Developing Resilient Teams for Managing Change

Introduction

When teams address the challenges of today’s turbulent work environment, there is potential for effective and often creative and innovative solutions. Often, though, teams never realize this potential. In fact, research has determined that under certain circumstances, teams are often less successful and less productive, including generating creative and innovative results, than various individuals working separately to achieve the same goal.

Research has further shown that to be effective, teams must combine many factors, including a mission or goal, defined tasks, diverse but relevant skill sets, and processes that facilitate interaction. Although any of these factors alone might contribute to a team’s success, their impact is intensified if they are leveraged in a way that builds upon the team’s strengths and offsets any potential weaknesses.

Conner Partners™ believes that the presence of and ability to leverage these factors depends on the team’s resilience. Conceptually, a team’s resilience is its ability to absorb high levels of change while displaying minimal dysfunctional behavior. In other words, a resilient team optimally uses its available energy or assimilation resources.

Specifically, a resilient team combines two factors—individual resilience and synergy. Each member of the team possesses a specific complement of the five resilience characteristics—positive, focused, flexible, organized, and proactive. How they use these characteristics is determined by the level of synergy among the group. A high degree of synergy allows the team to leverage its strengths and guard against its weaknesses. For example, although not every member of a team may be highly flexible, a synergistic team can draw from those members who are to maximize its performance. Not only does synergy leverage the group’s resilience resources, it also produces solutions that are better than and different from the original ideas of team members.

The resilient team is more likely to implement change in today’s fast-paced work environment. In addition, a resilient team serves as a coach for resilience and synergy for each member of the team. This raises conscious competence so that skills move from intuitive to overt and are thus readily transferable.
Resilience

Over the past several decades, organizations have continued to face many interrelated changes that have shorter implementation horizons than ever before. To be successful in this turbulent environment requires a two-pronged approach. First, an organization must focus on the change initiatives that are critical to the organization’s success and survival. In addition, an organization must strive to bolster its capacity to undertake change initiatives. The key to increasing this capacity is resilience.

Highly resilient individuals can absorb large amounts of disruptive change while showing a low level of dysfunctional behavior—those actions that significantly detract from quality and productivity. Resilient people, while no less vulnerable to the stresses of change than are other individuals, overcome barriers to major change. In fact, when resilient people face the ambiguity and anxiety that accompany new situations, such as change, they tend to learn from these situations and grow stronger rather than engage in actions that would deplete their energy. Because of these tendencies, resilient people are often characterized as thriving in periods of uncertainty.

Conner Partners has identified several characteristics that describe resilient individuals. These characteristics are listed below:

Positive: A resilient individual sees opportunities for success, not failure.

Focused: A resilient individual sets and achieves goals and stays centered on ultimate objectives in light of setbacks.

Flexible: A resilient individual finds new and creative ways to approach situations.

Organized: A resilient individual manages ambiguity in an orderly way.

Proactive: A resilient individual takes initiative and gets involved.

Typically, individuals possess varying complements of the resilience characteristics. While one individual might rely on the positive, focused, and organized characteristics, another individual might excel in being focused, flexible, and proactive. Usually, we prefer and often depend on those characteristics that have served us well in the past. Over time, successful use of these characteristics further reinforces our preferences—we generally perceive these characteristics as our strengths.

Creating a resilient team requires two key elements. The first element is combining a group of resilient individuals.

In ideal circumstances, individuals will be highly resilient if they possess a balanced complement of the five characteristics described above. Balance enables an individual to lead with or draw upon the appropriate characteristic for a given situation. In an extreme case, for instance, if an individual is suddenly assigned a new, highly unfamiliar task, he or she might need to draw on the resources of other individuals immediately—the flexible (social) characteristic.

In addition, a balanced complement of the characteristics offsets dangers inherent in the individual characteristics. Take an individual who has a high presence of the positive characteristic but lacks the flexible characteristic. When faced with an unfamiliar situation, the
individual may see only opportunities without recognizing dangers. In a sense, they may be too optimistic. With a balanced complement of the characteristics, however, the person can visualize and guard against the inherent dangers of the new situation to increase the probability of achieving the opportunity.

