

Resilience, Realistic Optimism, and Social Intelligence: Anchors for Managers' Career Success

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Abstract

Effective managers develop skill sets that enhance performance throughout their careers and translate into being successful. Three anchor skill sets crucial to a manager's long-term career success are resilience, realistic optimism, and social intelligence. Resilience furnishes managers with the mental toughness and skills to overcome the adversities which they encounter. Realistic optimism provides a mindset and skills for managers to always remain positive and place challenges into the proper perspective in the context of solving them. Social intelligence represents a skill set managers can employ to establish positive and productive relationships with others and work collaboratively with them to maximize everyone's productivity. Social intelligence also prompts positive feelings and emotions in managers throughout their careers that motivate them to want to work with others to solve problems which they could not solve alone.

Keywords: resilience, realistic optimism, social intelligence, managers' career success

1.0 Context

Managers need to consciously and systematically focus on skill sets and competencies that have lasting *added value* essential to career successes. Resilience, realistic optimism, and social intelligence are concepts that, if mastered by managers, will significantly contribute to successful careers (e.g., work productivity, job satisfaction, and career advancement).

Resilience skills provide the attributes and motivation for managers to reach deep inside themselves for inner strength to “keep going” and continue to be productive when events and happenings go against them in the form of adversities. Realistic optimism is an inner mindset of managers that keeps them motivated to continually strive to be productive, achieve goals, and maintain a positive long-term perspective regarding career accomplishments. Social intelligence skills provide managers with the where-with-all to enlist the support of others in the work environment to collaborate with them to achieve work targets that lead to career successes. Social intelligence is predicated on building positive and supportive relationships with others that foster a productive work environment, enhance job satisfaction, and prompt managers to have rewarding feelings and emotions about themselves and others.

2.0 Resilience¹

Sutcliffe and Vogus (2010) observe that resilience includes the ability of managers to positively adapt to hardships, bounce back from challenging situations and feel strengthened and more resourceful as a result of experiencing such situations. Resilient managers have the “ability to recover quickly from setbacks and continue to pursue a vision of the future” (Kouzes & Posner, 2012, p. 207). Managers that are resilient understand that failure is not an endpoint, but the beginning of a challenge to apply objectivity to identify what prompted the situation accurately. If a manager cannot determine the exact causes of the adversity, it is difficult if not impossible to effectively deal with the situation. A manager's thinking style plays a major role in being resilient. The *explanatory style* of thinking represents how managers explain the “good and bad things” that happen to them. The three dimensions of the explanatory style of thinking are:

1. **Personal (“me or not me”)** – I caused the problem (me), or I did not cause the problem (not me).
 - Do you view an adverse situation or failure as your fault or caused by other people or circumstances beyond your control?
 - If the likely cause of an adverse situation or failure is ambiguous, do you assume you are to blame or that it was due to circumstances beyond your control?
2. **Permanent (“always or not always”)** – The problem situation is unchangeable (always) or can be changed (not always).
 - Do you perceive the causes of the adverse situation or failure to have a significant long-lasting or relatively temporary effect on you?
 - Do you view an adverse outcome or failure as the cause of a one-time misjudgment on your part or that your judgement is misguided in general and likely to negatively impact other tasks you undertake?
3. **Pervasive (“everything or not everything”)** – The problem situation undermines almost all areas of your life (everything) or just a few
 - When encountering an adverse situation or failure, do you assume that the result will impact all aspects of your life (even possibly your personal life) or be limited only to your work?
 - Does the impact of adversity or failure at work permeate all aspects of your job or is it limited to the particular situation and circumstances in which it occurred? (Seligman, 2002a, pp. 153-156; Luthans, Youssef-Morgan, & Avolio, 2015, p. 118).

The *me, always, everything* thinking manager believes that: (1) she/he caused the problem (me), (2) the problem is long lasting and unchangeable (always), and (3) the situation will undermine all aspects of his/her life (everything). A *not me, not always, not everything* manager thinks that: (1) other people or circumstances caused the problem (not me), (2) the problem is fleeting and changeable (not always), and (3) it will not impact all aspects of one’s life. To be resilient, managers should *not assume* the “me, always, everything” styles of thinking, but rather start from the point of the “not necessarily me, not always, not everything” perspective.

A manager must be open-minded, objective, and use the causal-analysis approach in studying the factors prompting the adversity or failure in the context of resilience. Learning from failures is crucial to a manager’s future success. To reduce the chance of future failures, managers must analyze how their beliefs or skill sets have been the cause of failures and learn from them. While not internalizing the failures, managers must identify what, if anything, they can change to avert future problems from becoming failures. Graham (2018) believes that “flexibility is the core of resilience” (p. 3).

The attuned manager understands that there can be a fine line between a challenge and an impossible situation. On occasion, a manager may mistakenly pursue an impossible situation that fails. This does not mean that the manager, per se, was a failure. It does mean that the manager must bounce back be resilient without curtailing her/his motivation to move on to other challenges. As the old adage goes, “This too will pass.”

