

## The Resilient and Focused Manager

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### Abstract

*Purposeful managers strive to be productive and enhance personal satisfaction in their work environments. Resilience and focus are key attributes for aiding managers in being their best on the job and maximizing personal satisfaction. Resilience is the ability of managers to keep going when encountering adversity and the stress resulting from it, recovering from setbacks by adapting to change in a positive context, and being creative in finding solutions for moving forward. Focus is represented through concentrated attention by managers on a goal, zeroing in on the tasks to accomplish it, and then actually doing what is necessary to effectively complete the tasks required to reach the goal. Physical and mental energy aid managers in being their best by fueling resilience and focus.*

**Keywords:** resilience, grit, focus, energy, effective managers

### 1.0 Resilience

“Resilience is something you realize you have after the fact.” “A manager’s level of resilience is an excellent determinant of who succeeds and who fails” (Coutu, 2017 p. 6 & 8). Resilience is the ability of a manager to recover from adversity and setbacks, adapt to change in a positive context, persist in the face of adversity, and manage ongoing hectic and stressful work environments (Ovan, 2015; Achor & Gielan, 2016). Effectively managing ongoing hectic and stressful work situations requires managers to plan “recovery periods” in which they drawback, reflect, relax, and then return to solve problems previously encountered. This contrasts with the “toughing it out” approach that can result in the manager becoming stressed out and inefficient in addressing an adverse situation (Achor & Gielan, 2016).

“The most resilient individuals and teams aren’t the ones that don’t fail, but rather the ones that fail, learn and thrive because of it. Being challenged—sometimes severely—is part of what activates resilience as a skill set” (Fernandez, 2016, p. 2). Factors leading to managers being resilient are: (a) optimism; (b) an ability to stay balanced and deal effectively with difficult emotions; (c) a sense of feeling “safe,” even when under duress; and (d) a strong social support system. Managers need to control their work environment to reduce the likelihood of feeling overwhelmed and stressed—two factors that can greatly reduce resilience (Fernandez, 2016).

Aspects of managers remaining resilient are: (a) practice mindfulness, (b) compartmentalize cognitive load, (c) take detachment breaks, (d) develop mental agility, and (e) cultivate compassion (Fernandez, 2016).

**1. Practice mindfulness:** Mindfulness means managers are being actively and acutely aware of what is happening around them—with oneself and others—and living in the present for each moment. Heath and Heath (2017) emphasize managers need to be attuned to identify moments which offer opportunities beneficial to them advancing what they want to happen. It includes conceiving “new and creative solutions to today’s problems” (Kouzes & Posner, 2016, p. 80). This is compared to mindlessness in which managers’ minds are on automatic pilot and not consciously processing what is happening around them in a given situation (Seligman, 2002).

**2. Compartmentalize Cognitive Load:** This means creating dedicated times within the day (compartments) to perform common work activities. It involves creating optimal conditions to process information for more efficient and better decision making.

**3. Take Detachment Breaks:** Managers need to know their most productive and least productive times within the day. In the least productive times, managers should “detach” through physical and mental breaks to regenerate their creative juices and mental alertness. As Kogan, Merrill, and Rimes (2015) note, “Extraordinary productive people consistently recharge” (p. 15).

**4. Develop Mental Agility:** This pertains to managers successfully dealing with stress. Effectively “decentering” stressors are not denying or suppressing them, but being able to mentally pause and view what is happening from a neutral perspective. Subsequently the manager proceeds to objectively and systematically address the problem.

**5. Cultivate Compassion:** Compassion and empathy, while often overlooked aspects of a resilient skill set of managers, create positive and motivational emotions (Goleman, 2017; Seppala, 2017). Managers should use compassion and empathy with themselves and others to increase understanding, cooperation, and collaboration.

When initially confronted with adversity, managers should be cautious to not allow the *heat of the moment* to permeate their thinking for an extended time period. Rather, they must quickly shift to a “can do, will do” mindset and initiate a plan of action to address the adverse event in a systematic manner that emphasizes input from the perspectives of as many people as possible. Being able to see humor in the face of adversity can often help managers keep a healthy perspective.

Three characteristics of resilient managers are: (1) a staunch acceptance of reality; (2) a deep belief, often buttressed by strongly held values, in meaningfulness; and (3) an uncanny ability to improvise (Coutu, 2017).