The very nature of a team—individuals working together—requires a second view of balance. A resilient team can also achieve balance by combining individuals of differing strengths and weaknesses. At the extreme, balance may be achieved by combining five individuals, each of whom has a strength in a different resilience characteristic—positive, focused, flexible, organized, and proactive. A dynamic balance is created if the team can enlist the characteristics it requires in a given situation and if the inherent risks of each characteristic are offset through the interaction of the team members. In essence, a resilient team can combine the resilience strengths of each of its members.

How the resilience strengths of the team are combined is critical to the concept of team resilience. Team resilience is derived from a group that can work together synergistically to leverage its resilience resources. In this manner it can draw on its strengths and guard against its weaknesses. Thus, the second key element to producing a resilient team is synergy.

**Synergy**

In its simplest state, synergy is characterized by an outcome that is better than and different from any of the original inputs. Working together synergistically, a highly resilient team combines its individual resilience strengths to produce a level of resilience that is higher than that of any individual on the team.

Without synergy, teams often suffer from a reverse of the above phenomenon. Specifically, the members of the team combine their individual resilience strengths to produce a level of team resilience that is lower than every individual on the team. In this situation, the team puts more energy into the process of working together than it gains from outputs.

Although synergistic relationships are powerful and productive, they are not without expense. First, these relationships often take a great deal of time to develop and maintain. They usually require individuals of diverse backgrounds, skills, and experiences. Diversity may generate disagreements among the group members that, without the willingness prerequisites described below, may create such strife that the group self-destructs. Finally, these relationships often require outside resources to coach and nurture their development.

Before synergy can be achieved, two prerequisites must be in place: willingness and ability. Willingness stems from the sharing of common goals and interdependence. Ability is a combination of empowerment and participative management. Each of these prerequisites is briefly described below.

**Prerequisites to Synergy**

**Willingness**

- Common Goals: Team members understand and share a central purpose that drives their efforts.
• Interdependence: Team members recognize that they can only accomplish their shared purpose through the collaborative effort of every team member.

Ability

• Empowerment: Team members perceive themselves as valuable and influential in accomplishing the team’s work.
• Participative Management: The team structures mechanisms to elicit the input of individual team members.

If a team has a willingness to engage in a synergistic interaction, its members share a purpose and realize their interdependence. If team members have the same goal, they strive for a unified objective. This shared purpose directs the energies and actions of team members toward a focal point. A team’s common goals are usually structured at two distinct levels—a team level and a micro or personal level. At the team level, the goal relates to the success or survival of the organization. At the micro level, it relates to the individuals’ own values and beliefs. For instance, a team formed to create an automobile may have a team common goal to create a new, innovative design that will target the sport utility vehicle market. An individual on the team may have a personal goal of creating an award-winning design. A true common goal is congruent with the view of the team and each team member.

Interdependent teams understand that every member adds value to the whole. Without each member, the team would be unable to achieve its shared purpose. A truly interdependent team would falter if any one member was removed. By necessity, interdependent teams are lean entities. These groups do not involve participants solely for political reasons or because not to do so might “look bad.” Teams with common goals and interdependence are usually void of unproductive behaviors such as blaming, sabotage, infighting, individual recognition seeking, and power struggles. These behaviors detract energy from the group and its objective.

If a team has an ability to engage in a synergistic interaction, its members are, because of their inherent value, able to influence the decisions of other members. In addition, the team structures mechanisms to foster this influence. Empowered individuals openly voice their ideas, thoughts, and beliefs to other members of the team. These individuals inherently believe their input can influence those around them. Empowerment is reciprocal. If empowerment exists among team members, individuals are not only seeking to influence others, they are also open to being influenced.

Participative management occurs when the team’s sponsor, whether a participating member of the team or simply the person who sanctions its existence, is open to the input of the team as decisions are made. The team’s sponsor must recognize the ways in which the team’s work contributes to his or her success in helping the organization achieve its goals. He or she should also understand the degree to which it is appropriate to seek the team’s ideas and provide opportunities for input whenever the situation and skill level of the team allow.

