

Does Resilience Training Increase Resilient Performance?

Abstract

Companies spend a lot of money in training their staff in resilience prior to implementing major changes. This paper will examine the impact of this training on the actual resilience of the people who go through it - specifically, to determine if the training actually has a positive impact on the resilience of employees by maintaining productivity levels and reducing stress through a major change. A combined solution of career resiliency and better change leadership is suggested as a better solution than either one by itself.

Does Resilience Training Increase Resilient Performance?

Resilience is the capacity to absorb high levels of change while displaying minimal dysfunctional behavior.

At present, the company that I am consulting with is going through major transitions. There was a recent major acquisition, about two years after the last major acquisition. Every part of the company is going through reorganization and realignment. Many people were let go. Nerves were shot, morale was down.

One of the things that was done to alleviate the stress of the situation was to offer resilience training to all of its permanent staff. The training was offered after several months of communications relating to the impending changes and just prior to the implementation of the change. While talking with the permanent and consulting staff, it was clear that, at least in this area, productivity and morale were essentially destroyed for a period of time before, during, and after the initial change initiative and resilience training took place. This is not the first time I've been in a situation like this and I am not convinced that the return on investment of time and money was adequate for the results.

While discussing the impact of the resilience training and the turmoil of the change, a couple of interesting perspectives were noted. One person, who trained as an industrial psychologist remarked concerning the change effort and the resilience training "I know this stuff, I've taught this stuff but I'm still finding myself unable to fully function because in this environment.." Another staff member began with stating that the training didn't really do a lot, but then went on to say that the training was beneficial for a couple of reasons - to understand that

everyone was going through the same kinds of emotional turmoil, that it is normal, and that things would eventually return to something of a normal state. Several different people remarked that a great deal of the training sessions were devoted to complaining - not exactly productive, but it did provide a release for the tension that everyone was feeling. Adding some credibility to the idea that everyone is going through the same types of feelings and that it isn't just one person. An interesting outcome in this particular situation is that two of three people in my group attended the training - the two who went to the training happened to be the two that kept their jobs. The third person was let go. At least one reason that the two people were kept on was because of their apparent ability to adapt to new situations. The person who was let go was rehired in another group doing something completely different - in essence, the one who was judged to be less adaptable had to do much more adaptation than the others and is probably better off than the other team members.

This was by no means an in depth study, merely observations made while going through the experience. Based on this experience, it seems as though the value in this case was primarily a relief mechanism and an overview of what to expect - certainly a worthwhile exercise, but probably not the solution that it was meant to be.. Although I do believe that there is some benefit to resilience training, I think that much of the benefit will be derived in the long run and will likely be manifest in future changes when the staff have had the training and the experience to demonstrate that it reflected reality. When they recognize that they have experienced being resilient and somehow came through stronger, they will reap much more benefit than simply going through a training session in the middle of a change requiring resilience. If I was planning how to best get through a change with the minimal impact to productivity, I would provide the resilience training as a routine part of employee development - but more importantly I would

spend the time and money on teaching the leadership how to manage change so that it minimizes the impact on productivity and morale.

Now to look at what others have to say regarding resilience training. In a USA WEEKEND article on Resilience (http://www.usaweekend.com/99_issues/990307/990307resilience.html) there several assertions as to the validity of resilience training. For example, a Questar employee is quoted: “In the past, if someone hit a disruption in their life - a divorce, a family illness - we would lose them for several months” and continues that Resilience Training helps them get back on their feet, “reintegrate more creatively and become stronger.” They also say that productivity is up and sick leave down. The article does not present data regarding the maintained performance levels, but the company does seem to be sold on the concept. The article further asserts that resilience can be learned or fostered and is being used in programs to help both children and adults tap into their innate resilience. The idea that it is helpful is certainly appealing, but they really don't have data that supports what they are saying - the article reinforces that such training is becoming more and more popular, but offers little evidence of success.

In the article “Getting a Return on Investment (ROI) From Human Resources” (http://www.asaglobal.com/white_PageHR_ROI.html) John F. Horne III relates the following as the four generic deliverables of an HR Department:

Strategic execution - aligning HR and business strategy

Employee contribution - promoting commitment and capability

Administrative efficiency - delivering cost effective operation

Capacity for change - insuring the readiness and capability for change

The final bullet is pretty remarkable - one of the generic deliverables expected of all HR departments is a resilient organization. The article points out that a return on investment can and should be derived to show the value of HR functions. Although it should be done, it has not been common for companies to calculate ROI for HR functions, but it seems as though it will become more and more necessary to support these types of functions.

The article “Riding the Learning Curve...to a healthier workplace”, Geri McKeown relates that “The National Quality Institute (NQI), a not-for-profit organization located in Toronto, provides a framework for developing healthy workplaces based on the Canadian Healthy Workplace Criteria.” Geri goes on to describe award winning companies with respect to healthy workplaces. One in particular, “Telus BC has identified resilience, change mastery and a corporate culture that supports work/life balance and employee health needs as its key success factors.” Telus BC uses a balanced scorecard approach to measure management accountability with respect to healthy workplace environment. Telus BC reported that they had a \$3.00 return on every dollar invested in the healthy workplace program. Telus BC has taken the time to measure return on investment and it supports what the other articles allude to with information.

“Career Resiliency Programs and the Companies Bottom Line” (<http://www.vfandco.com/refmat/career.pdf>) also reports that “Companies have found that an effective career resiliency program can result in up to a 300% return on investment per employee.” What they describe as career resiliency has to do with guaranteed employability versus guaranteed employment - meaning that those who learn appropriate career skills will always be able to find a job, but realize that it may or may not be with the same company. The company realizes that employees with those skills is very valuable and will want to keep them

when they can. Companies provide educational and skill enhancement training - employees provide greater skills and flexibility to perform more tasks.

The idea of career resiliency is a much better approach than what I have seen as resiliency training. Career resiliency gives the employee the ability to build the knowledge and skills that they would like to have to support their continued employability. It lets them experience resilience by learning new skills and trying new opportunities. The half-day sessions that teach resilience during a crisis are a good overview and provide some relief, but, in my opinion are much less valuable than having an ongoing program that teaches resilience and lets employees prepare for and experience change prior to being in crisis mode.

In “Better Change, Best Practices for Transforming Your Organization” the Price Waterhouse Change Integration Team lists 15 guiding principles for implementing better changes in an organization. “The Change Agent's Handbook: A Survival Guide for Quality Improvement Champions” David Hutton lists must-haves and a wish-list for a change agent. Companies that couple leadership training in these principles and supplying the must-haves and some of the wish-list will experience better results in their change initiatives. One of the benefits of conducting changes as these books suggest is that it the same change will take less of a toll than it would without doing so. Coupling the benefits of leading better changes with employees that have career resiliency will produce a tremendous workforce that will achieve superior results.

In “Managing At The Speed of Change: How Resilient Managers Succeed and Prosper Where Others Fail”, Daryl Conner presents the case that understanding change is possible and managing change initiatives is the key to managerial success. He explains Resilience in terms the Nature of Change, the Process of Change, The Roles of Change, Resistance to Change,

Commitment to Change, Culture, and Synergy. All of these terms factor into the resilience of the people in the organization and understanding these ideas and effectively managing them will greatly reduce the impact of change on an organization. That is, managing change correctly will make change easier - and mismanaging it will make even smaller changes have greater negative impact than necessary.

Summary

Does Resilience Training Increase Resilient Performance? The answer is yes. But effective resilience training is not simply a half day session that explains the stages of change, but is rather an ongoing program that teaches the skills and lets people experience resilience actions prior to being thrown into a chaotic situation.

References

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