**1. Staunch acceptance of reality:** Realistic optimism is useful because it guards against “optimistic bias” that can distort the manager’s grasp of reality. Dalio (2017) stresses the importance of managers understanding the circumstances represented by reality and then proactively proceeding to deal with them. A fundamental question is: “Does the manager truly understand—and accept—the reality of the situation?” (Coutu, 2017, p. 12). Many emotions are involved in facing reality, and the manager must not allow such emotions to bias what is the actual situation.

**2. A deep belief, often buttressed by strongly held values, in meaningfulness:** A major building block for managers to be resilient is the propensity to make meaning out of their work, even during turbulent times. When events go against managers, it is imperative that they not view themselves in the context of the “victim syndrome.” When encountering adversity and difficulty that may initially seem insurmountable, managers must remain positive about the importance of their work. Finding meaning in their work builds a bridge for managers from their current adverse situation to a better and brighter future. The effective manager strives to make the present situation controllable and has a positive perspective on the future.

Managers need to understand that at times there is a fine line between a challenge and an impossible situation. Hence, when failure to accomplish a goal is inevitable, managers need to quickly move to new goals for which there is also meaning and find a way to successfully accomplish them. Finding meaning in work is related to linking the values and experiences of managers to their work, thereby resulting in positive feelings.

**3. Uncanny ability to improvise:** When times are tough and situations are going against the manager, an important component of resilience is the ability to improvise and make due with whatever resources are at hand. This often requires a spirit of inventiveness and ingenuity for managers to examine the present adverse situation from every possible angle and determine what creative ways exist to address it. Taking from the philosophy of *Blue Ocean Shift*, managers should not view a given situation as unchangeable, but rather set out to “reshape” the situation to their favor (Kim & Mauborgne, 2017). Managers need to identify multiple plans for addressing the adverse situation because if the initial plan is unsuccessful, they must have another “well thought out” plan ready to try. Challenging times require managers to be at their most innovative and creative. There is a natural tendency for humans to regress to their most established provincial means of responding when situations go against them (Coutu, 2017). Managers must counter a tendency to regress to their most habitual ways of operating when encountering challenging times and instead be their most flexible and adaptive to change.

They must “do their best when challenged” (Kouzes & Posner, 2016, p. 101). Goleman (2017) advises managers that when events go against them, they must counter defeatist thinking. It is also important for managers to handle conflict in a manner that does not stifle the willingness of staff members to give authentic input in developing innovative and creative ways to establish viable solutions in solving an adverse situation (Gallo, 2017).

Managers occasionally need to call a “timeout” so they do not lash out verbally or behaviorally and later regret their actions. Managers should initially “time themselves out” and regain their composure when presented with crucially adverse happenings. This period may range from several minutes to hours, or even a day or more, when time permits. In such a situation, it is also helpful for managers to seek insight from others who can help objectively assess the situation and possibly suggest the most logical and effective response.

### 1.1 Grit

The concept of grit popularized by Duckworth (2016) and Miller (2017) is akin to resilience in that *perseverance* is one of its major components, along with passion and effort. In the context of grit, perseverance means managers demonstrate self-discipline and “stick-to-it-ness” to remain focused in the face of adversity. This is supported by Blaine (2017) who advocates that passion represents how badly managers want to realize a goal and what efforts they are willing to dedicate in overcoming obstacles to reach that goal. Used in the grit context, passion plays an important role in managers being resilient. Specifically, if managers possess strong emotional desire and commitment to fight through adversity and “stay the course,” they can bounce back and overcome difficulty. As depicted by grit, effort means the resilient manager works hard to find creative alternative solutions to overcome adversity and has the mental energy to be motivated and persistently keep going.

### 2.0 Focus

“Bad news for self-proclaimed multitaskers: While some research continues to keep up the myth that you can productively do more than one task at a time, the human brain simply isn’t designed to function this way. Attempting to divide your focus increases stress and decreases performance” (Grenny, 2017).

Focus is concentrated attention—the ability to zero in on a goal and see related tasks through to completion. It is represented by managers having a clear understanding of what they want to accomplish and how to do so. Focus gives managers *drive* (Dalio, 2017). Linking drive with ambition, and even impatience at times, can propel managers to higher levels of focus and goal actualization (Charan, Willigan, & Giffen, 2017). Focused managers are not in a reactive mode to every issue that comes their way and, thus, not sidetracked by less important issues. They resist being distracted from crucial goals that truly require their attention and concentrated effort (Bruch & Ghoshal, 2002). Borrowing from the *Conscious Communications* philosophy, when managers intensely focus on something, their ability to accurately “hone in” on what needs to be done sharpens (Shores, 2017). The focused manager understands that an “interference dilemma” exists because of inference from attempting to multitask and allowing irrelevant information to enter the mind (Gazzaley & Rosen, 2016).

