to gain perceived control over changes in their environment (Coutu, 2003). They would also need the flexibility to reframe interpretations at times and consider alternatives when an existing solution is not working. Sense-making becomes more complex when teams have to work under time pressure and stress (Combe & Carrington, 2015).

6. Conclusion to Part One
From the literature, we have gathered that teams which are resilient display qualities which indicate a learning orientation, presence of positive relationships amongst team members, a clear sense of purpose, as well as the harnessing of diverse expertise and perspectives for decision-making and problem-solving. While the specific manifestations of behaviours may vary amongst teams, these 4 qualities come together to enable resilient behaviours. In addition, the manager or team leader plays a facilitative role in the team’s development and sustaining of resilient behaviours by setting the direction and structure for action, nurturing an environment of safety, sense-making and facilitating learning.

In reality, teams are likely to encounter potential challenges along the path of developing resilience. The unceasing demand to deliver results quickly is likely to put a strain on the team’s discipline to follow-through with the processes of learning and reflection. Operating in a context of competing demands and where there are no clear answers may also compel teams to constantly re-evaluate goals and adapt strategies, which may distract them from their sense of purpose and wear down their perseverance. Team managers are also likely to experience constant challenge to their mindset and ability to maintain a safe space for experimentation and learning. It is important to emphasise that team resilience is a collective effort and requires mindful attention and discipline from team leaders and members alike.

This section has offered evidence from literature on the unique strengths of teams which are resilient. The second part will present and examine evidence collected from teams who operated or are operating in the Public Service. In doing so, the study aims to deepen understanding of the experiences of these teams and how these have shaped their capacity for managing adversity. At the same time, the interviews present an opportunity to examine if the experiences of “real” teams will be consistent with those presented in the literature.
PART TWO: INTERVIEWS AND EMERGENT THEMES

7. Method

3 teams from the Singapore Public Service were interviewed as part of the data collection for this study. These teams were identified with the help of OD Practitioners in ILOD and were selected because these were stable teams which had worked together for a period of time (i.e. at least 1 year). In other words, team members were accustomed to interacting with each other in the work setting on a daily basis. 2 out of the 3 teams were intact teams, whilst the third was a project team whose members were put together for a specific project. By the time of the interview, the team had split up and team members had moved on to other assignments.

The duration for each interview was approximately 1 hour. As much as possible, all team members were present. The interviews were recorded with permission from team members, which were than transcribed and analysed. The following sections highlight the main themes from these interviews and will focus on factors which contribute to each team’s resilience.

8. Quality of Team Relationship

In the workplace, building and maintaining social support networks are important for individual and team resilience in times of change and adversity. Strong social support networks offer team members a space and outlet to express and reflect on their emotional reactions to situations, as well as to a resource where they can receive help in understanding and managing their emotions. Interviewees expressed that strong bonds within the team helped make challenging situations more bearable and helped sustain the belief that they could overcome any difficulties.

“We would just stick through whatever’s being thrown at us; and I think that when I said stick through - stick through together and not alone. So we sort of had each other’s backs. If [there were] late nights, you work late nights together, and then make sure that in those trying periods, we will care more; buy coffee or buy snacks to show concern and care.” (Team Member, Team 1)

The process of building relationships also develop team members’ creativity (Sosa, 2011), as well as to test out and seek new ideas and perspectives with regards to the challenges they faced. Good social support networks are also a means of identifying and securing resources and information (Cutrona, 1986; Thoits, 1986), and getting things done with and through others. Interviewees mentioned communicating with others to share their feelings and also to seek solutions to problems they were facing.

“So I think that kind of communication helped with ‘solution-ing’, but we also recognise our own anxieties and our feelings. You were not afraid to talk about it ‘cause I think instead of bottling it all up, you sort of used that time to ventilate.”

(Team Member, Team 1)

“So knowing how to pull in, you know, resources or brain juices to help us talk through things. That has helped.”

