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Commentary: Career resilience is more than just bouncing back

Years of coaching CEOs, workers and students have taught the NUS Centre for Future-ready Graduates' director that being resilient is one of the most important skills you need to grow.



How does one train resilience? (File photo: Reuters/Edgar Su)

SINGAPORE: For the past few years I have coached students to corporate workers, educators to CEOs about resilience and one question comes up constantly.

“How can we develop our resilience muscles if we are so afraid of failure?”

Students tell me that they've grown up with their parents sitting next to them when they're studying, correcting their mistakes even before they discover them.

Junior corporate workers tell me that they are sceptical about authority figures encouraging them to take risks, fail fast and think out of the box as their experiences with their line managers have taught them that even small failures affect their KPIs and are penalised.

Senior leaders tell me candidly that in this volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world, they are looking for people who are able to be resilient but most Singaporeans don't have any risk tolerance for failure and they struggle with finding people to take on ambitious roles or overseas postings.

WHAT IT TAKES TO BECOME TRULY RESILIENT

If we are to become truly resilient in work and our lives, we need to redefine our relationship with setbacks, uncertainty and change.

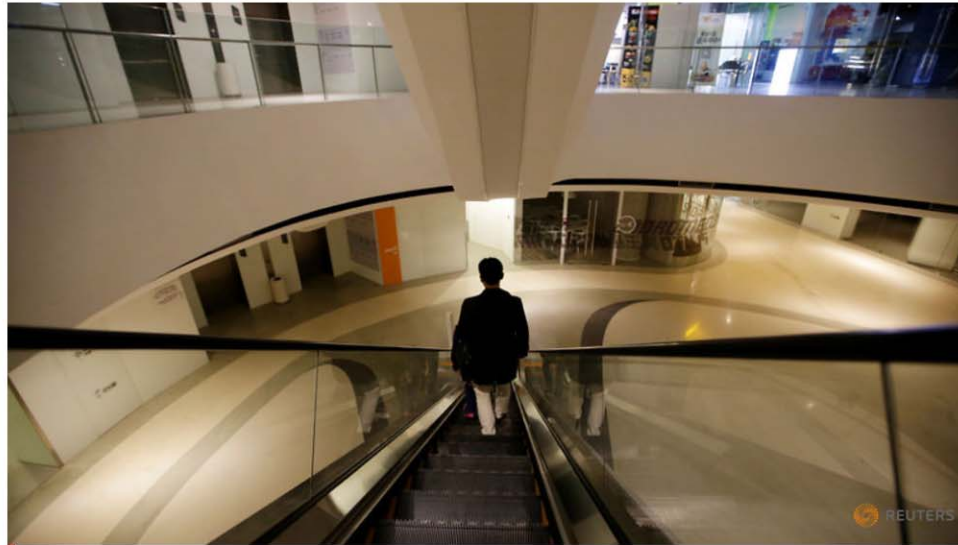
This requires a mindset shift from seeing change as a threat to an opportunity for growth.

This mindset shift must occur at every level in the ecosystem from student to educator, junior worker to HR to senior management, or “resilience” and “fail forward” will just become lip service - catchy but meaningless soundbites.

This is incredibly difficult because humans have a fundamental need for safety. Since we were cavemen, we have been programmed to seek biological, social and cultural homeostasis.

“ Change is the unknown, which means risk and potential disaster. ”

But as humanity enters a new era of constant change and disruption, there has never been a greater need for resilience. Change is now a given. The speed of change is exponentially increasing. How are we going to respond to it?



Being resilient requires us to redefine our relationship with setbacks, uncertainty and change.
(Photo: REUTERS/Jason Lee)

First, let's address some career resilience myths.

Career resilience is not simply about bouncing back from failure with a smile on your face, like an inflatable punching bag. It is not putting up with anything that is thrown at you in the name of work. It is not simply staying in the same job for decades.