Distractions in the form of interruptions are a major enemy of the manager striving to effectively apply focus. “Persistent interruptions become especially insidious when we are unaware of the peripheral role our surroundings play in shaping our thoughts, moods, and choices” (Grenny, 2017, p. 106). A manager’s work environment is crucial to minimizing interruptions. Managers can greatly enhance their ability to focus by structuring their immediate surroundings and general work environment to intentionally minimize interruptions and other forms of distractions. Grenny (2017) identifies five ways for managers to take control of their work environment through minimizing interruptions and maximizing focus.

**1. Monitor emotions:** Managers must learn to resist the feeling of a sense of urgency through stimuli from electronic devices such as texts, emails, phone calls, and tweets. They must not let these electronically driven stimuli distract them, causing anxiety and uncertainty that interrupts focus. Overuse of electronic devices can cause psychological dependence (Cheever, Rosen, Carrier & Chavez, 2014). Carr (2017) reports that the typical iPhone owner uses it 80 times a day or nearly 30,000 times a year. Carr (2017) observed that “our devices have an unprecedented grip on our attention—and research suggests that as we grow more dependent on them, our intellects weaken” (p. c-1). He continues by noting they are “an attention magnet unlike any we have had to grapple with before” (p. c-2).

**2. Do some easy things:** Sometimes it is best for the manager to take the low-complexity tasks on a “to-do” list first in order to get a sense of control and accomplishment, which may reduce anxiety. This will give them more continuous blocks of time to concentrate on important tasks.

**3. Structure solitude:** Managers must be able to identify their most productive times of day and focus on complex tasks during these time periods, while stringently guarding against interruptions and other distractions. Managers need to locate a comfortable, quiet, and relaxing place to work.

**4. Build attention muscle:** Managers need to be intentionally patient, while being constantly aware of the tasks at hand which serve as reference points for focus. Sometimes it is helpful for a manager to utilize several minutes of meditation to clear the mind prior to initiating focus on a task.

**5. Take a problem on a walk:** When a manager senses focus is being lost, physically removing oneself from the work station to take a walk or do other physical activity allows the mind to clear and is often beneficial. This physical break can regenerate mental energy. After such activity, the manager returns to the work environment and resumes the task with an intentional mindset of focusing.

Managers must clearly understand what they want accomplished by carefully weighing options and selecting a course of action for addressing adverse situations. This will result in the manager being able to achieve focus on the most crucial tasks for solving problems to overcome the adversity. Purposeful managers are extremely conscious regarding what needs to be done, have clarity of intentions, possess strong willpower, and prioritize their time. Procrastination is the enemy of a manager who knows that focus will be needed for a considerable length of time (i.e., several consecutive hours or even in segments over several days) to accomplish a major task.

## 2.1 Energy

Physical and mental energy are needed in sufficient quantities in order to maximize focus. Energy includes a manager being fueled by intense personal commitment. It is what pushes managers to go the extra mile when tackling difficult problems that require ongoing focus (Bruch and Ghoshal, 2002). It entails both physical and mental exuberance. The capacity for work energy comes from four sources: (1) body; (2) emotions; (3) mind; and (4) spirit. For each of these factors, energy can be expanded and renewed with *intentional practice* (Goleman, 1995). Managers need to identify situations that place considerable demand on their energy with limited payoff to their overall productivity and minimize or eliminate them.

**2.1.1. Regenerating energy through those with whom the manager works.**<sup>1</sup>The concept of mindset is an excellent source for how a manager can consciously work with others, both individually and through teams, to generate and secure energy. Managers need to furnish those with whom they work positive feedback and praise for effective efforts and results. In return, managers will gain positive emotions and *upbeat* feelings that regenerate their energy.

The Arbinger Institute (2016) is an excellent source for the application of mindset by managers through the concepts of inward and outward mindsets. The outward mindset manager perceives the effort in work completed by individuals and teams as crucially important and meaningful. The manager that demonstrates an outward mindset provides positive feedback through praise and gives individuals with whom he/she works specific feedback on performance. The outward mindset represents the manager coaching people in a positive manner to help them improve and effectively overcome challenges that may be difficult. Application of the outward mindset results in managers regenerating energy through the positive feelings received from those with whom they work.

