



Build Your Team's Resilience — From Home

David Sluss and Edward Powley

To make it through the current crisis and return to a new normal, you and your team will need to be resilient. The good news: leaders can help create conditions that make this possible. We've done multiple studies with U.S. Navy recruits that show how this can best be done—and, recently, in studying how leaders are responding to the crisis, we've come across valuable stories of how they can achieve this even when team members are working remotely.

The key is to focus on two things: people and perspective.

People: Know your team's resilience factors

Three “protective factors” predict whether people will have resilience:

High levels of confidence in their abilities

Disciplined routines for their work

Social and family support

Ideally, you'll already have a good sense of how your team members stack up on these—especially the first two. But some factors may be weakened during this crisis. One of the first things you can do is establish a “resilience inventory dashboard,” by checking in with your reports individually. Ask how comfortable they feel telecommuting, how they plan to schedule their work days, and how you might support them with any life or family commitments.

The many new challenges your reports are facing may shake their confidence, but you can boost it by **actively conveying your faith in them**. One mechanical engineer who was doubting her ability to telework told us how much it helped her confidence to have her manager simply tell her that he respected the decisions she made and the work she produced, and that any mistakes she made would just be tools for improvement.

Doing their jobs from home will require new routines and test your people's ability to focus. Think about how you can help your team adjust. One loan-processing manager called for more-frequent quality checks while his reports were getting used to working remotely, for instance. Though that may seem like micromanaging, an underwriter on the team told us it reassured him and helped his group “slow down and not rush” despite being under extreme pressure. Leaders might also suggest **time-blocking** and other personal productivity strategies to encourage disciplined work habits.

Leaders can also strengthen their teams by displaying compassion. Thoughtful managers can do this by showing concern, helping members get office equipment and supplies they need to do their jobs at home, and by making special accommodations for individuals who are at high risk due to underlying health conditions. **It's especially important to demonstrate that you genuinely care about your team as not just employees but people**. If your people rate high on the resilience factors, that's great, but you can't assume they're out of danger. Very resilient people are geared toward action and what they can control. As a result, they may “**panic-work**” and burn out during times of crisis. You will need to take measures to maintain their resilience, too. Try to focus their energy on strategic initiatives.

People: Foster resilience-oriented conversations

A large body of research shows that **the most effective way to increase resilience at work is through customized individual coaching**. A field experiment with approximately 400 U.S. Navy recruits in 2015 also point to its power. We asked recruits to rate their resilience at the beginning of boot camp and then

midway through. had half of them take part in a one-on-one peer coaching session in the form of a “guided conversation”—while the other half were left to their own devices. In the guided conversations, recruits **were asked to share positive experiences, compare challenges and how they were dealing with them, and imagine their future** as navy sailors. Recruits who had these conversations saw a significant 20% increase in resilience, while the control group changed less than 1%.

As a manager, you can have guided conversations with each direct report yourself, but the power differential could make these discussions lopsided. We recommend encouraging your team members to have guided conversations among themselves on a regular basis. You could assign pairs and require scheduled video chats to encourage team members to discuss successes, problems and how they’re tackling them, and what they’ve learned during the crisis that they can still apply when things return to normal. People need to be reminded that things will stabilize—and envision who they will be when the adversity has passed.

Perspective: Ask questions

Neuroscience suggests that the fear and anxiety we experience due to COVID-19 will narrow our ability to see the future or envision creative solutions to our problems. **Leaders can counter this effect.** First, help your team members face down reality. **Accepting things as they are is key to building resilience.** Admiral Jim Stockdale, who was held captive during the Vietnam War, famously noted that the optimists who expected to be rescued quickly didn’t survive: “I think they all died of broken hearts.” Ask direct reports what plans they have for working remotely longer than anticipated. While they might not feel comfortable thinking about such things, they will weather the crisis better if you help them plan constructively. Remind people they can rely on and collaborate with others. Ask, “Who on your team might be able to help you?” **There is power in reminding members they’re not alone, and in building a network of support.** Colleagues lending a hand will benefit too, because helping others also increases people’s resilience.

Perspective: Find learning opportunities

In a different 2015 study involving 200 U.S. Navy recruits during training, we found that recruits who viewed their unsuccessful experiences as learning opportunities—rather than as a string of failures—it also built their resilience. In his book ***Crucibles of Leadership*** Robert J. Thomas described an approach he called “reframing the tension”: which focused learning opportunities *within* the adversity rather than *despite* the adversity. Another thing you can do is **help your direct reports recognize special talents or skills that might be especially useful during the crisis.** Do you have a member who is superb at dealing with distraction? You could have that person provide virtual training to the others. As each member sees how his or her special skills contribute to the good of the team, the group’s confidence and social support will grow.

Resilient teams will **learn how to improvise** in these new modes of working together. Since improvisation will require constant adjustments, we recommend conducting a daily virtual “standup” meeting as a status check on people and projects. **Remember to focus not only on tasks but also on relationships:** Use the meeting to increase the team’s sense of connection. Lead discussions on how well things are working or what processes can be improved. **Highlighting what the team is learning during the adversity will collectively strengthen it in all three critical protective factors: confidence, disciplined routines, and support.** Any crisis is also an opportunity to build resilience among your reports.

If you successfully implement the tactics we offer here, you may find that they not only **bounce back from these difficult times but emerge much stronger** as people and as a team.

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