

Resilience in the Face of Adversity

Recently a superintendent told me about the time he proudly led his school district to pass a bond referendum for new construction. Two years later, overcrowding caused the district to propose a new bond referendum and, to the district's surprise, it was soundly defeated.

With one vote, pride turned to insecurity. Over the next six months, the superintendent observed a huge wedge being driven into the community, dividing people into two camps: winners and losers of the referendum. The winners bragged how they showed the school district who was boss. The losers played victim, whining that they were the only ones who cared about the children and their future.

The superintendent worried about his ability to move the district ahead in the face of this unanticipated adversity. As he quietly confessed, "The leadership skills required now are not the same ones needed when things were going well."

Indeed, there is a fundamental difference between moving along when things are going well and moving ahead when things are tough. What can educational leaders do to help others and themselves move ahead in the face of adverse conditions?

Five leadership strengths for moving forward personally and professionally in difficult times

Understanding Resilience

In a sentence, resilience means using your energy productively to move ahead in the face of adversity.

However, there's much more to resilience than that. Drawing from the research on resilient leadership, particularly the work of Daryl Conner, author of *Managing at the Speed of Change*, I have identified five leadership strengths that are central for leaders to help the organization, as well as themselves, strengthen their resilience.

As I describe each point, keep in mind that resilience is a long-term, not a short-term, construct. Resilience doesn't fluctuate daily like the stock market. You're not resilient today and non-resilient tomorrow. Resilience represents your capacity, your collective energy points, available to move ahead under

adversity. You build or destroy your resilience capacity one day at a time.

Staying Upbeat

● *Strength No. 1: Be positive in spite of the negative.*

Most school system leaders don't enter their assignment with a negative mindset. In a practical sense, though, the cumulative impact of negative circumstances understandably pushes many leaders over the line from optimist to pessimist. In other words, legitimate reasons exist for school system leaders to be pessimistic about today's conditions in education.

At the other end of the spectrum are school system leaders who wear the proverbial rose-colored glasses to work. Such an outlook distorts reality and negatively affects resilience when reality doesn't measure up to the imaginary world the leader wishes for.

Somewhere between the extremes of perennial pessimism and unbridled optimism is the well-researched field of positive thinking. Here are a few suggestions for strengthening your own resilience in being positive.

> *Expect the world to be filled with disruptions.*

It's not the surprises that negatively affect your resilience account. It's when

you're surprised that you're surprised! You can probably recall a time when you were relieved to just get through a particular year of adversity with your job and your sanity intact. You even may remember uttering these familiar words, "The next year should be a normal one. No disruptions. No surprises."

When the surprises and disruptions reared their ugly heads, how did it affect your personal resilience? If you view the disruptions to your expectations as the natural result of a changing world we live in, you have a greater chance of being positive about the overall condition of things. You don't waste resilience points worrying about the disruption. Instead you treat disruption as reality and work your way to a positive outcome.

> Find opportunities in the midst of adversity by applying "and" thinking.

Today, many school system leaders feel compelled to have to choose between what the state department of education demands and what the school district needs. For example, let's assume that the state department of education values all school districts demonstrating a certain standard on statewide achievement tests.

Resilience is drained when you and your school staff feel obligated to implement what the state department demands at the expense of what the local school system cares about. Being forced to choose between A and B creates a negative hit on resilience.