The inward mindset manager is egotistical, self-centered, and has little concern for others in the work environment. The inward mindset manager has very little—or no—consideration of the wants, needs, and psychological support of others with whom she/he works. Positive feelings are not received by such a manager, and energy is not regenerated. Figure 1 represents a comparison of the inward and outward mindsets as applied to managers.

**Figure 1. Comparing Inward and Outward Mindsets for Managers Toward Staff and Others**

<b>Inward</b>	<b>Outward</b>
1. Strives to control people	1. Strives to cause staff and others to be fully responsible and engaged in work
2. Often blames others when things go wrong	2. Takes responsibility for actions of oneself and staff in the work environment
3. Is narcissistic	3. Displays modesty toward staff and others
4. Consistently defends one’s position	4. Works collaboratively with staff to solicit their opinions and collectively develop the best solutions for problems
5. Focuses on protecting oneself and interactions with staff and others	5. Focuses on building positive relationships with and among people, and interactions with staff and others
6. Uses behaviors that sometimes try to manipulate staff and others in an attempt to improve one’s own image	6. Strives to facilitate “committed behaviors” collectively with staff and others to improve work produced and achieve goals
7. Shows minimal regard for how to create “collective results” among staff and others	7. Is motivated about how to work with staff and others collaboratively and for others to collaborate with each other and oneself
8. Views staff and others in context to how they can help oneself achieve goals	8. Focuses on the needs and challenges of staff and others to create a work environment that prompts individual and team cooperation
9. Assumes that to simply change one’s behavior is the best way to enhance the work productivity of staff and others	9. Understands changing how one views staff and others is more beneficial to everyone in comparison to merely focusing on changing behaviors toward staff and others
10. Focuses on how to make oneself “look good” for work produced, even at the expense of staff and others	10. Sees, thinks, and works on how to improve job performance through collaboration with staff and others that incorporates their needs and wants, and gains them recognition
11. Often creates competition between staff and causes them to work independently of each other	11. Focuses on the staff as an entity having a collective belief of working with each other for the common good of the work unit and organization
12. Focuses mainly on the job responsibilities of oneself	12. Assists staff and others in identifying their interests and being motivated to successfully achieve what they need for the betterment of the work unit and organization

<b>Inward</b>	<b>Outward</b>
13. Focuses on getting the work “out the door” with little identity for its benefits	13. Focuses on the meaning and purposefulness of the work and the positive impact it can have on the work unit and organization
14. Is inclined to step in, take over, and direct the work of staff and others when not pleased	14. Helps staff and others understand what they need to do; provides developmental training, when needed; and furnishes the necessary resources
15. Creates conflict that keeps staff embattled with each other (divide and conquer for control)	15. Focuses on preventing and resolving conflict among staff and others
16. Focuses on personal and professional goals and behaviors to protect and advance oneself	16. Focuses on the goals of the work unit and organization, and objectives and behaviors that take staff and others into consideration
17. Advances one’s own agenda at the expense of staff	17. Focuses on working together with staff and others for “collective” results to benefit the work unit and organization
18. Identifies what can be taken from others to achieve objectives for oneself	18. Identifies what can be given to help staff and others successfully achieve their work objectives
19. Oftentimes tries to control the behavior of staff and others for self-benefit through power, authority, and fear	19. Relinquishes power and authority to empower staff’s and others’ abilities to be responsible and accountable for their work (Bartz, Thompson, & Rice, 2017; based on Arbing Institute, 2016)

### 3.0 Concluding Thoughts

Purposeful managers strive to be productive and enhance personal satisfaction in their work environments. Skill sets for resilience and focus are crucial for managers ineffectively maximizing performance and satisfaction. Because resilience is something managers realize after being tested by acute adversity, acquiring a skill set for it beforehand is imperative. Focus—sustained concentrated attention to a goal and the related tasks for completion—is key for managers maximizing both their job performance and satisfaction. Possessing and regenerating physical and mental energy will significantly contribute to a manager’s resilience and focus.

### 4.0 Footnote

<sup>1</sup>This section is based in part on: Bartz, D., Thompson, K., & Rice, P. (2017). Managers helping themselves “be their best.” *International Journal of Management, Business, and Administration*, 20(1), 1-8.

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