(Team Leader, Team 1)

8.1 Social Networks

Whilst social support networks can provide a range of emotional, informational, and practical support, people alike are unlikely to meet their varied needs through a small group of people. Different networks may provide different types of support and it is likely that people will need to build different networks in order to meet their full range of needs. Personality and social psychology literature suggests that people are most susceptible to “nostalgia and denial during stress” (McFarland and Buehler, 2012). This is what makes external networks particularly important for people in stressful times. When tension may be running high at the workplace, seeking support internally may expose individuals to vulnerabilities (Jackson and Edenborough, 2007). Harvard Business Review has suggested several different types of networks (Ibarra and Hunter, 2007) that individuals could tap on. When these networks are brought together in a team, it magnifies the pool of resources and support the team has access to:

i) Operational network: Good working relations with people who can help in completing tasks and achieving goals

“I suppose another external support is one of our associates, [name withheld] - so there was some point in time where... she came by; and then we had managed to... I can’t remember what reason – surface[d] some of these things up to her, and sought her guidance on how to proceed; and so I think she gave some good counsel and support, yeah, in terms of helping me to be focused and clear on what is my role in this whole effort.” (Team Leader, Team 1)

ii) Personal network: Individuals who can provide new perspectives and resources. Evidence emerging from neuroscience (Southwick and Charney, 2012) shows that the presence of social support – depending on how extensive and supportive it is - aids greatly in the face of adverse situations and has real physiological impact on individuals. Facing stressful situations in the presence of trusted friends produces oxytocin, a chemical compound produced in our bodies, oxytocin is related to attachment and other pro-social behaviours like empathy and trust (Davydov
et al, 2010). It also plays an immensely important role in muting cortisol (stress-causing hormone) and increasing calmness (Heinrichs et al, 2003).

“Yeah, but so I think of my good friends - one of the times when I met up with them I was feeling very, very stressed with work and stuff; and she asked me a question to the effect of like I suppose what are the upsides that I saw in that challenge; or how do I see myself moving from this, which helped me then kind of take a stop, and kind of reflect to try and see some of the positive side of things. So I think that helped me at that time, during one of those challenges.” (Team Leader, Team 1)

9. Communication

Communication is defined as the “exchange of information between a sender and a receiver and the inference of meaning between them” (O’Reilly and Pondy, 1979). It plays a critical role in team resilience as it influences a wide range of important team aspects such as coordination, conflict resolution, information exchange and team dynamics. In this section, we focus on the roles communications plays in three key areas that affect a team’s resilience: (1) discussing ideas and providing feedback, (2) sense-making and role clarification, and (3) learning from experiences. The role of communication in building trust amongst team members and creating a psychologically safe environment will be discussed in later sections.

9.1 Giving feedback and discussing ideas through open dialogue

“Open communication (Edmondson, 2003) is a form of open dialogue which sparks ideas, suggestions and innovative new procedures that may improve team processes. Dialogue is important for the team in exploring complex issues from diverse viewpoints and gaining insights that cannot be achieved individually. The purpose of dialogue is to allow individuals to go beyond their own understanding; “to gain access to a larger pool of common meaning, which cannot be accessed individually” (Hedlund, Börjesson, & Österberg, 2015). Dialogue is a collective process where members are not competing with each other. Interviewees mentioned having many dialogue sessions to discuss ideas, to provide feedback as well as encouragement to one another.

“Because then it also looks at respecting one another’s perspective and opinions on who should be a part of the team; and how we could work together; and I think it’s this sort of culture that we wanted to have in the team... So I think at least now, in the current team now, we certainly want to foster that sense of openness and discussing issues and dialogue, which I think we feel is a healthy way to make the team really be resilient.” (Team Leader, Team 1)

9.2 Sense-making: Clarifying roles and making sense of complex situations

Within the team, communication helps individuals make sense of their experiences. This includes their individual roles, differing working styles between members and dealing with assumptions and complex discussions. Sense-making is defined in the literature as a “frame of reference” which involves the “creation of a common perspective” within the team (Lorenz, 2013). “This common perspective by which an organization or team tries to ‘frame’ the overall viewpoints of employees is referred to as ‘framing’. Each individual’s perspective can therefore also be seen as a unique frame, which is influenced by different ‘sources’ or ‘references’”. Having a common frame of reference helps members’ gain clarity in various situations, especially when there is no guidance available. Our interviews revealed that interviewees communicated openly and regularly to make sense of their roles and the complexity of the tasks they had to work on.

i) Communication was critical for members who needed to clarify their roles in the team.

