

Leadership Guide – Building Personal and Team Resilience

April 2020

Introduction

Resilience is a topic that is getting a lot of airtime as lockdown continues and challenges persist in the face of coronavirus. It is also a subject we are being increasingly asked about by clients seeking to support colleagues and employees as well as explore how growth mindset can help during this uncertain time.

This short guide to Resilience has been developed around a series of LinkedIn posts published by Matthew Syed Consulting during the week of April 20th 2020. It includes some additional detail and insights from our Mindset Advantage psychometric analytics as well as our other content and techniques for understanding and building growth mindset.

The following sections explore what resilience is, why it matters and the relationship between resilience and some of the individual and cultural traits associated with growth mindset. It also offers some practical steps for helping further develop resilience in yourself and in others, and for helping to build a more resilient team.

What is resilience?

Resilience is often defined as the ability to recover from difficulties, but it can also be the capacity to cope with and adapt to challenging circumstances. It is often associated with concepts of grit and mental toughness, but there are differences.

Mental toughness relates to how people deal with challenges, pressure and stress. It's how we approach these situations. People who are mentally tough, tend to be optimistic, confident and to learn from these experiences. They tend to be resilient.

Grit, popularised by Angela Duckworth, relates to the tendency to sustain effort to achieve long-term goals. It is whether we keep going and persevere in the face of challenges.

According to the American Psychological Association, people who are resilient tend to:

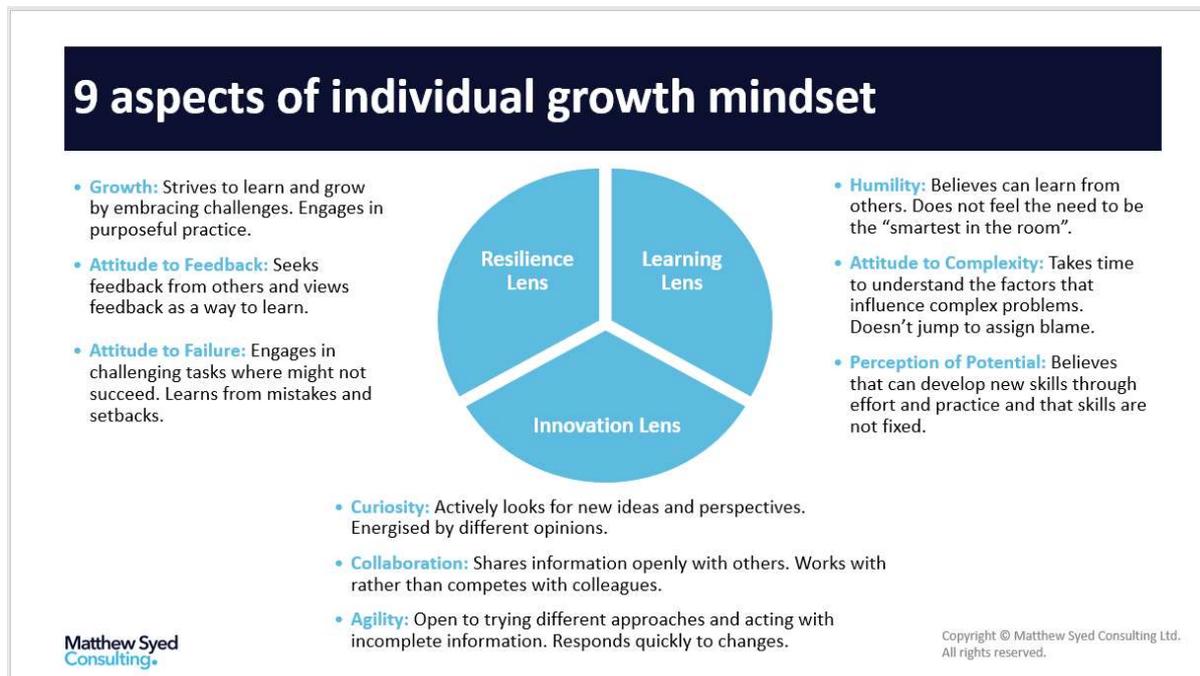
- 1) Make realistic plans and take steps to carry them out
- 2) Take a positive view of themselves and have confidence in their strengths and abilities
- 3) Communicate effectively and solve problems effectively
- 4) Manage strong feelings.

The link between resilience and growth mindset

Resilience is a key attribute of a growth mindset. Figure 1 shows the nine personal traits of a growth mindset and those that particularly relate to resilience, though others can also play an important role.

Crucially, resilience isn't a personality trait that you either have or you don't; it is something you can develop or strengthen with practice and intent. This will not only help you through a challenging time, but will also enable you to grow, both personally and professionally.

Figure 1. Resilience as part of a growth mindset



Note: Many of these aspects are closely linked and also impact on other lenses, humility also having an impact on resilience, for example. Furthermore, strengthening a particular trait will often positively affect another, for example, being open to feedback will likely strengthen one's curiosity.

Practical actions for building resilience

Reframe failure as a learning opportunity

The way we view failure can fundamentally affect our resilience. When something goes wrong, do you view it as an opportunity to learn or as an excuse to give up? When we re-frame failure as a learning opportunity, our motivation and self-belief are much less threatened.

In the current environment, if we can lessen our fear of failure, we will feel more motivated to try something new or to do things differently and will also feel more optimistic about our ability to tackle the challenges we face and take something positive from them.

