



Building Resilience in Times of Crisis

by Melaina Spitzer

Have you ever wondered what causes some people who have limited resources to thrive while others become utterly defeated? Chances are, the distinguishing factor is resilience. But what, exactly, does resilience mean? Fred Luthans, an expert in organisational behaviour, describes resilience as “the developable capacity to rebound or bounce back from adversity, conflict, and failure or even positive events, progress, and increased responsibility.”¹ Resilience is also about adaptation, as in “the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully.”² Resilience necessitates mastery of our bodies, our thoughts, and our behaviours. I define resilience as the ability to reboot your brain, cultivating the mindset and practices to move you forward through times of change and challenge.

As we all adjust to a changing landscape and a new normal in our personal and professional lives, it is imperative that we each develop an increased capacity to thrive in the face of adversity. This can be done one of two ways: unconsciously, through painful and time-exhaustive trial and error; or consciously, through deliberate cultivation of our own resilience. Beyond personal considerations, resilience is the distinguishing factor that will allow our businesses and communities to bounce back and thrive in unprecedented times.

Resilience can be built on three distinct levels:

- 1. Individual Resilience:** Research in this area considers how we can “look inward at ways we can better harness our natural human resources and adapt to the environment.”³ How do we as individuals and leaders employ both micro-resilience and macro-resilience strategies to adapt and overcome a crisis? Micro-resilience refers to making minor shifts to our daily habits for major energy and productivity boosts in the short term, while macro-resilience habits give us increased energy and better health in the long term.³
- 2. Organisational Resilience:** How do organisations develop a proactive approach, dynamic and agile leadership, responsiveness to change, and a strong corporate culture while keeping focused and maintaining a long-term view?⁴
- 3. Community Resilience:** How do we build and use community resources to thrive in the midst of change? (As an example, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Canadians have created a movement called “caremongering” to spread acts of kindness.)⁵

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—Melaina Spitzer

Staying Afloat in the Storm

Where to begin? The best place to start building resilience—no matter your job, industry, or location—is at the individual level. As individuals, we can practice cultivating the mindset and practices necessary to become more resilient. Imagine you’ve fallen overboard on a boating trip, and the waves are high.

You’re relieved that you’re wearing a life vest, but you know you have to inflate it to stay afloat. There’s a critical amount of air you need to blow into your vest to keep yourself above the waterline. Implementing resilience practices is like blowing air into your life vest. You have to take action to stay afloat.

You also have to cultivate a resilience mindset to keep perspective during trying times. If you get pushed under by a big wave (think: a crisis), the last thing you want to do is panic. Developing a resilience mindset will help you keep calm, get real about what you need to do, keep perspective on which way is up if you’re tumbling under the wave, and be creative about how to get back to shore.

If you’re a leader, parent, or caregiver, the plot thickens. Imagine your team (or children) are in the water with you. If they’re depending on you to keep them afloat, you will need extra air in your life vest. If they’re wearing life vests, you will need to make sure your vest is inflated first, then teach them the mindset and practices necessary so they can inflate their own life vests. The more responsibility we have, the more skilled we must become at resilience.

The Road Map to Resilience

How do we get there? Just like many things, resilience is a journey, not a destination—a practice we must incorporate into our daily life if we want it to stick. There are three key steps to building resilience:

Step 1: Reboot Your Brain. Research shows that the higher functioning part of our brain gets taken offline when we are stressed or confronted with a crisis. Step 1 walks you through the neuroscience behind this crash and provides simple actions you can take to get your brain back online and functioning optimally.

Step 2: Develop a Resilience Mindset. That which we believe has a direct impact on the outcomes we experience. In her seminal book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Carol Dweck shares her research on the growth mindset, which is “based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts, your strategies, and help from others.”⁶

Understanding the plasticity of our brains, the extraordinary capacity to create new neurons and new neural pathways, means we can actually reprogram our thinking toward a resilience mindset. Step 2 presents four key elements to a Resilience Mindset as well as practices you can adopt so that you can thrive no matter what adversity comes your way.