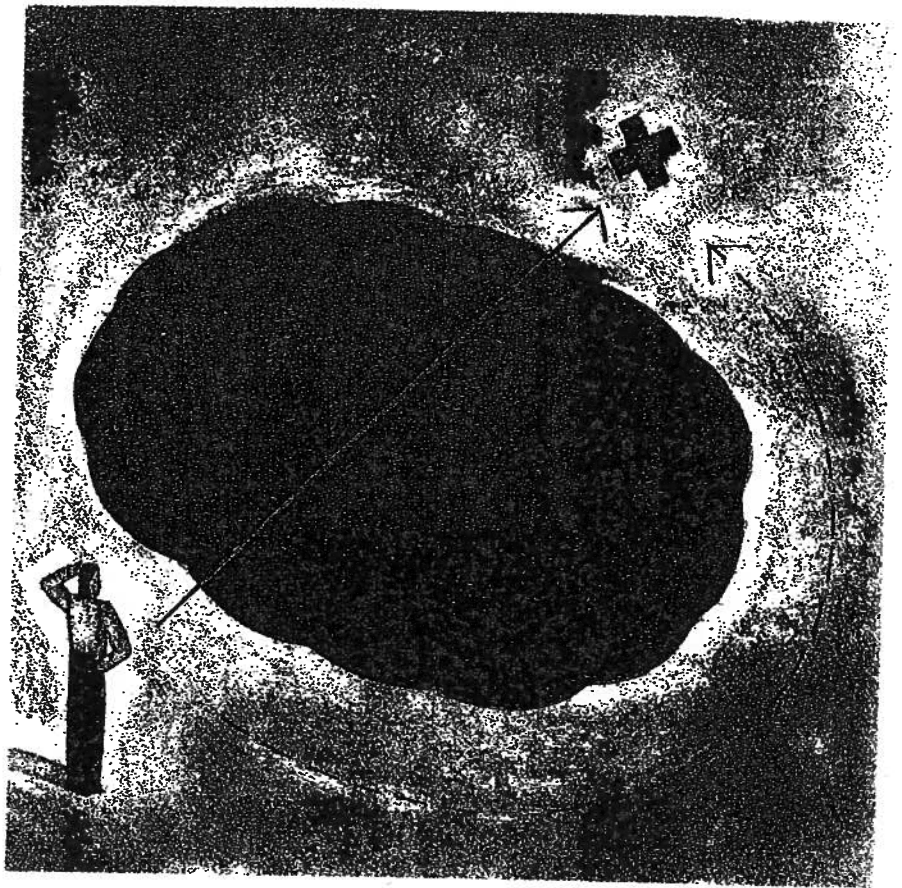
A more resilient approach is for you to create a win-win situation by reframing the issue to create "and" thinking. For example, try asking: "How can we be true to our own values at the school system level and, at the same time, comply with the state's penchant for publishing each school's standardized test scores?"

This strategy allows you to honor your obligation to implement state standards without sacrificing the opportunity to advance your own district initiatives.

> Think "how can we" rather than "we can't."

The victim role is much more comfortable because it lets us avoid responsibility for our actions. As long as we say "we can't because of all of the adversity we face," we escape any accountability for our own actions. Imagine the school system leader who tells the community, "We can't put computers in all classrooms because the state won't give us any more money."

Imagine, instead, the school system leader who asks, "How can we work within our existing resource base plus



find community resources to reach the board and community goal of putting computers in all classrooms?" By asking how can we, we create a much more positive scenario than lamenting that we can't because of our adversity.

What Matters

● *Strength No. 2: Stay focused on what you care about.*

When I ask leaders what drains their resilience account, inevitably they point to examples where there appears to be no connection between what is being demanded of them now and what was demanded of them previously.

in the following ways:

> Maintain a strong sense of purpose and organizational values.

As a school system leader, you need to consistently and persistently operate from a clearly articulated set of core personal and organizational values. This statement acknowledges your good intentions about being value-driven. Unfortunately, good intentions are not enough. Resilient leaders consistently and persistently apply concrete strategies to make sure these values are clearly articulated and understood by others.

For example, your own resilience is strengthened when you can convey the

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As one superintendent complained, "Today the flavor of the month by the board is block scheduling. Yesterday it was year-round schooling. Who knows what it will be tomorrow? I can feel my resilience getting weaker with each new scatterbrained initiative."

School system leaders can help reduce the scatter and increase the focus

following to others in the organization, "On this subject, this is what I care about and this is what you can expect from me to help assure that my conduct is consistent with what I value." As an illustration, what do you value specifically beyond just the platitude of site-based management? Based on what you value, what will you personally do (and can be



held accountable for) to make the value come alive in your organization?

> *Avoid unnecessary distractions.*

Maintaining focus, by definition, means avoiding temptations to be unfocused. You are the lightning rod for every conceivable interest group wanting a piece of your energy. Resilient leaders are able to sift through the assorted demands by outside forces, keeping the potential distractions from siphoning resilience away from the core values that matter most.