“...So I still remember that meeting and I still remember being very upset about it, but the sort of feedback that I got immediately after it helped me... helped me be quite certain that, that was the right approach to take... I guess, having people that are willing to give that kind of views and feedback was... was kind of useful. And I also felt in return, I mean not in return but, generally giving feedback about what worked and what didn’t, and being honest about things... sort of helped to keep the team in good shape.” (Team Leader, Team 2)

ii) Interviewees shared that they clarified complex issues and made sense of situations through “trial and error”. They also applied this behaviour in their interactions with external stakeholders and contributors. This suggests that resilient behaviours and mindsets are not confined to the team, and, in applying them to external parties, resilient teams could have a positive influence on the larger circle of partners they work with.
“There wasn’t any precedent or someone that we can emulate or learn from [for the project]...So we just based it off gut feel, based on little we have read, ask around, discuss, bounced off [each other] quite a bit, [did] quite a lot of mind sharing and we [did] what we [thought] was right.” (Team Leader, Team 3)

“...We would have hypotheses on things but we had to repeatedly go to the relevant [stakeholder] and ask them if we thought about it this way... how would you respond to it or how you would... what are the issues that would come up with it. And we really had to trial and error a lot of approaches...We had no expertise and asking the right agencies the right questions. And then using their responses to try to improve the solutions...” (Team Leader, Team 2)

iii) Communication reinforces team members’ mental models. A team mental model or shared mental model is “the organised understanding and mental representation of the knowledge that team members share concerning relevant task, team aspects and the environment” (Klimoski & Mohammed, 1994 cited in Marques Santos & Margarida Passos, 2013). While each member holds their own mental models, a team mental model assumes a degree of similarity among the mental models of team members (Marques Santos & Margarida Passos, 2013). Constant communication amongst members strengthens these mental models which further reinforce their ability to sense-make.

When team members share an understanding about key elements of the task and functioning of the team, they can anticipate the needs and actions of other team members, and adapt their behaviours to fit closely to those of the other members and the task demands even without explicit environmental cues (Cannon-Bowers et al, 1993; DeChurch & Mesmer-Magnus, 2010 all cited in Marques Santos & Margarida Passos, 2013). While each member holds their own mental models, a team mental model assumes a degree of similarity among the mental models of team members (Marques Santos & Margarida Passos, 2013). Constant communication amongst members strengthens these mental models which further reinforce their ability to sense-make.

9.3 Learning from Experiences

Open communication also allows space for reflection and learning from one’s mistakes (Dayaram and Fung, 2014). Team members are able to test their assumptions by drawing on each other’s experiences, and engaging in various trial-and-error and reflective processes within their teams. These may lead to new information and abilities, and eventually promote organizational learning through knowledge exploration and experimentation. Conflicts also offer an opportunity for learning. Learning to communicate effectively during conflicts help people clarify and resolve issues as well as to learn more from each other’s experiences.

“...In all families, there are squabbles, there are arguments. But I say this because I think it’s important to recognise that this will happen in any organisation, any team, but it is how the team chooses to resolve those conflicts, that’s important... You don’t resolve it properly, and in the constructive way, I think that is very detrimental to your team spirit and there’s no way to build resilience in that kind of environment... how to have open communication, how do we decide how to move on with our issues. Even where people might disagree with the decision – [it is about] how we make a decision and we just take ownership of it.” (Team Leader, Team 3)

10. Trust

According to Deutch (1958), trust is defined as an individual’s confidence in the intentions and capabilities of a relationship partner(s) and the belief that a relationship partner(s) would behave as one hoped. Trust within teams is a function of other team members’ perceived ability, integrity and benevolence and as of the members’ own propensity to trust (Jarvanpaa et al., 1998). Its main function is to provide synergistic relations – “teamthink” (Manz and Neck, 1997). Trust performs this function by activating appropriate social processes. These processes are broad and flexible role definition, intensive social relations, high confidence in others, help-seeking behavior, free exchange of information, giving priority to team objectives and needs, high commitment and solidarity (Jones and George, 1998). Thus, trust is seen as a required condition for “teamworking” (Erdem, 2003), as mentioned by some interviewees who spoke of how a sense of trust served as a motivator in achieving their goals.

