

Growing Thick Skin: Building Resiliency

I recall meeting a veteran legal marketer when I was a tenderfoot marketing director. He had a reputation for doing great things and launching innovative programs at his firm. He was larger than life, in both body and spirit. I asked him for some advice. He replied,

“You know, some people think I’m fat. It’s not that I’m fat. I just have really, really, really thick skin.”

He nailed it. Having thick skin is critical to success in law firms, especially when your job centers on developing programs that help a firm compete in a dynamic and increasingly competitive environment.

Another word for having thick skin is resiliency. Resilience is how quickly and effectively you recover from adversity. People who are resilient are those that have a positive response to adversity. Adversity can come in many forms, including external pressure, failure or mistakes, expectations from others or yourself, criticism, changing situations or political environment. Adversity often leads to stress, which has physical and mental ramifications that further prevents us from performing at a high level.

If we can improve our resiliency, we can minimize our stress and work at a higher level of creativity, engagement and effectiveness. So, how can we become more resilient?

The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) integrates resiliency training into their leadership development programs for mid-level and senior executives. Here are some tactics we recommend to leaders to build their resiliency:

Take Care of Yourself: Get enough sleep. Eat healthy. Exercise. Take care of yourself physically, mentally and emotionally. “Show up” ready to meet each day’s challenges and opportunities. Stay in the present.

Develop a Sense of Purpose: What are the values that drive your actions? Why do you do what you do? What gives meaning to your life? Write down a personal “Why” statement. Think about how you react to adversity and how it relates to your big “Why”. Look for ways that adversity gives you an opportunity to build skills or understanding that helps you reach your life purpose.

Clarify your Personal Identity: Separate who you are from what you do. What makes you, you? Where are you now in your career and life journey? Where do you want to go? What roles, opportunities or challenges you do need to get to the next level? What changes do you need to make? When challenges and disappointments occur, a strong sense of identity gives you the freedom to focus on your strengths rather than anxiety.

Refocus: Step back from the situation and observe how you think about adversity. Examine your beliefs about the situation and check to see if they match reality. Ask yourself, “What is a

different perspective I can have on this situation? How do I need to change to adapt? What can I learn from this challenge? Am I holding on to old behaviors, such as defensiveness, blaming, pleasing, etc..., that are no longer working for me? Do I need to acquire or hone new leadership skills to address this situation?

Strengthen Personal and Professional Networks: Are you accessing the in-person and on-line networks that you developed to help you through adversity? Effective networks consist of people who can share their perspective, give feedback, broaden your worldview, teach you new leadership skills and encourage you. Reach out to your network regularly to give and receive support.

Take Time for Reflection: It is difficult to find time to reflect, especially in times of change and stress. Most of our learning about resiliency comes through times of personal reflection, however. Consider journaling or discussing your reaction to adversity with a friend:

- Describe what happened and how you experienced it. Focus on the facts of what was said, in what order, and your role in the situation.
- Describe your reaction. Be objective. Describe your actions, thoughts, feelings and beliefs.
- What did you learn? Is there a pattern to your reaction behavior? Are there skills (patience, active listening, managing your temper, etc...) that you need to work on? What would you do differently next time?

CCL's Nick Petrie writes in his white paper, *“Wake Up! The Surprising Truth about What Drives Stress and How Leaders Build Resilience”*, that one of the enemies of resilience is rumination. Calling on the research of Dr. Derek Roger, he defines rumination as, “the mental process of thinking over and over about something, which happened either in the past or could happen in the future, and attaching a negative emotion to it.” You can download the white paper at ccl.org.

Petrie recommends four steps to overcome rumination and build resiliency:

1. Wake up, and stay awake – Be present. Be aware of what you are doing and thinking right now. Focus on your current state of mind and decide to make the most of what you are doing right now.
2. Control your attention – Focus on one thing at a time. When you catch yourself wandering or worrying, bring your focus back to the present and the task at hand. Train your mind to put your attention where you want it to be and holding it there. Practice focus.
3. Detach – Detachment is the “ability to get appropriate distance from the situation you are facing” according to Petrie. It is maintaining perspective in the heat of adversity. Detachment is focusing on what you can control and not worrying (ruminating) over

things you cannot control. People who are good at detachment don't turn molehills into mountains. They care deeply about the process and outcome, but see worrying as a waste of time.

- 4. Let go – Leaders who are good at letting go ask themselves the question, “Will continuing to focus on this help me, my team, or my firm? If the answer is no, they let it go. According to Petrie, “A classic example of letting go is Nelson Mandela, who when asked why he was not angrier about spending half his life in jail replied, “If I thought it would be useful, I would be.”

So, what can you do to build your resiliency? Take a few minutes to jot down some actions or life changes you can make in the areas of physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual resiliency. If you get stuck, think about a time in your life that you were able to overcome or recover from adversity. What happened to you? How did you get through it? What and who helped you get through the adversity? What did you learn from that experience that can make you more resilient today?

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