

Building a foundation: Selecting and retaining resilient employees

Dr. Merv Gilbert & Dr. Bob Acton

Gilbert Acton Ltd.

Occupational Consulting Psychologists

Published in *Network* by the Human Resources Institute of Alberta, April 2006

In this era of increasing workplace pressures (increased competitiveness, a faster pace and labour shortages), many organizations are truly recognizing that their most important asset is their employee. A recent global survey of global executives found that the top business issue was 'attracting and retaining skilled staff'. Enlightened organizations have responded by striving to create psychologically healthy workplaces, where workers flourish rather than founder. Indeed, research shows a link between better people management and better financial performance. Amongst the features of such organizations are opportunities for employee involvement and development, flexible benefits and working conditions, attention to health and safety, and provision of family-friendly employee assistance programs.

As essential as such environmental factors are, they tend to be reactive in that they serve to mitigate or respond to the needs of those individuals who are in the workforce. A proactive and complementary approach is to attend to the features of employees that are the best fit for the particular position and organizational culture. While most organizations base their recruitment and selection decisions on candidates' experience

and technical skills, few attend to the characteristics that are most likely to result in employees who are productive, satisfied, and likely to succeed in the organization.

This is particularly important in the selection of managers given research demonstrating that those individuals exhibiting the most effective transformational leadership style yielded greater trust, self-efficacy and well-being amongst their direct reports. Attending to the requisite characteristics of potential employees, as well as the psychosocial demands of the position they will hold, has a number of benefits for the creation of a healthy and productive workplace. These include the opportunity to tailor organizational and individual development programs to build and nurture desired qualities, improved job design and performance management, and design of employee supports and benefits that recognize strength and growth.

A common characteristic of those individuals who are most adept at managing in the modern work world is 'resilience'. The concept has been around for several decades; in fact it first gained prominence when describing children who thrived in adulthood despite an early experience of deprivation and neglect. The essence of resilience is the capacity to 'bounce back' when faced with stress and adversity. Such individuals are not untouched by such demanding circumstances but their responses do not impair their ability to manage to the same degree and they are quicker to return to equilibrium; indeed they may actually 'bounce forward' and develop new strength and competencies. Resilient individuals not only exhibit the capability for adaptive self-care, they are also

better equipped to care for those around them, be they colleagues or family, and to contribute to the larger systemic good, be it their organization or community.

Resiliency is therefore a critical factor to any business. The resilience levels of the staff have direct influence to either side of the ledger. Low resilient staff members are more likely to exhibit greater illness and disability, higher absence and turnover, and reduced engagement and productivity. On the other hand, employees who are highly resilient can easily adapt to change, find ways to overcome adversity, are more productive, and easier to work with. Moreover, the resiliency level of the workforce influences how resilient the business itself can be under times of business stress.

An individual's resiliency is a function of many factors, including their biological and genetic 'heartiness' as well as their experiences within their family and childhood. That said, resiliency is not some fixed, theoretical and immutable characteristic. It is not an abstract potential but is only evident and relevant when it is demonstrated in response to real world situations. Resilience is also common.

Although we may marvel at the feats of figures such as Lance Armstrong or Sir Edmund Hillary, a single mother successfully caring for her children and aging parents is just as heroic; in some ways more so because they occur without extensive training and preparation. Finally, and most importantly, resilience can be learned. We all have many capacities that contribute to our ability to cope, and we can all improve these capacities.

So what are some of the core features of resilience, particularly with respect to the workplace? On the basis of the existing psychological research we believe there are seven primary dimensions. They are:

Deleted: ¶

- **Personal vision:** It is difficult to know where you are going if you don't have a plan, let alone to know if you have arrived.

- **Alignment:** One's personal values, principals and beliefs are consistent with current job and employer

- **Emotional capacity:** Reactions to situations are experienced as sources of useful information for action, rather than becoming overwhelmed

- **Efficient problem solving:** The ability to rapidly bring a range of possible solutions to a challenging situation and to modify these when they do not work

- **Self efficacy:** Confidence that one has the specific and appropriate knowledge, skills and capacity to deal with a problem

- **Social Support:** The ready availability of useful understanding, and healthy assistance from family, friends or colleagues, as well as the willingness to provide to others

- **Wellness:** Overall physical well-being that provide the reserves to deal with adversity, and are not a source of stress in themselves.

It should be noted that these qualities are not mutually exclusive; a strength in one area may well enhance another. In addition, different situations will call for different capacities, a familiar but emotionally charged situation will require different skills than a novel but less loaded one.

What are the implications of resiliency for the employer, particularly in term of selecting and retaining employees?

1. Probe a little deeper. Many job interviews will include questions about how an individual dealt with a difficult situation in the past, what their personal goals are or how they handle their own stress. Spend the time to ask how they developed these skills or aspirations, how important they are to them and what they have learned from their experiences.
2. Specifically measure resiliency factors. There are an increasing number of psychological questionnaires and surveys that reliably assess resiliency or related dimensions. In addition to providing direct information, these can be useful to guide subsequent selection tests or interviews, and can contribute to the development plan for the employee.

3. Identify and modify psychosocial hazards in the workplace. As with all things prevention and early identification are the best defense. What aspects of a particular job, work team or organization are most likely to challenge prospective or current employees? What training or development would mitigate the impact of these demands?

4. Create a workplace that fosters individual resilience. Review existing organizational values, policies and programs to determine the extent to which they promote and complement resiliency amongst employees. When considering new employee benefits or services, provide a balance between those that promote strengths as well as support areas of need.

Striving to select and sustain resilient workers and workplaces is by no means a luxury; it is a necessity for the contemporary business. Those qualities that the resilient individual brings to bear to help them 'bounce back' in the face of challenge are the same qualities that contribute to productivity, engagement, and advancement. Taking the time to be intentional about this will yield positive outcomes for employees and employers alike.