“But [at] the same time I think it’s also trusting in ourselves, trusting in the team. And sometimes what keeps you going is just the stubbornness that you think you are doing something right, something good, and regardless of outcome, I mean just continue doing it, hoping for the best. [It is also] loyalty to what your beliefs are, your values are, and I think loyalty to the organisation and its vision. Loyalty to one another as members of team...also loyalty to the staff – loyalty downwards. Cause you are also mindful that you are responsible for the well-being of the people reporting to you. So that’s also loyalty downwards...loyalty upwards.” (Team Leader, Team 3)

As team members assume individual responsibility for various components of a task, mutual obligations are formed (Piccoli and Ives, 2003). Members trust one another to take responsibility for their part of the task and when this happens, the trust is deepened. As such, when a member does not carry out his/her responsibility, it may impact trust in the long run. An interviewee spoke of this sense of obligation.
Research suggests that trust is a “critical team state” (Berson et al, 2015) that creates an environment which is conducive to team learning and where team members feel safe and supported. Trusting relationships within teams are said to promote employee engagement in learning and experimenting that is critical for learning success (Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012). Speaking up is integral to experimentation in this context (trying new actions and reflecting on the results) and to building a repertoire of shared experiences concerning what works and what does not. Members who learn to speak up with observations, concerns, and questions should be better able to learn new routines than those who are reluctant to voice their thoughts. When members trust each other, they are able to voice their concerns freely without the fear of any backlash or offending others.

Team leaders also play a big role in creating shared meaning and building trust within the team. Teams confronting major change in their work routines benefit greatly from non-threatening leadership. The goal of teamwork is better realized when leaders create psychological conditions of meaningfulness and safety (Kahn, 1990) by reducing power-based barriers to speaking and enabling people to focus fully on the task at hand. Leaders who take an active role in motivating the team - communicating a rationale for change and issuing a clear, direct invitation for others’ input - and paid attention at hand. Leaders who take an active role in motivating the team - communicating a rationale for change and issuing a clear, direct invitation for others’ input - and paid attention to experimentation in this context (trying new actions and reflecting on the results) and to building a repertoire of shared experiences concerning what works and what does not. Members who learn to speak up with observations, concerns, and questions should be better able to learn new routines than those who are reluctant to voice their thoughts. When members trust each other, they are able to voice their concerns freely without the fear of any backlash or offending others.

11. Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is “a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking” (Edmondson, 1999). Amongst the teams interviewed, team members cited mutual trust and a general feeling of safety as a key factor for persevering and experimenting.

Research in aversion to risk-taking and face saving revealed that people consistently value image and avoid engaging in behaviour that puts their “face” and positive social image at risk (e.g. Goffman, 1955). Such counter-productive behaviours are particularly strong in organisations where admitting errors and discussing problems are perceived to be threatening to an individual’s career or “face” (e.g. Dutton, 1993). As Argyris concisely pointed out, “people tend to act in ways that inhibit learning when they face the potential for threat or embarrassment (cited in Edmondson, 1999).

The presence of psychological safety encourages more open communication and trust amongst members because they believe that they can voice opinions and challenging views without judgement or reproach from fellow members (Edmondson, 1999; Kostopoulos, Bozionelos & Prastacos, 2009). By allowing team members to be more confident about being daring and creative in the examination of issues (Kostopoulos, Bozionelos & Prastacos, 2009; London, 2014), psychological safety enhances team effectiveness by “increasing the accuracy of shared understanding, knowledge and information amongst members to improve skills, problem-solving and encourage constructive disagreement and discussion” (Kostopoulos, Bozionelos & Prastacos, 2009).
“...[we] work quite well in terms of when we're thinking through things to need to talk it through with someone. So I think that helps, and that's why we kind of complement each other, as opposed to getting on each other's nerves... But I think even when we're open, I think the thing is that we know that it's not with any ill intention.” (Team Member, Team 1)

The open communication and trust enabled by the presence of psychological safety also facilitates more effective team learning because team members do not worry about being judged as incompetent or blamed for undesirable outcomes (Edmondson, 1999). 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 experiences was critical (Ashauer & Macan, 2013).

Edmondson (1999) defined team learning behaviour as the team’s ability to (1) seek help and feedback from others; (2) experiment and innovate novel ideas; (3) discuss problems and errors openly and objectively, and (4) discover, accept and work on expected results or situations. These abilities were observed amongst the teams in this study.

One of the team leaders shared this approach when she recalled an incident where the team made a recommendation which was not well-received by stakeholders of the project, and how the team was able to move on from the negative experience.