Step 3: Cultivate Your Resilience Practices. Once you’ve learned to reboot your brain and shift your mindset, it’s time to put what you’ve learned into practice. In Step 3, your first challenge will be to create your Revolutionary Well-Being Plan, choosing from a menu of practices that support physical, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being. Next, you’ll create a support structure—your Resilience Team—that will set you up for success so that you can stay on track with your reboot, mindset shift, and well-being practices.

Action Steps to Reboot Your Brain:

- Breathe—regulate your breath
- Change your immediate setting or environment
- Hydrate and nourish your body
- Visualize a peaceful setting
- Stretch and move your body
- Journal to unburden your mind
- Connect with someone or something that brings you joy



Step 1: Reboot Your Brain

The Neuroscience behind Resilience

The prefrontal cortex (PFC) is the part of our brain we use to make every decision, from granular/analytical problem-solving to strategic visioning, goal setting, and planning. Dan Siegel, neuropsychiatrist and executive director of Mindsight Institute, and David Rock, CEO of NeuroLeadership Group, created a model called “The Healthy Mind Platter.” Based on extensive neuroscience research, the model reveals seven essential mental activities we need to keep our PFC at full function.⁷

While we rely heavily on the PFC in the modern workplace, it often gets taken offline when we are stressed. Daniel Goleman coined this phenomenon as the “amygdala hijack” in his book *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*.⁸

The amygdala is a tiny almond-shaped part of the brain that triggers the flight, fight, or freeze response. Located in the emotion center of the brain, it kicks off the flood of stress hormones into our body when we perceive a threat. The problem is, an amygdala hijack diverts our attention from tasks we need or want to focus on, reshuffles our memory hierarchy to focus on the perceived threat, and makes us fall back on “overlearned” responses from our childhood. Often, Goleman says, this can lead us to “do or say things we may regret later.”⁹

When we catch ourselves being rude, or are unable to focus or think, lose the capability for emotional or physical regulation, or fail to stop ourselves from doing things we know are bad for us, we don’t realize it’s our PFC failing as it is taken over by our reptilian brain. The amygdala hijack takes down the PFC with almost no warning. It kicks in only when we reach our limit. We often don’t get any indicators until we are behaving in a way that we did not consciously choose and do not condone. For some people, there’s a little bit of warning—they are more sensitive to noise and light—but most are unaware of these signs.¹⁰

Neuroscience and coaching expert **Madeleine Homan Blanchard** says we can combat this by applying self-care techniques in those high-stress moments. “If you have five minutes before your next call, you’re better off getting up and taking a walk or having a glass of water or a snack than writing that email. When in doubt, choose to take care of yourself.”¹⁰

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—Madeleine Homan
Blanchard

Step 2: Develop a Resilience Mindset

Trying to build resilience without changing your mindset is like building a house of cards. The resilience mindset is the glue that holds the cards together. Only a shift in our beliefs will allow us to sustain the behaviour changes we need to be resilient over time.

Dr. Vicki Halsey, best-selling author (*Brilliance by Design*) and expert in leadership and applied learning, explains the connection between beliefs and behaviours. “Beliefs drive behaviour to give us an outcome over time. Let’s say I want to eat healthier. If I try to change my behaviour—for example, eating more kale and salad—I can will myself to do that for a few days. But because I haven’t changed my current belief about food (the harder I work, the more I should be able to eat anything I want), that flawed belief will override my behaviour, and I won’t get the results I want over time. The belief that would serve me better is the harder I work, the healthier I must eat to sustain my energy. That’s the mindset that will drive behaviour change.”¹¹

Similarly, if we want to build resilience, we must modify our beliefs (build our resilience mindset) to create sustained behaviour change (cultivate our resilience practices) in order to get the results we want in the face of adversity. This principle is an adaptation of Hyrum Smith’s Reality Model from his book *What Matters Most*.¹²

The Four Components of a Resilience Mindset

In her article “How Resilience Works” from the *Harvard Business Review’s* Emotional Intelligence Series: Resilience, journalist and editor Diane Coutu highlights some important trends in research on resilient individuals. She identified three characteristics agreed upon by most resilience theorists as essential: “a staunch acceptance of reality; a deep belief, often buttressed by strongly held values, that life is meaningful; and an uncanny ability to improvise.”¹³ Each of these characteristics requires a unique mindset. In our research at Blanchard®, we have identified a fourth critical mindset for building resilience as a part of our Leading People Through Change® program: the Change Leader Mindset. It helps leaders guide their teams to success by applying courage, curiosity, agility, and grit.¹⁴

