

## Building emotional and mental resilience in tough times

by Dr Sunny Stout-Rostron and Michael Taylor

“No one knows what specific challenges we will face in 2020, but we have a strong idea of what the leaders who can meet those challenges will look like, and how they will get to be that way”  
– Michael M. Lombardo and Robert W. Eichinger (2001)

### Introduction

The significant events of the past few months with the outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown, have affected us all, irrespective of our race, gender or social standing. While these events have exposed vulnerabilities in our societies and corporations, they have also provided many opportunities for the best of humanity to shine through.

While some prominent business leaders are predicting a total global economic “reset”, one wonders how ready we are as business leaders, for the dramatic changes we will be called upon to make to survive these tough times?

Recent events have seen radical and volatile shifts in global stock markets and business confidence, with dramatic increases in unemployment. This has caught many organisations and its leadership off guard, unsure of what to do and how to do it. An added complexity is that we now also need to manage remotely, which has necessitated a completely different approach to managing teams, requiring a new level of trust.

Many business leaders we speak to describe the current situation as involving a continual state of leadership paralysis! While some political leaders have excelled during these times of crisis, others have found that their traditional approaches are no longer appropriate.

Times of crisis expose weak leadership, and illuminate the fault lines in those who think that arrogance, dogma and ego will carry the day.

*The leadership that will take us through these tough times requires courage beyond bluster, compassion beyond perceived weakness, and authenticity that is borne of emotional maturity and profound wisdom.*

We have heard inspiring stories of organisations that have repurposed their entire manufacturing plants to supply emergency ventilators and testing kits in this crisis. Such decision making could happen only in organisations where courageous, compassionate and authentic leadership is nurtured and encouraged through its culture and practices.

### What is our role as leaders in these turbulent times?

*Leaders are in the hope creation business.*

Our initial reaction to unforeseen change is generally a mix of fear and overreaction. No one wants to fail. If we can understand and accept our own unique fears and not project them onto others, we will discover that team members who are fully engaged are far more creative and productive than ones who are frightened and insecure.

As senior leaders, our key role is to create hope. The way we do that is through articulating an inspiring vision of the future, interpreting this vision in our own functional teams, and ensuring effective and efficient execution against the plan (Stout-Rostron and Taylor, 2020).

### ***Absorbing the pressure***

Some individuals seem to flourish and handle stress in their stride, whilst the same situation can cause anxiety, mental, and physical reaction in others.

The difference between these two types of people lies in their psychology, i.e., their mental hardiness and emotional resilience. We know that there is a strong correlation between mental and physical well-being, and a person's ability (or inability) to manage their thoughts and beliefs during stressful periods in their lives (Judge, 2017).

Our research with executive leaders and teams has shown us that leaders are being asked to step up to a *next level of leadership thinking* in terms of both self and others management.

Radical change is holding leadership development practices to the fire, and many organisations are found to be wanting (Stout-Rostron and Taylor, 2020).

### **Acquiring the new next-level leadership skillset**

Key to mastering this different leadership mind-set is to recognise that we will need to be more agile and adaptive in our learning of the new and different. In particular, we need to build the mental and emotional resilience in our workplaces, especially in these tough times, when markets crash, revenues are under pressure, consumers are cash strapped and overreaction to political and social paranoia becomes the norm (Zolli, 2012).

*It's relatively easy to swim with tides of negativity and pessimism, but far more challenging to stand up and do what is needed to lead people and organisations to not only survive, but also to heal and to thrive. This is the mental and emotional resilience required from every individual tasked with the responsibility of leadership.*

### **What is resilience?**

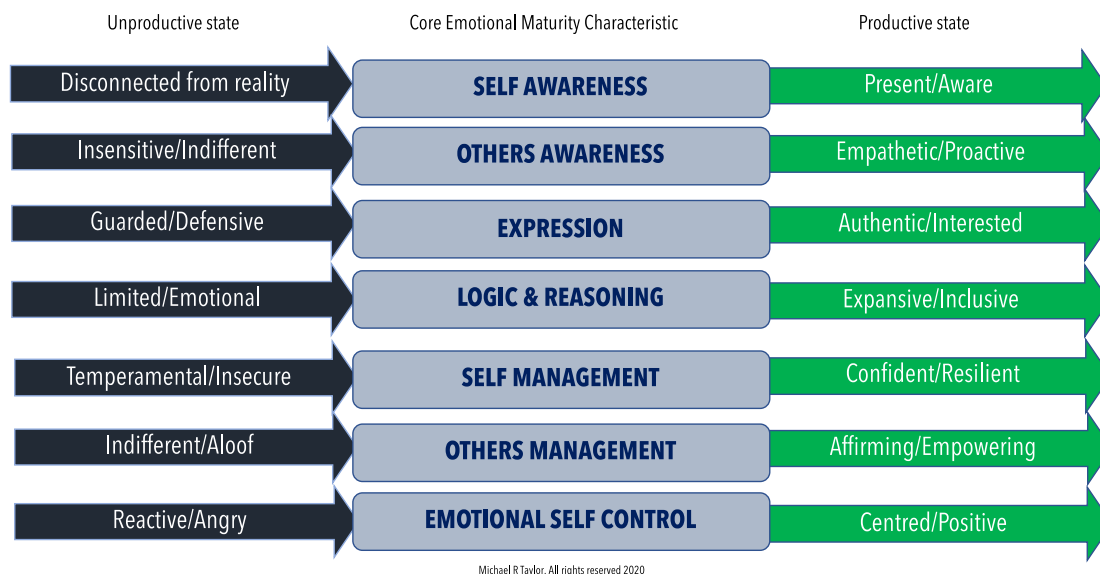
Resilience is the capacity of a company, team or a person to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances. Resilience is what makes the difference between those who