“... So even though things were not going well... we just try to find a way to move on and not lay blame on whatever happened because people do things for a particular reason and it doesn’t matter. The idea is that we understand why, what the concerns are and then we move on together... the team [know] that they are protected...” (Team Leader, Team 2)

The shared belief of psychological safety also facilitated other proactive behaviours such as role-shifting because they were enacted under assumptions of trust and good intentions, and perhaps more importantly, team members trust that they will not be punished for stepping beyond their assigned roles. Such proactive behaviours serve to reinforce positive relationships amongst team members and throughout the interviews, team members spoke often about how fellow team mates provided support for each other.

“...the simple things that when you’re not around, people cover your duties. It sort of helps you trust your team members a bit more. They’re not going to like wait for you to come back to clear things – they will step in to help you. So already, from there you will start to trust your team already; and having known the person, you know the person is not someone who will just drop the ball.” (Team Member, Team 1)

While support from the larger context is also important in facilitating learning and proactive behaviours, psychological safety perceived within the immediate team context appears to be a more potent enabler of such positive, but potentially “risky” behaviours (Edmondson, 1999).

12. Team Processes

12.1 Teamwork, Team Prosocial Motivation and Team Co-operation

Team prosocial motivation is defined as team members’ shared desire to focus their efforts on benefitting others. Research suggests that pro-socially motivated teams are more likely to engage in behaviours that contribute to collective benefits, including team effectiveness. “Teams produce successful outcomes when they are able to produce synergistic gains, minimize process losses (Hackman, 1987; Steiner, 1972), and facilitate team task coordination and interpersonal bonding” (Hu and Linden, 2015). Team cooperation plays a mediator role towards team prosocial motivation and tends to smooth dysfunctional conflicts among team members (Kozlowski & Bell, 2003) and increase effective problem-solving within the team (Podsakoff et al., 2000). This encourages better teamwork outcomes. “Driven by the meaningful purpose of helping others, team members are willing to share their ideas and may not be afraid to voice viewpoints that differ from those of others as long as they believe these inputs can positively contribute to the collective goals of the team (Grant & Berry, 2011, Hu and Linden, 2015)”.

Pro-socially motivated team members have a lower tendency to focus on calculating their personal gains or losses. They are generally “more attentive and open to others’ opinions and needs (De Dreu, 2006)”. This generates productive levels of task conflicts and reduces, if not eliminates, dysfunctional interpersonal conflicts, thereby creating positive team synergy and promoting effective team cooperation. Interviewees describe a sense of teamwork where everyone was supportive of each other despite their role differences and building a team culture which was supportive and cohesive.

“...The common sense of camaraderie amongst the team when we work together... It helps that you always, like they always say you go to war not because of the high ideals but because you have, fighting for your friends, your family, and in the trenches, who’s your buddy... it’s about teamwork and looking out for one another. Not drawing lines.” (Team Leader, Team 3)
When team members work together and support one another for an extended period of time, they develop a shared understanding and a familiarity for one another and each other’s working styles. This is known as team familiarity which is defined as team members’ shared experience working together, and a group of individuals who have spent some time working together tend to perform better than a group whose members are new to one another. Individuals who have worked together before would have already formed “a shared representation” of the types of knowledge that each individual possesses within the team. This makes them better able to locate the knowledge and solution to particular problems. Research on transactive memory in teams suggests that members who work together longer develop an understanding of who knows what, enabling them to coordinate actions while learning a new task (Moreland, 1999). In a laboratory study of team adaptation, Okhuysen (2001) found that familiar groups were better able to initiate opportunities to study of team adaptation, Okhuysen (2001) found that familiar groups were better able to initiate opportunities to reflect out loud on the task and change direction. Thus, if familiar groups were better able to initiate opportunities to reflect out loud on the task and change direction. Thus, if familiar groups were better able to initiate opportunities to reflect out loud on the task and change direction.

Teams who are familiar with each other would also have developed a “shared language and communication channels” and would have had the opportunity to “create team beliefs such as psychological safety and positive social acceptance.” This might help to increase the “quality and quantity of knowledge they share, resulting in better performance.” This was particularly true for Team 1, as having spent so much time working together, they have built up a sort of familiarity in many different aspects – working styles, strengths and weaknesses, for instance. This made it easier to navigate and delegate any tasks that came their way.