In addition, once the prerequisites are in existence, four essential skills must be applied for synergy to occur. These skills are briefly outlined below.
Synergy Skill Set

- Interacting: Team members surface diverse ideas.
- Appreciative Understanding: Team members find value in the diverse ideas of other team members.
- Integrating: Team members combine diverse ideas to generate creative solutions.
- Implementing: Team members effectively put their ideas into action.

Interacting

Synergy begins with interaction among team members. To improve interaction, team members must learn to listen actively and communicate their ideas directly and with clarity. Teams learn to recognize that members may vary widely in their communicating style preferences—that facts, contexts, actions, and feelings may be perceived very differently from one individual to another.

Such tools as the **Communicating Styles Survey** (CSS) identify each team member’s preferred communicating style (e.g., thinker, sensor, intuitior, or feeler). The team must then learn the advantages and drawbacks of communicating in their preferred styles and understand the importance of communicating in the most appropriate style, not the most favored. Ideally, good communication includes the use of all four communicating styles exhibited appropriately at different times depending on the situation.

Figure 1 shows how a team typically functions during interaction. Individual members (represented by circles) may be turning their resilience resources outward (large arrows), away from each other. Individual diversity, whether that diversity is reflected in knowledge about change or a strength in applying a particular resilience characteristic, is not exploited by the team. Communications are characterized by transactional rather than interactive dialogue (small arrows). In such cases, individual resilience characteristics may or may not be optimized, let alone leveraged to accomplish group goals. A major step toward successful interaction is the open discussion of each member’s resilience strengths and weaknesses.

![Figure 1. Interacting—Surface Diversity](image)
Appreciative Understanding

As important as effective communication is to resilient teamwork, something more must occur. Team members must learn to value and use their diversity. A basic condition for this to occur is an open climate where differences can be surfaced appropriately and different perspectives can be viewed as legitimate though conflict may arise. When differences surface, the team is taught to address such issues in a timely and deliberate manner conducive to resolution, always with the goal to optimize the team’s collective resilience.

Appreciative understanding is a process in which team members learn to accept input from others and encourages looking at perspectives from another’s point of view or strength. Figure 2 reflects the positive results of successful interaction as members come to appreciate and value the knowledge, skills, preferences, and strengths of each member. The resilience of each member (large arrows) is now more focused on the process for accomplishing the team’s goals. At the same time, interactions between the team members are more truly two-way, where ideas are shared and mutual learning is valued. The team members begin to understand and value each other’s strengths and defer to a particular member should his or her resilience strength be needed. Members begin to coach each other in optimizing personal resilience as it is used in service of the team.

Figure 2. Appreciative Understanding—Value Diversity

Integrating

While effective communication and valuing diverse perspectives are important to achieving team resilience, integrating or merging diverse viewpoints and skills is an important step toward achieving tangible results. Team members must next learn to step back from their ideas and evaluate all possibilities. The result is a team that can combine diverse ideas into mutually supported alternatives.

Integrating is perhaps the most critical phase of the process because team members must learn to merge four distinct behaviors. First, team members must learn to tolerate uncertainty or
ambiguity while being persistent. Many teams look for quick solutions when faced with the uncertain nature of the change process. This process helps team members in seeing the futility of this approach and teaches them to resist the “quick fix.” They learn to examine change projects as complex endeavors that require a great deal of patience and perseverance. Second, teams must learn to modify their views, beliefs, and behaviors to support the team. Synergy occurs when all team members can amplify their collective resilience and better modify their own views in a way that is accepting of and integrated with the views of others. Third, team members learn to generate creative ways of merging diverse perspectives into mutually supported action plans. This activity encourages creative thinking. The team learns to use methods that help it to use each member’s resilience strengths to solve problems deliberately.

Finally, the team must learn to identify issues or concepts that cannot or should not be integrated. Here, the team learns to balance the importance of tolerating ambiguity with the need to continue struggling when integration appears impossible. Figure 3 illustrates the cumulative effects of interacting and appreciative understanding and the beginning of the integrations of ideas through the conscious use of the team members’ resilience strengths. The communications among team members have become highly interconnected. Dialogue between any two team members related to the team’s goals is perceived as important to all team members. Ideas are clarified as the team’s conscious use of the resilience characteristics are used to solve problems. Individual resilience (large arrows) clearly begins to converge, in service of the team’s needs. True team resilience is the dynamic and balanced use of individual members’ resilience to achieve the aims of the team.