succumb to problems and the pressures of change, and those who fight through them. Resilient people are able to say to themselves, “I’m going to use this difficult situation as fuel to try harder” (Zolli, 2012).

The three key components of this resilience are;

1. *Self-awareness that is brutally honest.* Self-awareness means having a deep understanding of one’s emotions, strengths, weaknesses, needs, and drives. People with strong self-awareness are neither overly critical nor unrealistically hopeful. Rather, they are honest – with themselves, and with others. People who have a high degree of self-awareness recognise how their feelings affect them, other people, and their job performance. Self-awareness extends to a person’s understanding of their values and goals. Someone who is highly self-aware knows where they are headed and why. A highly self-aware leader has a greater likelihood of successful transitioning than one who is low on self-awareness. Without self-awareness, learning and development translate into mindless reactions to the environment. *A lack of self-awareness is THE single biggest factor in leadership derailment* (Goleman, 1998)
2. *Mental agility.* People high on mental agility are comfortable with newness, complexity and are mentally sharp. They are seen as inquisitive and curious. They love to delve deeply into problems, thoroughly analysing them through contrast, parallels and searching for meaning. They can get to the essence of issues quicker than most others can. Additionally, they can help other people think through their challenges quickly (Eichinger, Lombardo and Raymond, 2004).
3. *Emotional maturity.* Emotionally mature individuals have the innate ability to handle crises without unnecessarily escalating them. Instead of seeking to blame someone else for their problems or behaviour, emotionally mature people seek to fix the problem or behaviour. They accept accountability for their own actions. They collaborate to find solutions to problems (Judge, 2017).

The behavioural shifts required to move to emotional maturity are illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1** Moving to emotional maturity

## Building emotional resilience

1. Have a sense of gratitude about your life and what you've accomplished to get to where you are, acknowledging the obstacles you've had to overcome.
2. Reframe the challenges in your life as opportunities for self-development. We learn from hardship and pain, rather than when life is easy.
3. Take full responsibility; move from blame to accountability; no "shame, poor me" stories.
4. Forgive yourself first; release the guilt, then forgive others; don't bear grudges.
5. Decide quickly, avoid dwelling on weighty issues. Take action and free yourself from procrastination and inaction.
6. Be forward-looking and proactive; ask "what is the right thing to do now" rather than "who did it" (adapted from Neill, 2014).

## Conclusion

In an era of unprecedented business challenge, these skills matter like never before. These next-level leadership skills are rich in emotional competence, and are the break-through ingredient for leaders committed to sustainable success.

## References

- Eichinger, R., Lombardo, M., & Raymond, C. (2004). *FYI for Talent Management*. Minnesota: Lominger
- Goleman, D. (1998). *Working with Emotional Intelligence*: USA: Bantam Publishing
- Judge, M. (2017). *Why emotional maturity and emotional intelligence are important for healthy*

*relationships*. *The Root Internet Blog*, 5 December. <https://www.theroot.com/why-emotional-maturity-and-emotional-intelligence-are-i-1821030316>

Lombardo, M.M., & Eichinger, R.W. (2001). *The Leadership Machine*. Architecture to Develop Leaders for Any Future . Korn Ferry: ebook

Neill, C (2014). *10 Personal Habits of Resilient People*. <https://www.slideshare.net/cuchullainn/resilience-30228567>

Stout-Rostron, S., & Taylor, M. (2020). *Next-Level Leadership*. Team Coaching Workbook.

Zolli, A. (2012). *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back*. Kindle Edition. London: Headline Publishing.

## **Authors' biographical note**

Dr Sunny Stout-Rostron and Michael Taylor are directors of People Quotient (PQ) (Pty) Ltd, a consultancy specialising in the design and implementation of processes that shift organisational culture and leadership behaviour.

## **Authors' contact details**

sunny@people-quotient.com

michael@people-quotient.com