"Whenever there is a gap, we do not hesitate. Sometimes we do not even talk and discuss. We just get it done whenever we see that there is something that needs to be done. So I think a lot of mutual trust is there and there are no lines drawn." (Team Member, Team 3)

With all that said, teams that are able to maintain good relationships, communicate effectively to establish trust and build a psychologically safe environment; are able to mitigate the potential downsides of being too familiar with one another.

### 12.2 Role agility

Amongst the teams interviewed, all team members described situations where team members took on additional tasks or tasks which were not associated with their formal roles. While such proactive behaviour appeared to be an accepted norm in these teams, it was especially evident during crunch time.

Role shifting is the act of “adjusting one’s own activities by substituting for someone else or performing some of the tasks in someone else’s role.” (Bechky, 2006). In role shifting, team members exercise independent decision to supplant the role of missing members (Leung, Chan & Lee, 2003). Typically, role shifting is observed in teams in 3 situations:

1. When the team is under pressure to get things done
2. When the team has to lead itself in the absence of a formal leader
3. When the team has limited information about the situation they are expected to manage (Bechky, 2006).
According to role theory, roles “represent expectations associated with positions in a team” and therefore can facilitate continuity of team behaviours over time and across situations (Bechky, 2006). At the same time, roles can be structured with great flexibility so as to adapt to evolving expectations under different situations (Bechky, 2006). Team members in this study were clear about the roles they held in the context of their respective teams, which enabled them to get work done in a co-ordinated manner. However, these roles were held as a reference point rather than absolute definitions. Team members understood that their roles were interdependent (e.g. Team 3) and exhibited willingness to shape and shift roles to get things done. In other words, team members take on and execute the various tasks that need to be completed so that the team’s job can be done (Bechky, 2006).

The teams interviewed shared several instances where team members, without being prompted to do so, willingly stepped up and into multiple roles for the benefit of the team’s objective.

“...even if we hadn’t proactively assigned it, I think [they] knew... the value they were bringing into the team and they would proactively... take on the jobs... I think they really wanted... to help so they would just try to find ways to be as helpful as possible.” (Team Lead, Team 2)

“...where there is a gap to be plugged, you just take the initiative and plug it. And we might not keep one another in the loop now, but eventually we will communicate to one another that ‘don’t worry, this has been sorted out.” (Team Member, Team 3)

These teams’ experiences are consistent with literature which suggests that team performance isn’t achieved by holding to fixed roles, but by adapting to the situation (e.g. Manning, 2013; Senior, 1998). While role conflict can still occur, shared team qualities such as open communication and trust enhance the teams’ ability to constructively resolve differences.

Literature on mental models may provide further explanation on why role shifting occurs. A shared mental model facilitates role shifting because it “provide team members with a common understanding of who’s responsible for what tasks and what the information requirements are” (Stout, Cannon-Bowers, Salas & Milanovich, 1999), which enables team members to anticipate each other's needs, recognise changes in the task/team and adjust the way they work and exchange information according to changes in the situation (Espevik, Johnsen & Eid, 2011, Marques Santos & Margarida Passos, 2013; Stout, Cannon-Bowers, Salas & Milanovich, 1999).

A shared mental model also contributes to the team’s collective sense-making, which enhances the team’s collective awareness of the situation they are in (Stout, Cannon-Bowers & Sala, 1996 cited in Stout et al, 2011).

The shared understanding of the team’s objectives, expectations and situation increases the likelihood that team members are able to make conscious and informed decisions to role-shift when they perceive a need to do so (e.g. Vera & Crossan, 2005).

Studies have yielded evidence for the utility of shared mental models for team resilience (Espevik, Johnsen & Eid, 2011), especially with regards to team members’ adaptive behaviour. In particular, shared mental models:

1. Enable team members to learn each other’s work and unfamiliar tasks faster and be able to perform these tasks better over time;
2. Enable teams to adopt more efficient and effective communication strategies based on adaptation to the team’s circumstance;
3. Facilitate greater adaptability and more frequent back-up behaviour compared to teams without a shared mental model (see also Stout et al, 1999)
4. Is associated with less physiological stress and faster rate of recovery post-challenge, which suggest that teams with a shared mental model are less flustered under stress because they know that as a team, they’ve “got this”.

