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# How Resilient Leaders Think



By Rachael Noyes , INSEAD Knowledge

## Can you encounter adverse circumstances and emerge stronger from them?

*“For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.” - Shakespeare*

Resilience as a career concept is having a kind of **heyday**, with good reason. Flung into new ways of working, both at home and in newly dangerous roles, people all over the world were forced into adapting to the pandemic and economic crisis while doing their jobs.

Confronted with the continued flow of bad news, some kept a bit more of themselves intact. The concept of resilience isn't just about being knocked down and getting back up again. In a recent “Navigating the Turbulence of Covid-19” webinar, INSEAD Professor of Management Practice **Narayan Pant** spoke about how leadership resilience is the ability to emerge stronger from inevitable adverse circumstances.

Describing a former colleague who had weathered many organisational storms and might be seen as a kind of “comeback kid” because he lost job

after job whilst engaging in unhealthy behaviour, Pant said of this man, “This isn’t resilience, this is barely survival.” Getting back up again without having learned anything from that knock is survival, not resilience.

For Pant, leadership resilience starts with the self. He said, “The truth is leadership has three domains to it. First, you lead yourself. Then you lead teams. And then you lead organisations. The right way, I believe, to think about this is in the form of an inverted pyramid with leading yourself at the bottom of that pyramid. If you're not able to lead yourself, then you can throw away the idea of leading teams and leading other people.”

## **Resilience, choice and getting out of your own way**

We need resilience because adverse circumstances aren’t rare occurrences. Pant cited [Black Monday, the 1997 Asian financial crisis, 9/11, the dot-com bubble, SARS](#) and [the 2008 financial crisis](#) as examples of how often these moments of utter turmoil can shake us.

According to Pant, our mental preparation for crises boils down to two responses: “If you're like a lot of the leaders I meet, you do one of two things. One, you try really hard to stop this bad stuff from happening. In fact, many of the people I know consider this their job description: ‘to make sure I minimise the impact of bad stuff happening by planning for all the bad stuff that can happen.’ The second thing people do is they try to ignore what might happen if they don't manage to stop the crisis.”

Of course, stopping the pandemic or pretending it’s not there is not leadership. This is where resilience comes in – dealing with negative thoughts. Pant took the webinar participants through several exercises to help them “get to a place where you’re able and willing to work on raising your own resilience”. He didn’t promise resilience, instead he described a process.

Negative thoughts and the way we react to them are within our control. Also, our more exuberant responses to positive thoughts need to be addressed with a modicum of neutrality. Understanding this is important in the practice Pant described. The biggest obstacle, he explained, is ourselves and our own deeply established patterns of thinking and behaving.

“It’s quite likely that you will get in your own way,” he said. “One of the first things that psychotherapists do when they work with their patients who are

displaying say unproductive or dysfunctional behaviours is they try and find out how those behaviours are helping their patients.”

The unproductive behaviour was useful at one time but isn't any longer. To practise resilience, Pant suggested that we stop the mental hamster wheel and be open to a new process.

### **Practise, practise, practise**

Mindfulness is key to creating resilience, not only mindfulness meditation per se, but an awareness of thoughts. Pant explained that “meditation has relevance to building resilience”.

Citing Hamlet, Pant said that the understanding that there is nothing inherently good or bad about thoughts “gives us a lever and that lever is our thoughts and the choice in how we see them”.

Traditional cognitive behavioural approaches to managing thoughts look at the thoughts and beliefs that intervene between an external stimulus and our reactions. For example, an external stimulus may be the discovery that we won't make our numbers this quarter. This creates anxiety and dysfunctional behaviour. However, the anxiety arises not because of the numbers alone but the thoughts that intervene in between.

Examples of thoughts include: “What will my colleagues think of me if I don't make my numbers?”, “If I don't make my numbers, I could be at risk of losing my job” or “If I lose my job, it will be a disaster.” Having identified these thoughts, you can reduce their validity, thereby reducing their effect. However, this works best when you have time and the help of a therapist who helps you with it.

An alternative is to just watch the thoughts. See them as objects created by the mind and view them as if they were projected on a screen in front of you. One way to do this is to imagine your thoughts were (someone else's) quarrelling kids. You just observe them, without getting attached to any single thought.

Pant said, “It's important to be cognisant of the cacophony inside because it's those thoughts, even though you may not be aware of them, that are driving your reactions. When you make your thoughts salient, you reduce their power over you – defusing them – by observing them as if they were a separate entity.” This isn't natural and takes practice. But with practice

comes rewards. “It's a bit of an exponential curve. You struggle with it for a little bit, but then it's quite easy to see thoughts as something that are external to you.”

Pant described a recent personal example of resilience building during the recent “circuit breaker” in Singapore. Gyms were not allowed to open so he started running, which he generally doesn't enjoy. “As I run, the thought very quickly comes into my head that says, ‘Okay, so this is good. You've run enough.’ However, I learned to pay attention to my breath and my muscles and discovered that they were not stressed at all. So, it was only my mind that was talking to me, for some unfathomable reason.”

Each run was an opportunity for Pant to practise observing his thoughts and being present. That practice, in turn, enhances the ability to apply resilient, detached thinking to other occasions: “If you're going to have difficult conversations about things of considerable salience or significance, you can apply habits developed in other contexts, because you've practised them.”

One way to rethink the way you think about thoughts is how you express them. “Instead of saying, ‘I think we might miss our numbers this quarter’, articulate it as ‘I'm having the thought that we might miss our numbers.’ This might sound artificial, but it has a very powerful effect. It articulates the fact that this thought is a thing. It's not you.”

Of course, none of this means we should not act in the external world. Rather, putting some distance between your thoughts and your response improves your decision making by making it more rational. Pant said, “Of course we must try and control our circumstances the best that we can...In addition, we must regulate ourselves when sh\*t happens, as it inevitably will.”

## **Continuing resilience building**

“Practise developing a productive attitude when things don't turn out the way in which you expect,” Pant said. “That's the core of resilience building – an attitude that comes from the ability to manage and regulate the way your thoughts impact you.” Further exercises are available on Pant's [website](#).

Developing a leadership resilience practice allows managers to model resilience for their teams, even in times of crisis. “If you can demonstrate that sense that you're comfortable with yourself, others will be comfortable

with themselves,” he said.

*INSEAD’s webinar series “Navigating the Turbulence of Covid-19” features expert input on key issues surrounding pandemic control and current countermeasures around the world. Watch them [here](#).*

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##### **Covid-19**

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