

Bringing back the bounce

Being able to take difficult situations in your stride is a critical attribute for a consumer affairs professional. However there are many other good reasons why building resilience should be a priority for both individuals and organisations. Freya Purnell reports.

Once defined as the ability to bounce back from adversity, resilience now has a more holistic definition. Rather than focusing on the response to stress or trauma, resilience is currently seen as the capacity to handle ongoing stresses in a positive way.

Psychologist Carolyn Manning says she sees resilience as a cluster of coping mechanisms. She gives the example of a football team which is beaten soundly one weekend and yet turns around to win the next match – the players put the disappointment of the first game behind them and move onto the next challenge.

“Resilience seems to have a developmental aspect, in that previous experiences of resilience develop a stronger base for coping with the next setback or hardship,” Manning says.

Resilience is also regarded as the ability to embrace change, find ambiguity and uncertainty energising rather than draining, and to stay calm, focused and optimistic during turbulent times, according to Steve Arthurson, head of human resources, Australian Pharmaceutical Industries.

However, executive coach, facilitator and director of Solutions: Taylor-Made, Nancy Taylor, believes that while resilience is important, for those wanting to achieve peak performance and a holistic sense of wellbeing, positive psychological capital is what is required. She has been involved in the creation of the Vida Beyond Resilience Program, which aims to build psychological capital and holistic sustainability – elements of which are resilience, hope, optimism and confidence.

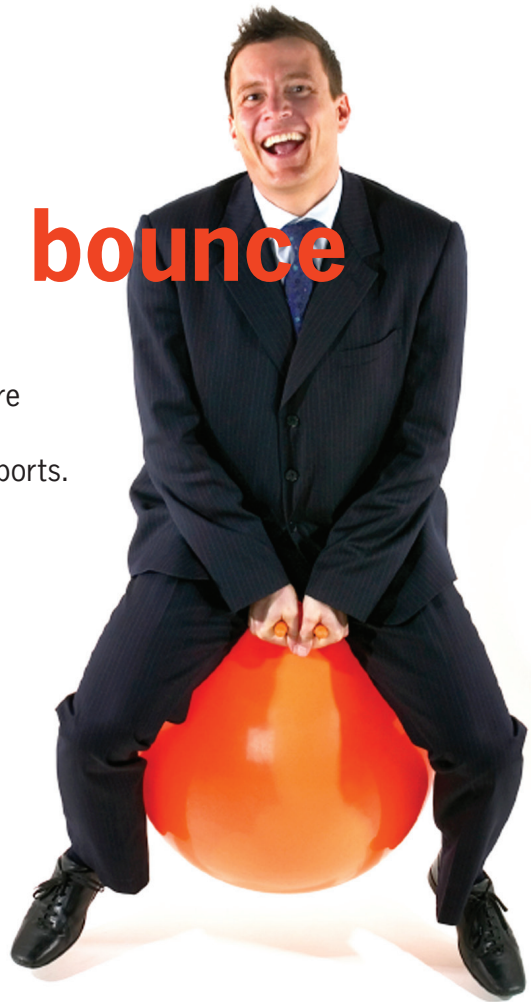
“We like to work holistically because the more psychological capital you have, the more robust and sustainable your performance is, but also your health, your happiness and joy in life are enhanced. Every single indicator says people are better off with high levels of psychological capital and it delivers to the bottom line for organisations because they perform better,” Taylor says.

Under pressure

Both circumstances and skill deficits can undermine individuals’ ability to be resilient.

“Ongoing stressors, even minor ones, erode our capacity to be resilient. Simple things like not sleeping well can mean you’re not able to handle things as well as you otherwise might,” says Ingrid Poulson from Steadfast Training.

According to Arthurson, there are five elements of resilience: self-confidence, a sense of emotional wellbeing, continuous learning, physical health, and connectedness. If a person is deficient in any one of these areas, it can impact negatively on their resilience.



Staying strong

For consumer affairs professionals, and particularly those working in dispute resolution and complaints handling, resilience is crucial. It makes individuals more “bulletproof” and ensures they can perform under stress and ride out setbacks.

“Dealing with complaints can be quite stressful, so resilience helps staff to continue to perform, while maintaining their psychological wellbeing. Besides the obvious stress of the occasional aggressive complainant, the constant stream of complaints may take a psychological toll. For example, hearing complaints about the company for eight hours a day may undermine a worker’s confidence in their company and their identity as a worker there. Staff with higher levels of resilience may cope better in these situations,” Manning says.

“Resilient people typically have confidence that they will be able to overcome new stresses, based on the fact that they have coped with the challenges to date,” she adds.

The rewards of resilience are not just good workplace performance.

“For the individual it creates a sense of holistic wellbeing, calm and happiness. Resilient people radiate a sense of confidence and optimism, and engage and inspire other people, so they are good leaders. From an organisational perspective, you can create this very engaged, inspiring, optimistic and positive feel amongst the team,” says Arthurson.