![Figure 3. Integrating—Merge Diverse Ideas](image)

**Implementing**

Resilient teams are not easy to establish and maintain at productive levels. Teams must learn to harness the energies generated by their work and channel it toward the implementation of a task. There are three conditions that must be considered:

- Team members must establish overall strategies and specific measurable goals and objectives regarding the change initiative. When this condition is met, the team has a blueprint for all goals and objectives that follow.
• Team members must monitor implementation progress and supply the necessary consequences to ensure success. The team learns the importance of follow-through and understands its impact on a change implementation.

• Team members must modify the implementation plan when necessary to ensure its relevance to current reality. Turbulent environments produce constantly changing conditions. The team learns that responding to these shifts in reality is necessary for goal achievement.

Figure 4 illustrates how the optimization of each team member’s personal resilience and the team’s ability to consciously leverage individual strengths, skills, and ideas converge in the powerful outcome of highly effective plans and well-targeted action in service of implementing a change.

Figure 4. Implementing—Initiate and Complete Action Plan

Ultimately, how well a team performs during major change depends on the resources available to it. The personal resilience of its members and the effectiveness of the group process it employs (its synergy) optimize its resilience resources to implement change. The latter is critical. High levels of personal resilience are necessary, but not sufficient, for team resilience. Even with highly resilient individuals, a team must function in a way that leverages its individual resilience strengths. It is the combination of personal resilience characteristics amplified through the effective application of synergy skills that yields maximum team resilience.

Conner Partners has identified several characteristics that describe the resilient team. They are described below.

**Positive**

A resilient team is positive, both about the capability of each member to contribute to the team’s work and the team’s ability to influence the organization during change.

**Focused**

A resilient team is one in which individual energies are centered on the team’s shared objectives during change rather than toward multiple agendas, irrelevant discussions, or other off-task activities.
Flexible: Ideas

A resilient team can incorporate a wide range of perspectives into its approach to change—both those brought by various team members and those from outside the team, seeing varied ideas as contributing to effective solutions.

Flexible: Interpersonal

A resilient team can elicit the open participation of team members. Each person recognizes that he or she cannot accomplish the team's task in isolation but benefits by drawing on the strength of others.

Organized

A resilient team can translate the confusion that typically accompanies change into meaningful, patterned information by doing such things as evaluating relevance and setting priorities. This enables it to identify workable solutions for addressing change.

Proactive

A resilient team engages action in the face of ambiguity, even when risk is involved, rather than waiting for stability. Because team members seek to learn from experience rather than merely to avoid failure at all costs, the team can change its plans when they are not effective.
Summary

Organizations are now challenged with a sweeping and dramatic increase in the amount and complexity of change. In fact, effectively absorbing the impact of these transitions has become essential to organizational success. Failure to do so will result in dysfunctional behavior, unproductive employees, and strategic initiatives that are superficially applied and short-lived.

The challenge goes beyond teaching teams coping mechanisms, beyond managing their collective stress, beyond merely “adjusting” to the workplace. Today, organizations must prepare people at all levels to remain high performers during turbulent times by teaching them how to:

• Quickly regain their equilibrium after expectations are disrupted
• Maintain high levels of productivity during ambiguity
• Remain physically and emotionally healthy while struggling with uncertainty.
• Avoid symptoms of future shock
• Rebound from the pressure of change even stronger than before

The dynamic orchestration of each member’s resilience characteristics through skillful, synergistic team interaction fosters a heightened team capability to achieve the resilient outcomes necessary for successfully implementing major change initiatives. The development of a synergistic work environment helps teams to identify, plan, and implement solutions to change-related problems. Nevertheless, this synergy is enhanced even more through the orchestration of individual and collective resilience, resulting in a much greater capacity to implement change projects on time and within budget.