Mindset Shift 1: Realism Saves Lives

Resilience can stem from optimism “only as long as such optimism doesn’t distort your sense of reality,” says Coutu, citing an interview with a US Navy admiral who was tortured by the Viet Cong for eight years. When management researcher and writer Jim Collins asked about the people who didn’t make it out of the camps, Admiral Jim Stockdale said, “Oh that’s easy. It was the optimists.”¹⁵

It turns out that denial is not a very effective coping mechanism. Optimism can blind us to a less-than-acceptable reality. The first step in cultivating resilience from realism is to really understand the truth of the situation. The next step is to accept it and take action based upon the reality, not the fantasy.

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—Dr. Vicki Halsey

*Strong values
infuse an
environment
with meaning.*

—Diane Coutu

Action Steps for Getting Real:

- **Take an inventory of your current state and assess the possible paths life may take.** Ask yourself: Do I fully understand the reality of this situation? Have I (or my organisation) accepted this reality? Are the decisions we are making based on this reality? What other possible outcomes might be in store for us if we take different actions?
- **Survey, then tackle your tolerations.** What are the things you're putting up with, letting slide, or overlooking in life that are a liability to you and that keep you from being your most resilient self? In their book *Leverage Your Best, Ditch the Rest*, Madeleine Homan Blanchard and Scott Blanchard describe tolerations as barnacles on the hull of a ship: "A few are not a problem, but layers of them seriously impede the vessel's speed and seaworthiness. What starts out as a hardly noticeable blip slowly becomes an annoying inconvenience, which over time turns into a major problem, undercutting productivity and happiness." If you get real about your tolerations, and then tackle them, you'll have a lot more energy when things get tough.¹⁶
- **Prepare for contingencies.** Create a plan for how you will respond to possible situations that may arise. (A select few of us were prepared with enough toilet paper when the panic buying began during the COVID-19 pandemic. I rest my case.)
- **Use worst-case-scenario thinking.** If your worst-case scenario is losing your job, imagine which steps you would take if it happened: Would you apply for unemployment, move in with a family member to save on expenses, try to find a new job?
- **Be authentic and forthright about where you are.** People are usually ready to lend a hand if you let them know you need support. If you're a leader, your team members will appreciate your candor and transparency in the long run—it will help them prepare and consider their options.
- **Create a structure that supports your new normal.** If you are aware and accept that change is happening, you can set yourself up for success. For example, if your new normal is working from home, create structures for your well-being in a new environment and get your family members on board.

Mindset Shift 2: Search for Meaning out of Hardship

Some situations may seem insurmountable or meaningless. Why so much suffering? It is easy during times of change and crisis, when our personal concerns kick into high gear, for us to throw our hands up in desperation and ask, "Why me?" or "Why us?"

Perhaps no one knew more about this challenge than Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor E. Frankl. Realizing he had to find some purpose for himself in order to survive the concentration camps, Frankl focused on "imagining himself giving a lecture after the war on the psychology of the concentration camp." Frankl later founded a humanistic therapy technique called "meaning therapy," and his theory laid the foundation for much of resilience coaching in business today.¹⁷

In addition to focusing on creating meaning, when building a more resilient organisation, it is imperative to have a strong value system. "Strong values infuse an environment with meaning," explains Coutu, "because they offer ways to interpret and shape events."¹⁸

At Blanchard®, one of our values is Kenship, a term defined on our website, kenblanchard.com: “We value Ken Blanchard’s spirit of compassion, humility, and abundance. Kenship describes our commitment to create connected relationships, serve others, and have fun.”¹⁹

Action Steps for Creating Meaning out of Hardship:

- First and foremost, allow yourself and others to **feel all the emotions associated with the grief of the hardship you’re going through**. One of the most valuable lessons I’ve learned as a coach is not to try to coach on top of emotion. Emotion is natural and must be expressed. As a leader, it is important for you to make space to ask about and listen to the concerns of your team members. People go through predictable stages of concern. In order to move through those concerns, people need to feel they are heard and get some of their questions answered.
- **Use opposite thinking to identify silver linings**, positive outcomes, learnings, or personal or societal transformations that may come out of this hardship.
- **Set clear and compelling goals** based on something you find meaningful.
- **Spend time visualising a future** in which these goals have been achieved. Draw an image of this future and post it somewhere to remind you of what you’re working toward.
- **Identify your values**, whether as an individual or an organisation, and choose to take actions that are aligned with those values.

