

Time to step up

When it comes to putting your best foot forward, embrace your strengths and let go of that which you can't control, writes organisational psychologist

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In a recent case, I worked with an ambitious partner who was struggling to present to her board. Concerned that her opinions would be dismissed or deemed inappropriate, this talented professional doubted her capacity to handle potential pushback. She used to hold back valuable contributions for fear of risking credibility and this had a significant effect on her executive presence and perceived status.

In fact, her boardroom silence elicited the opposite outcome to the one she wanted. Worse still, it was self-perpetuating. Via a process of reframing and practice she was able to recognise that, although she could never truly control the board's response, there were many other areas she could proactively influence, such as her own responses to challenging questions.

While attending board meetings is unlikely to ever be her favourite pursuit, the partner's presence rose dramatically once she focused on her areas of influence, recognised her capacity to create certain outcomes, and let go of ones she couldn't affect.

Resilience, also known as mental flexibility, is an individual's ability to quickly adapt and recover from stressful situations. Resilient people are better able to maintain poise and a healthy level of physical and psychological wellness. They tend to approach the

world with a positive, optimistic, flexible, and adaptive outlook. Less resilient people tend to dwell on problems, feel overwhelmed, and use unhealthy coping tactics. They can even feel anxious or depressed.

It's hard to talk about resilience without referring to stress. Psychologists Yerkes and Dodson suggest that moderately increased stress improves performance. For example, a mild adrenaline rush before an important meeting helps focus attention and drive outcomes. However, excessive stressors can diminish optimal performance, and the more complex the demands, the more significant this gets.

"Complexity" is in the mind of the beholder and different people display varying responses to the same scenario, often based on their interpretation. For example, an associate expecting a poor outcome from a meeting is more likely to feel stressed than if they anticipate a positive outcome. Such expectations impact resilience and are a product of personality, experience, and emotional make up.

Fortunately, shifting one's interpretation of events can help develop a more resilient style. For example, focusing on solving issues within one's power, rather than dwelling on matters out of one's hands, can be hugely beneficial. Often referred to as having an "internal locus of control", individuals

with this type of thinking essentially believe they generally have control over what happens to them and proactively seek solutions to problems.

Conversely, reactive people can believe life is controlled by factors outside their influence. Consequently, they don't believe their actions are likely to make a difference. A good example of this is when receiving performance feedback – some view their own actions as instrumental in achieving results (whether good or poor), whereas others may place responsibility of outcomes on external forces. The former are more likely to accept praise as due and also tackle their shortcomings. They tend to present as self-directed, persistent, co-operative, and willing to take considered risks to achieve results.

So, while it's a truism that there are things we can't change, one way of building resilience is to develop a better awareness of our sphere of influence and focus our attention on the things we can control. **LSJ**



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