Practical strategies to build resilience

While both individuals and organisations can take actions to build resilience, self-assessment is a good start.

“As a first step, people need to get clear about what are the things in their life that restore them and what depletes them. Where do you really feel energised and robust? The more we can identify and engage in those things in our life, then the more robust we become. There needs to be a balance between stress and recovery,” Taylor says.

Arthurson works with a ‘menu’ of actions for individuals to either self-assess or work in teams to discuss how they are travelling, which include:

1. Confidence: articulating personal values and vision; developing an action plan for areas of life that require attention; reflecting on what works or is positive; focusing on process goals, rather than outcome goals; and using visualisation and affirmation.

2. Emotional wellbeing: achieving a sense of calm by reducing stress, being proactive, focusing only on what you can change, and using meditation, music, exercise and humour; fostering concentration through process goals, action plans and learning mindfulness; and gaining a sense of control through action planning, and learning how to problem-solve and make good decisions.

3. Learning: having a capability development plan, or even just making a list of new things you’d like to do.

4. Physical health: having a good diet, exercise, water and sufficient rest.

5. Connectness: Establishing a relationships plan to support others and be supported by others.

Similarly, Taylor believes the key elements which help us perform at our peak or build positive psychological capital are having a sense of purpose or meaning in life; setting clear, well-defined goals; having confidence – including having the right training and support to fulfil your role; and looking at the quality of your thinking.

“By that, I mean the decisions we make every day about the meaning we give to events in our lives. Do we tend to explain things to ourselves in a way that empowers us to keep going or do we explain things in a way that leaves us as a victim or disempowered in the situation we’re in?,” Taylor says.

Poulson’s tips on how to build resilience include:

- Create more positive experiences. US psychologist Barbara Fredrickson has posited that experiencing three positive events for every negative event can lead to dramatically increased performance and happiness (visit www.positivityratio.com to take an online test to find your ratio). “It’s important to put some strategies in place to ensure there are positive experiences in the workplace, including acknowledgement and celebration. Some very simple tips are, for example, leaving a whiteboard near the door where people can write one positive thing that happened during the day. It means your lasting memory of that day is positive, and it’s there again when you come in the next day,” Poulson says.
- Don’t save up to relax. Build in breaks during the day, even if it is just taking a few deep breaths to release tension.
- Institute a routine to separate work from home. This could be doing some physical activity between work and home, using visualisation strategies such as imagining walking through a waterfall between your workplace and home and washing the day off, or even just changing your clothes.

From the frontline

Resilience is the “X-factor” for complaints handling staff, providing the energy to continually face challenges and conflict, according to a SOCAP Australia member who provided their view on resilience.

“Without resilience it is very easy to fall into the work problems that these potentially volatile situations can cause – lack of rational thought, aggression, anxiety, social dysfunction, depression, and anger.”

Some of the consequences of lower resilience observed in the complaints handling environment include impaired wellbeing, not feeling valued, inadequacies being magnified out of proportion, clouded judgement, issues/emotions carrying over to the next customer interaction, a lessened ability to detach the issue from the customer, inflexibility, a lack of direction and assistance from management and peers, and disillusionment with the effectiveness of their role.

Some of their tips on how to increase resilience include:

- Debrief by talking with other case managers/ managers/complaint handlers.
- Take care of your body – eat well and exercise regularly.
- Schedule activities that you enjoy – get involved in leisure activities such as reading, community groups, and hobbies, and take regular holidays.
- Remember to tend to your family and friendships. Also form strong team relationships so you have people in a similar role to bounce things off, vent with, and so on (a sense of humour helps too!).
- Focus on trying to change the things you can change and not trying to change the things you can’t. Stay flexible.
- Laugh often and hard – laughter is healthy for the body and frees the spirit.
- Focus on the positive – track the differences you make in the business. It gives you a sense of accomplishment to keep doing what you do.
- Recognise that you won’t always handle things perfectly. Every customer complaint is an opportunity to learn about yourself.

What managers can do

Taylor believes that because managers play such an important role in setting the emotional mood and tone of the workplace, they need to ensure their own psychological capital and emotional wellbeing is up to par.

“Especially when managing people who deal with complaints, bear in mind that it is an anxiety-producing environment, so managers shouldn’t add to that anxiety,” Taylor says, recommending a focus on praising staff, noticing what they do well, checking to see how they are feeling at the beginning of the day, and debriefing after a difficult experience.

Because of the complexity of the task of developing resilience, involving as it does complex psychological processes such as self-esteem and control, Manning recommends considering professional advice to help train your teams in building resilience.

Carolyn Manning will facilitate a workshop on ‘Managing Difficult Customer Behaviour’ in December. Visit www.socap.org.au to find out more.