Mindset Shift 3: Think Like an Inventor

Now that you’ve assessed reality and made meaning, it’s time to get creative and bring in your ingenuity! In Blanchard’s Self Leadership program, lead author Susan Fowler explains that not only can your assumed constraints prevent you from producing your best work, but they can also defeat you before you even try. False assumptions can hold you back from setting goals or believing you can achieve them.²⁰ Instead, think like an inventor!

Action Steps to Create Ingenuity:

- **Make a list of your assumed constraints**. See if you can identify all the beliefs that are holding you back.
- **Flip each constraint to a positive statement** that reflects a more empowering belief. Make sure this belief is something you can get behind and that it moves you in the direction you want to go, even if it is uncomfortable.
- **Commit to actions** that align with your new positive beliefs and create an action plan.
- **Brainstorm opportunities** that could be created from the current challenge. Ask: What haven’t we thought of yet? Practice putting all the ideas—including the ones that seem crazy—out on the table.
- **Eliminate fear of failure**. Ask: What would we do if we knew we could not fail?
- **Test a pilot idea**. Pick one of the ideas from your brainstorming session and agree to conduct an experiment by implementing it without attachment to having it succeed. Make sure you’re using an iterative process where you get feedback. Incorporate it, and any learnings you might have gleaned, to improve on your idea.

- **Play an improv game.** To hone your improvisation skills and get you thinking on your feet, enlist your colleagues or friends to engage in a game of "freeze tag". I distinctly remember this improv game from theater camp as being one of the funniest and most challenging experiences of my teen drama career. Look it up and try it out on your next Zoom call—I promise you won't be disappointed. Improv games help us get more comfortable with coming up with ideas on the fly. They also bring much-needed laughter, which contributes to our well-being and releases stress.

Mindset Shift 4: The Change Leader Mindset

Whether you are the head of your household, a manager or team leader at work, or the CEO of an organization, leading in the face of change can be a challenging task. Pat Zigarmi and Judd Hoekstra, coauthors of Blanchard's Leading People Through Change® program, identify four qualities of the high-involvement change leader mindset that can help you navigate through the waves of any change. The following qualities and behaviours are key factors in developing the resilience mindset.²¹

Courage—Strength in the face of challenges and uncertainty

Behaviours to build courage:

- Move toward what makes you uncomfortable or creates a sense of vulnerability.
- Tell the truth about *what is* and *what needs to change*.
- Change your approach to change—share control by involving others in change making.

Curiosity—A strong desire to know, learn, or understand something

Behaviours to build curiosity:

- Ask about what you don't fully understand.
- Express interest in others' experiences, opinions, feelings, and well-being.
- Demonstrate that you value others by involving them in the change process and hearing their voices.

Agility—The ability to think, understand, and move quickly

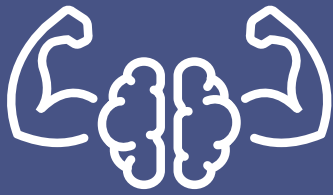
Behaviours to build agility:

- Recognize the need to change and act quickly.
- Remain open-minded when things don't go as planned.
- Anticipate and flexibly respond to others' concerns.

Grit—The ability to withstand discomfort

Behaviours to build grit:

- Demonstrate passion for achieving long-term results.
- Persevere in the face of discomfort and challenges.
- Demonstrate resolve in seeing things through.



Courage Tip:

Practice being forthright by sharing a piece of helpful and honest feedback.



Curiosity Tip:

Ask open-ended questions to learn new points of view and build community.



Agility Tip:

Bring the team together to ideate solutions to potential scenarios.



Grit Tip:

Practice something uncomfortable or challenging every day.