Communication is particularly important in the formulation and reinforcement of shared mental model and therefore, role-shifting. Communications focused on planning (e.g. setting goals and awareness of the consequences of errors, clarifying conversations, discussions about unexpected events) are particularly powerful (Stout et al, 1999). Amongst the teams interviewed, such communication can be prompted by any team member.

13. Sense of Purpose, Meaning and Values

Having a meaningful purpose helps teams “develop direction, momentum and commitment” (Katzenbach and Smith, 2005) to the team’s goals. Successful teams invest a lot of time into shaping a purpose which continues throughout the team’s ‘lifespan’. Having a purpose, clear goals and existential meaning encourages teams to persevere through difficult times (Bonanno, 2004). This was illustrated by some of our interviewees who mentioned that sense of purpose and meaning in their work encouraged them to keep going even during very tough times.

“[When] there is an intent, there’s a need, [then] there will be many ways of getting from point A to point B. If we follow only a fixed route for getting from point A to point B, we’ll probably still get stuck somewhere, [so we] have to be street smart about some of these things. Ultimately [we] know where the intent is and [then we are able to] get things done.” (Team Leader, Team 3)
Resilient teams are made up of rather resilient individuals to a degree and the difference between very resilient people and those who are less resilient is that the former have a greater tendency to “devise constructs about their suffering to create some sort of meaning for themselves and others” (Coutu, 2002). Whilst an individual might not be able to control external factors, the meaning of a situation is something that an individual has control over (Coutu, 2003). Teams that are made up of people who are able to exercise some form of control over the situation they are in by actively interpreting and shaping events tend to be more resilient. They are able to maintain hope in averse situations (Kumpfer and Glantz, 1999) by deriving motivation from a strong inner value system. Some of the interviewees mentioned possessing a sense of purpose for a higher intent and purpose, and how this sense of purpose was a great source of motivation when the going got tough.

“When our team member, our colleague, our friends are all having the same intention, the same good intention to serve for the greater good, you cannot go very far wrong.” (Team Leader, Team 3)

Having a sense of meaning and purpose not only aids with growth and learning but it also creates an emotional support network, as studies have found that when teams and individuals are able to find meaning in their work, it encourages the emergence of an emotional and social infrastructure which members can then tap on for compassion and support (Lilius et al., 2003). Sometimes, this sense of purpose and meaning helps inspire confidence and success.

“... [we] know where we are going. We are very clear of the destination. So what keep[s] us going, [is] because we have no doubt that we’ll be successful. We have no doubt that we’re doing something that is very meaningful. And every day as we do something meaningful...it inspires us further.” (Team Leader, Team 3)

14. Implications

On the overall, data from the team interviews in Section Two and literature review presented in Section One yield consistent themes with regard to qualities which contribute to team resilience. A conceptual framework on the key qualities that contribute to team resilience can be found in the Appendix. This section summarises the main development implications for teams and the team leader/manager. This is not intended to be a comprehensive or prescriptive list, but rather, key areas where intervention could yield augmented benefits in terms of team resilience and effectiveness.

14.1 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. Team members across the interviews spoke about being able to count on team mates, to speak up and to engage in difficult conversations. These activities and interactions were possible because team members perceived sufficient trust and safety within the team’s internal environment. In other words, team members assessed that they would not be punished for honest mistakes or for speaking their minds.

The teams who participated in this study were constantly working to adapt to changes, navigate uncertainty in their environments and experimenting with different ways of doing work. These processes need to happen in a safe space where people are assured that they are free to do the work that needs to be done without fear of judgement or punishment (e.g. Carmeli, 2007; Edmondson, 1999). This ‘safety’ does not equate to immunising team members from consequences of irresponsible action. Rather, to trust in their good intentions and not punish them for doing or thinking differently.

While team members share the responsibility for creating the environment that works best for them, the manager or team leader appear to hold an important role in setting up the space which enables teams to be resilient. The managers/team leaders in this study influenced the team’s internal environment through their framing of issues and sense-making of situations, which served to reinforce shared purpose and meaning (e.g. Edmondson, Bohmer & Pisano, 2001). Managers/team leaders also enriched the positive tone of their teams’ environment by modelling desired behaviours such as learning and openness, which further reinforced individual and team habits which developed resilience. Such openness also allowed for a diversity of opinions to be expressed.
In their collective research on resilience, Cooper, Flint-Taylor and Pearn (2013) found that when managers are resilient (based on self-assessment), they are better positioned to enable the resilience of their teams. This is not surprising considering the crucial role that managers play. One of the key implications for manager development is to help this group build up personal resilience through structured interventions. Equipping this group with the relevant tools for setting up the safe space for teams would further enhance effectiveness in enabling their teams to be resilient.