If you're just rebounding mindlessly without any growth, what's the point in that? You're setting yourself up to replicate the same mistakes in future, wasting effort and time.

Rather, true career resilience is about choosing to take responsibility for your own career and growth, being agile, constant evolution and recovering from setbacks with new insights and personal growth.

To me, there are three components of career resilience:

Awareness - Are your awareness sensors working? How self-aware are you and how aware are you of the wider world? How is your career serving you now? And are you contributing at your best and utilising your strengths? What's working, what's not working and what could you change?

Agility - Are you able to adjust to change and setbacks nimbly and carry on pursuing your goals? Can you respond intelligently rather than just reacting on autopilot? Can you turn adversity into opportunity? Can you reinvent yourself and evolve with the times?

Growth and transformation - Are you wiser? Have you grown and learned from setbacks? What does success look like to you and what metrics do you use to measure your own growth and success?

Ask yourself those hard questions now before it is too late, because the truth is that no one is responsible for your own career development but you.



Ask yourself the tough questions because no one else has an obligation to do so. (Photo: REUTERS/Antonio Bronic)

SOME SPECIFIC TIPS ON HOW TO CULTIVATE RESILIENCE

1. Understand your brand. Be able to define your strengths and what your unique value proposition is. If need be, ask others around you. What strengths do they rely on you for?
2. Have some curiosity about the world outside. What's going on in other sectors? What new events could you go to? Meet new people and form new networks. So much of life depends on happenstance - you randomly bump into someone who turns out to have an opportunity for you for instance.
3. Curiosity about the world inside. Self-reflection is key. Make it a practice to carve out some time every day or week to reflect on past events and cultivate a habit of asking yourself what's working, what's not working and how you can develop.
4. Draw inspiration from yourself. Some people read inspirational memoirs of great people to motivate themselves, but it can be even more effective to draw inspiration from your own past successes.

One suggestion is to spend 15 to 30 minutes letting yourself journal. Find a quiet spot and keep your pen moving across the page without editing.

Write about the three greatest setbacks or challenges in your life that you have overcome and identify what strengths you used to pull through. Read it back to yourself. You may even want to put it somewhere where you can see it to encourage yourself to keep going when times are tough.

5. Have optimism. Our consciousness is saturated with negative messages from the media and our surroundings. Research shows that optimistic people are far more successful and resilient than pessimists.

One way to deliberately encourage more positive thinking is through a gratitude practice. I do a very simple practice with my family at dinner where we each say one specific thing we are grateful for today. It helps us have more empathy and insight into each other's lives, and also reminds us not to overlook the beauty and richness of life itself.

6. Self-care. It sounds basic, but self-care is a hygiene factor. If you're not sleeping well, eating well or exercising your body, you are not optimising your ability to be resilient in your career and your personal life.



Exercise and time for yourself can help increase your capacity to be resilient. (Photo: HypnoArt/Pixabay)

7. Build social resilience. One of the most successful people I know tells me that she has appointed her own "advisory board" of trusted people whom she goes to for advice, encouragement and ideation. Life is challenging and having good friends and mentors makes a huge difference.

Don't get so busy with the operational stuff that you forget to invest in relationships. As the African proverb goes,

“ If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”

I'm very passionate about resilience because I believe it is the the biggest factor influencing your career success.

Yes, skills are important. But resilience trumps skills any day.

If you don't have resilience, you'll never have the opportunity to apply even the most sophisticated skills. If you give up easily, none of your talents you've spent so much time acquiring will actually see the light of day.

So invest in yourself and be resilient about exercising resilience.

Crystal Lim is director of the Centre for Future-ready Graduates at the National University of Singapore.

This is the fourth commentary in Channel NewsAsia's series with the NUS Centre for Future-ready Graduates on achieving career success.

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Read the second commentary on why [networking](#) is not a dirty word but a necessary skill.

Read the third commentary on why [multi-tasking](#) is a productivity killer.

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