Success is a journey

The current situation may at times be testing for even the most resilient among us. There are a number of indicators that suggest resilience may be lacking, or weakening, some of which include:

- dwelling on negative feedback
- lacking belief in one's own ability
- preferring to avoid something new or difficult and instead sticking with familiar tasks or methods.

While it might be natural to experience some of these feelings at times, it's important to acknowledge them, take a step back and give your resilience a boost.

Remember that success is a journey; it happens through high quality practice and persistence and is not simply the result of natural talent. If you acknowledge that success doesn't happen instantly you will be less disheartened with initial setbacks - thus improving your resilience.

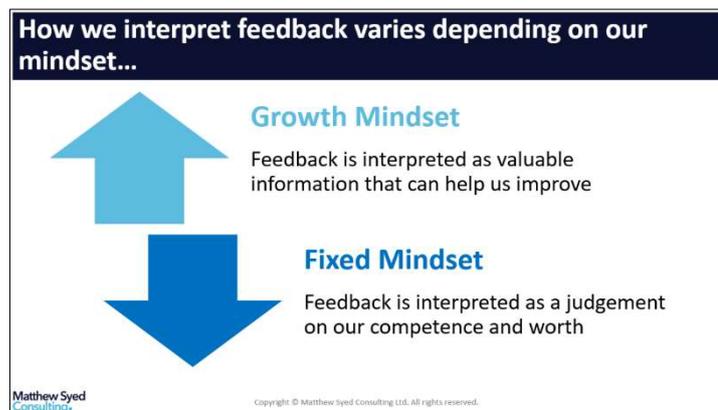
Make plans and act on them – as well as giving a sense of control, it also improves chances of achieving a goal. And take care to manage expectations (whether your own or those of others) to avoid feelings of frustration due to the time it may take to achieve a goal or milestone.

Feedback is a gift

How we choose to respond to feedback can affect our resilience. Feedback is simply information, but our interpretation of it - depending on our mindset - makes it feel good or bad. In a growth mindset, we view 'critical' feedback as something valuable that can help us develop. In a fixed mindset, we see it as a judgement on our competence or self-worth. It's not always easy to embrace feedback with a growth mindset approach - we want to learn but we also want to be liked or valued for who we are.

Consider 'negative' feedback as 'constructive' and an opportunity to learn and improve, rather than an indication that you have failed. Separate the points for development from any feeling of personal attack; it is not a judgement of you as a person.

Acting on the feedback shows that you can change, develop new approaches, and tackle challenges constructively.



Consider also using the Feed Forward approach: identifying something you want to improve and seeking input to enhance your performance. This helps maintain the focus on feedback as being developmental rather than judgemental.

Humility above all

Humility is another key trait that aids resilience as it means we accept when we need help and will seek it. We recognise our limitations and are open to ideas and feedback from others, whatever our qualifications or experience. Nobody has all the answers; nor is this the role of leaders or managers, though you will probably need to make the final decisions. If we feel we have to provide all the answers or cover up any shortcomings in order to protect our reputation or status, we lose the opportunity for better communication, collaboration, innovation and learning.

Being aware of gaps in our knowledge and open to the ideas and viewpoints of others will help build trust and collaboration as well as resilience. The current situation is an ideal time to be open to input from others; nobody has all the answers right now as we are all dealing with situations, and a level of change, we have probably never encountered before. Invite ideas and feedback from others – demonstrating humility will allow others to do the same by fostering psychological safety.

Create psychological safety

Research shows that resilient teams are more successful. But having a team of resilient people is not the same as a resilient team. Resilient teams are built on trust and psychological safety; enabling team members to share ideas and information and be open about mistakes or concerns or needing help, without fear of criticism or recrimination. Some research suggests that as little as 1% of people feel extremely confident voicing concerns at crucial moments¹, when stakes are high. This can lead to poor decisions, maintaining the status quo, lack of learning and inferior team performance.

Actions for fostering team resilience and psychological safety:

- ❖ Communicate clear purpose and priorities
- ❖ Provide and ask for feedback, praising effort not outcome
- ❖ Avoid blame and focus on learnings when something goes wrong
- ❖ Actively encourage new ideas and approaches – from every team member
- ❖ Model the behaviours you want other people to display, e.g. being open about mistakes or not having all the answers.



Psychological safety takes work, but can help you create an environment where people and diverse ideas thrive.

Conclusion

There is an intrinsic link between many traits of growth mindset and resilience. Building one's own growth mindset, and in particular adopting the beliefs and behaviours we have explored above, will aid personal resilience. But this can be hampered if growth mindset, trust and psychological safety is lacking at a team level. By building resilient teams and a growth mindset culture across an organization, leaders can expect to optimise both personal and business benefits and performance.

References

1 - Patterson, K., Grenny, J., Mcmillan, R., & Switzler, A. (2012). *Crucial conversations: Tools for talking when stakes are high (second edition)*. McGraw-Hill Education.

Matthew Syed Consulting

Matthew Syed Consulting works with an impressive portfolio of global clients in the public and private sectors. Building on the work of best-selling author and influential thought-leader Matthew Syed, we establish thriving growth mindset cultures that drive higher performance in individuals, teams and organisations. Through a synthesis of leading psychological research and industry best-practice, we have developed a framework of proven tools and innovative strategies that empower organisational development and accelerate business outcomes.

To find out more or to have an informal conversation about leadership development or building growth mindset, email team@matthewsyed.co.uk.