14.2 Paying attention to communication

The analysis of the data from this study suggested that open communication, sense of psychological safety and trust reinforced each other in a loop. Team members across groups spoke about how they were able to have honest conversations with team mates, which contributed towards feelings of safety and trust, which further encouraged them to engage in similar engagements throughout their experiences of working together. Team members used communication as the main tool to jointly sense-make and resolve differences and problems through dialogue, feedback and reflecting on these experiences together.

In an environment where teams are expected to function for a prolonged or an indeterminable period of uncertainty, team members need safety and open communication to sustain their efforts in a mix of experimental and/or monotonous endeavours. And because organisations want teams to persist, we need to set up the space to support this persistence. The main developmental implication for teams is to equip team members with the skills and mindsets to engage in open communication. While team members may often talk to one another, to be resilient, they need to be able to engage in open conversations, listen with openness and give and receive feedback, some of the key skills in the open communication which were reported by the teams in this study.

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

A sense of purpose provides direction, motivation and gives meaning to the tasks that the team would be working on. A common purpose ties a team together and also helps in creating an emotional support network which members can tap on in difficult times. This has to be maintained and reinforced continuously over time, and has to be revisited consistently to make sure the team is on track to achieving its goals.

Besides a sense of purpose, sense-making is also important. Along the way, teams would come up against changes in the environment which require them to quickly adapt and adjust. This requires the team to make sense of situations and interpret conflicting information, thus giving them a sense of perceived control over their work. Sense-making also plays a part in clarifying roles and reinforcing the shared understanding amongst team members with regards to the relevant tasks.

14.4 Maintaining positive relationships

It is important that teams maintain strong, positive relationships both within and beyond the team. Having social support in difficult times is important in maintaining one’s resilience. Strong relationships and a great sense of teamwork help in building trust and creating a safe space for members to express their views. Having strong bonds within the team also makes it easier to deal with challenging situations. Building relationships with people outside of the team would mean that there are extra points of contact to provide resources or emotional support when the team or individuals in the team need it. Being trained in communication skills and taking the time to building rapport with one another outside of the confines of work would help immensely in strengthening relationships.
15. Conclusion

While this is only an exploratory study where the findings may not be applied across all teams in the Public Service, we hope the insights may be a useful starting point for managers and organisations to consider team development. What we found from the teams was consistent with the literature:

- Setting up an enabling space to create a psychologically safe environment for members to express their diverse views and learn from mistakes without negative repercussions
- Having a diversity of relationships to tap on for social support and other uses
- Constant communication amongst team members
- The ability to sense-make and make meaning out of complex situations, ambiguity and sudden changes in the environment.
- A sense purpose to serve as a guide
- Building up a learning culture in the team; an ability to constantly reflect and incorporate feedback

Future research can pursue deeper lines of inquiry into the driving force of a team’s sense of purpose or the impact of resilience on a team’s effectiveness. Other possible directions may be more focused studies on specific qualities of resilience and their impact on performance. The impact of resilience unfolds over time, therefore, longitudinal studies such teams may yield valuable insights on team development in the Singapore Public Service context.

As an exploratory study, one of the limitations was the limited sample of teams which participated in the study. Future research into teams can include a wider spectrum of teams (e.g. varying team size, function, timeline). It should be pointed out that this paper does not seek to be the authority on resilient teams, but rather, to present a perspective of such teams. And in doing so, we hope this paper will generate awareness of teams which quietly and steadily strive to deliver high levels of performance under persistent pressures.

Resilience is like a muscle – the more it is used, the stronger it gets. We hope that this paper has achieved its intention of raising awareness of resilient teams in the Singapore Public Service – the qualities of resilient teams, how these qualities enabled resilient behaviours, and how managers/team leaders facilitate the development and sustenance of such resilient behaviours.
Figure 3: Conceptual framework for developing resilient teams
References


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