After a recent workshop I conducted, one superintendent participant called me aside and said, "I'm finally coming to terms with the reality that I can't be all things to all people. I realize I must be absolutely clear in my own mind about what matters most to me and resist the temptation to chase other things just because they are the hot topics of the moment."

> *Maintain perspective for the long haul.*

Unfortunately, most school system leaders feel pressure to focus on the urgent at the expense of the most important. To strengthen your resilience as a leader, relentlessly remind yourself, "where do I want this organization to be three years from now? What are the strategies, behaviors and attitudes necessary to help us get there?"

Another way to help you maintain perspective for the long haul is to find ways to celebrate the small wins along the way. In this instance, I'm referring to you personally celebrating the small wins you have achieved.

In your leadership role, you spend so much time focusing on helping others that you can easily lose sight of the need to take stock of what you have done in the short run to move the organization ahead in the long run. Give yourself permission to say, even if it is said privately to yourself, "I am really proud about these things I have done to move us ahead in the face of adversity."

Tolerating Ambiguity

● *Strength No. 3: Remain flexible in how you get there.*

A common resilience-draining tendency among school system leaders is to feel compelled to adhere to every single strategy printed in the infamous strategic plan already approved. Rigidity in focus needs the strong company of flexibility in strategy.

To help you increase your flexibility in how you get there, practice the following:

> *Develop a high tolerance for ambiguity.*

If you are like most school system leaders, your professional environment is

full of ambiguity. And leaders differ widely in how ambiguity affects their resilience. If you are one who needs clarity, certainty and predictable outcomes to function effectively, the inevitably ambiguous world of school system leaders will become a drain on your resilience.

If, on the other hand, you are tolerant of new, unfamiliar situations and you are willing to act on incomplete, apparently contradictory information, then your high tolerance for ambiguity will actually strengthen your resilience.

> *Recover quickly from setbacks.*

As a school system leader, you will have setbacks. As mentioned in Strength No. 1, the harsh reality is that things won't always develop as you would like. A significant difference between resilient and nonresilient leaders is how they choose to handle the defeat.

If the school board unanimously defeats your latest administrative reorganization proposal, first give yourself permission to be disappointed. It's even OK to wallow in a little self-pity, temporarily. A major key to resilience is how quickly you pull yourself out of the mire and find flexible strategies for moving ahead despite the setback.

> *Be willing to see diverse perspectives.*

Usually, school system leaders invest considerable time and anguish in searching for the most effective path to achieve systemwide goals. About the time the charted path meets approval, however, outside forces wreak havoc with the carefully constructed steps for achieving the goal. Nonresilient leaders fall in the victim trap of blaming and stubbornly attempting to push their agenda forward without serious consideration of alternative paths. Resilient leaders pay attention to the messages sent by these imposing forces and search for ways to incorporate diverse perspectives without giving up on the ultimate goals established.

Pro-active Behavior

● *Strength No. 4: Act rather than react.*

Adversity can bring out the competitive spirit in all of us. In particular, school system leaders rise to the top of the organization partially because they have a track record for prevailing under adverse conditions.

Sometimes the virtue of prevailing backfires when it depletes your resilience and weakens your effectiveness for facing adversity in the future. There are, though, pro-active strategies you can implement that increase the likelihood your resilience account will become stronger, not weaker.

> *Recognize when change is inevitable.*

The song lyrics popularized by Kenny Rogers directly apply to school system leaders. You do indeed need to know when to hold them, when to fold them, when to walk away and when to run. In the face of adversity, sometimes you have to let go of the old way of doing things. Rigid and blind adherence to the old way of doing things can prove detrimental to your resilience account.

As a concrete example, the yoke of state-imposed standards is here and has no intention of going away. In your role as school system leader, you have a choice. You can try ignoring the state standards, hoping they will go away. Or you can recognize that state standards likely won't go away in the foreseeable future and proceed to develop strategies that move your district from the victim status to the position of taking charge of making standards work for, not against you.

Clearly, taking the offensive is more resilience-building than remaining defensive.