Step 3: Cultivate Your Resilience Practices

In addition to shifting your mindset, it is important to develop the resilience practices that will have you taking actions that produce results. The good news is that resilience can be learned. And one of the best ways to learn is to develop your Revolutionary Well-Being Plan and get your Resilience Team on board to help you achieve it.

Your Revolutionary Well-Being Plan

Humans have been striving for well-being for centuries. The ancient Quechua term “sumak kawsay,” meaning “good living” or “good life,” has permeated indigenous cultures in South America for thousands of years.²²

Civilizations across the globe have developed and passed down wisdom about their unique conception of well-being. While well-being can be a highly subjective idea that includes everything from the physical to the financial to the spiritual, we will focus for the purposes of this exercise on four core areas of well-being. Consider these action steps when building out your personal Revolutionary Well-Being Plan, and feel free to add your own:

Physical Well-Being Action Steps

- Sleep 7–8 hours/night
- Prepare and eat healthy foods
- Take a walk around the block
- Practice chair yoga or stretching
- Hydrate regularly
- Exercise daily

Social Well-Being Action Steps

- Call a friend or loved one
- Set up an accountability partnership
- Join a virtual or in-person meet-up centered on your interests
- Schedule team connection time
- Participate in a virtual happy hour or dance party with friends
- Volunteer with a service project you love

Emotional Well-Being Action Steps

- Practice gratitude
- Monitor negative self-talk
- Write and repeat affirmations
- Schedule regular downtime
- Talk through your feelings with a confidant
- Set aside worry
- Meditate daily
- Journal
- Connect with a therapist

Spiritual Well-Being & Purpose Action Steps

- Set motivating goals
- Create sacred reflection time
- Connect with a spiritual or purpose-driven community
- Align your schedule with activities connected to your purpose
- Ask: How can I pivot to be more in alignment with my values?
- Connect with nature
- Partner with a coach

Your Resilience Team

One of the greatest mistakes we can make is to believe that we have to take on our challenges alone. Research on the impact of professional coaching shows that having support structures in place—including people who can help keep you inspired, connected to your purpose, and accountable—goes a long way toward creating behaviour change and building resilience.²³

Wouldn't it be great to have your very own Resilience Team to support you as you put your Brain Reboot techniques, Mindset Practices, and Revolutionary Well-Being Plan into action? Make it a reality with these simple steps:

1. Identify the top three people in your life who would best support you in building resilience.
2. Choose three more people who could serve as your backup team (think ready and willing on the bench at a sports game) in case you can't reach your top three.
3. Decide on the role you'd like each person to play based on what you need and what their specific strengths are.
 - Coach
 - Cheerleader
 - Confidant
 - Listener
 - Accountability partner
 - Creative collaborator
 - Mentor
4. Contact your Resilience Team candidates and invite them to the team! Explain the specific role you'd like them to play and ask them if they're willing to support you. It's okay if this feels uncomfortable at first—remember, most people get great fulfillment out of providing support to others.

For additional resources or support, check out Blanchard *LeaderChat's* "Ask Madeleine" column, or visit Blanchard Coaching Services to learn about the impact of corporate coaching and get connected with a Blanchard ICF-certified coach.

Set Sail

Choose how you will reboot your brain, develop a resilience mindset, revolutionize your well-being, and onboard your Resilience Team. As you navigate uncharted waters along with the rest of us, use these tools to inflate your resilience life vest and share them with colleagues, teammates, and loved ones who may benefit from Building Resilience.

About the Author:

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With more than 15 years of training, coaching, and facilitation experience, Melaina Spitzer brings strategy, creativity, and connection to her role as a Consulting Partner for Blanchard®. Melaina specializes in innovative program design, workplace resilience, leadership development, cultural transformation, conflict resolution, and change management.

*Alone we can
do so little;
together we can
do so much.*

—Helen Keller

Blanchard® is a global leader in leadership development, consulting, and coaching. For more than 40 years, Blanchard has partnered with organisations to maximize individual achievement and organisational performance—bringing measurable progress and true transformation. Blanchard’s SLII® is the global leadership model of choice, powering inspired leaders for more than 10,000 organisations worldwide. Blanchard also offers a suite of award-winning solutions through flexible delivery modalities to meet the specific needs of clients and learners.

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