> *Take risks in spite of potentially adverse consequences.*

A nonresilient strategy can be seen in school system leaders who don't want to risk the possible fallout from unpopular actions, especially under adverse conditions. At times, the reasoning goes like this: "The adversity we're facing is bad enough without my taking action that will possibly make matters worse."

In contrast, a resilient strategy used by school leaders is to realize that taking action, even at the risk of negative consequences, can turn out to be resilience building in the long run. If your actions are consistent with what you value, the long-term payoff for you and the organization is a greater sense of confidence that resilience points are being spent in a manner that matters most, aligning actions and values, irrespective of the consequences.

> *Invent new approaches to move ahead in adverse conditions.*

Sometimes everything you learned about leading change gets thrown out of the window when unexpected adversity hits. For instance, what if the stable board leadership you enjoyed and counted on for 10 years is wiped out overnight during a board election. The new board ran on a platform of fresh ideas, not old, stale strategic plans.

As a school system leader, you are faced with being victim or architect. You can choose to argue for the so-called old strategic plan adopted three years ago by the old board. Or you can find

new approaches to capitalize on the energy of the new board and the sentiment of the community that elected them. Who knows, inventing new approaches may invigorate your own resilience as you grow from the experience.

Conservation Efforts

● *Strength No. 5: Apply resilience-conserving strategies during tough times.*

Some leaders become lost when faced with confusing information and multiple demands that can't be met to everyone's satisfaction. Resilient school system leaders find ways to conserve their resilience in the following ways.

> *Identify what's important in the face of confusing conditions.*

You can waste precious resilience points by trying to respond incrementally to the multiple, competing demands of various stakeholder groups. Or you can consolidate what appears to be several unrelated demands on your resilience by finding common themes that allow you to more efficiently direct your energy and the energy of the organization.

Suppose, for example, technology advocates want more computers in the schools, back-to-basics advocates want more drill and practice, and gifted education advocates want more vertical and horizontal enrichment. Rather than chasing each set of demands independently, how can you find patterns that incorporate these multiple demands into a common initiative designed to improve student learning?

> *Don't waste energy on resilience-draining issues.*

Sometimes school system leaders create their own adversity by embracing every good idea proposed. Hidden inside every good idea lurks a mountain of surprises.

Imagine a well-intentioned group presents you with its good idea to create an open-enrollment plan so parents have a choice of teachers and schools. What seems like a good idea at the time turns into adversity as the teachers' union, principals' association and the parent-teacher organization all argue against the good idea for widely disparate yet very sound reasons.

The ultimate impact of this good idea turns out to be bad news as you are forced into your firefighting role.

You have an obligation to your own resilience and the resilience of the organization to anticipate hidden adversity and simply not waste time on issues that will waste resilience.

> *Know where to go for your own resilience support.*

There exists the implicit expectation and accompanying pressure for school system leaders to hang tough during tough times. Unfortunately, hanging tough too often translates into hanging tough alone. And repeatedly facing adversity alone can prove debilitating to your personal resilience.

You need to recognize when to ask others for help. More importantly, you need to know the sources available for help. As I discuss in the recent book published by AASA, *The Anguish of Leadership*, if school system leaders are doing their jobs right they are going to put rocks in their pocket. The cumulative weight of these rocks can take its toll on resilience.

Therefore, you need to do whatever it takes to conserve your resilience during adversity, even if it means taking the risk to reach out for help. For example, one regional group of superintendents told me they met monthly in a session facilitated by a trained psychologist. The sole purpose of the monthly session was to help the leaders sharpen their strategies for moving ahead in the face of adversity.

Thoughts Count

Clearly, there is no single, magic checklist for strengthening resilience. There are, however, two central points to guide you in this direction.

First, keep in mind that it's not so much *what* you do, it's how you *think about* what you do that makes all the difference. The five resilience strengths offered here are designed to help you think about what you do.

Second, keep in mind that people don't choose to be nonresilient. They simply choose not to do what it takes to become resilient. Your challenge is to accept the responsibility for doing whatever it takes to move ahead in the face of adversity. By accepting this responsibility you create a more resilient world for you and your organization. ■

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