A manager’s professional life, and a particular position in his/her career at a point in time, is a work in progress. Developing a “can do” perspective enables a manager to seek challenging opportunities, knowing that if adversity or even failure strikes, she/he will deal with it effectively (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). At times managers may need to *rein in their egos* to refrain from lashing out at others as a defense mechanism when a failure occurs.

Countu’s (2010) advice to managers regarding the application of resilience skills when encountering adversity or failure is to “coolly accept the harsh realities facing them” (p. 49). Managers need to find meaning in the situation by examining how this can be a learning experience while gaining insights for performing better in the future. Further, managers need to improvise by “putting resources to unfamiliar uses and imagining possibilities others don’t see” to salvage the situation, to the extent possible (Countu, 2010, pp. 49-51). Essentially, this means making the best of a bad situation. As Countu (2017) observes, “Resilience is something you realize you have *after* the fact, and a manager’s level of resilience is an excellent determinate of who succeeds and who fails” (pp. 6 & 8). Managers’ application of mental agility to counteract stress by consciously taking pauses to view what is happening from a neutral perspective is also important to their mental well-being and to maintaining a positive outlook (Bartz, & Bartz, 2017).

Durable inner strength is crucial to providing managers with mental resources such as determination and self-worth that aid in being resilient (Hanson, 2018, pp. 1-2). Hanson advocates managers learning from failures by knowing how to minimize trauma and maintain positive mental well-being through difficult work experiences.

Hanson's emphasis is supported by the positive psychology movement that stresses managers are nurturing their well-being which is defined as positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments (Seligman, 2018a).

The concept of *Grit*, popularized by Duckworth's book (2016) fits well with resilience because *perseverance* is one of Grit's major components, along with passion, effort, and goal setting. In the context of Grit, perseverance means managers demonstrate self-discipline and "stick-to-it-ness" to remain focused and *stay the course* when faced with adversity in goal accomplishment. This concept is supported by Blaine (2017) who advocates that passion represents how badly managers want to realize a goal and what efforts they are willing to put forth in overcoming challenges and difficulties to reach that goal.

As a component of Grit, passion plays an important role in managers being resilient. Specifically, if managers possess a strong emotional desire and commitment to fight through difficulties and not give up, they can bounce back from and overcome adversities. As depicted by Grit, effort means the resilient manager works diligently to find creative alternative solutions to overcome adversity and has positive mental energy and motivation to keep going persistently. Hanson (2018) includes "dogged, tough resourcefulness" as a key ingredient of Grit (p. 77). Anchor and Gielan (2017) remind managers that resilience is not just about enduring, but also encompasses recharging. Too often managers take the tough approach to resilience, meaning that they see no need to have a *recovery period* from time-to-time. As Anchor and Gielan (2017) observe, "The very lack of a recovery period dramatically holds back our collective ability to be resilient [over time] and successful" (p. 112).

3.0 Realistic Optimism²

Realistic optimism is a skill set that complements resilience. Optimism is future-oriented and means managers have positive attitudes that events will turn out well, even to the extent of being confident that such will be the case (Southwick & Charney, 2018). Optimism also includes managers accepting the past and not allowing previous unpleasant experiences to cloud expectations for the future. Appreciating living in the moment being mindful is also a part of the optimistic manager's thought and behavior processes (Positive Psychology Program, 2017).

The optimism of managers is not a fixed quantity because it can increase or decrease, depending on how information is processed and the context in which it is placed. Seligman (2002b) makes it clear that learned optimism is within reach of managers who are unduly influenced by its enemy pessimism. "Disputing pessimistic thoughts is the central skill of learned optimism" (Seligman, 2018b, p. 211).

Realistic optimism is managers paying close attention to negative information relevant to the problem at hand, but not remaining focused on it. Managers with such optimism apply problem-focused coping strategies and accept the realities of the situation they cannot control (Luthans, Youssef-Morgan, & Avolio, 2015). Realistic optimism means managers are possessing positive emotion and simultaneously applying realistic evaluation (Luthans, 2002). "Realistic optimism includes an evaluation of what one can and cannot accomplish in a particular situation and hence adds to one's [manager's] efficacy and hope" (Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007, p. 547). Managers possessing realistic optimism rapidly disengage from problems that are likely unsolvable, know when to cut their losses, and devote time and energy to solvable problems (Schneider, 2018).

Managers skilled at realistic optimism are acutely aware of avoiding optimistic bias that involves self-deception or convincing oneself of the desired belief without an objective reality check of all factors involved in a situation. Managers should feel confidently in control so that, when they do take on a task or project, their actions have a significant impact on the outcomes. They must be motivated and willing to fight for whatever it takes to realize the desired outcomes (Luthans, Youssef-Morgan, & Avolio, 2015).

Dweck's (2016) analysis of mindset is important to managers in the context of effectively practicing realistic optimism. Managers can allow pessimism to prevail by believing that events will usually go against them and that negative situations are unlikely to change (fixed mindset). Such pessimism prompts managers to distance themselves from the reality of problems through denial, escape, fatalism, and cognitive avoidance (Luthans, Youssef-Morgan, & Avolio, 2015). Or, managers can believe that events will turn out successfully (growth mindset) through close analysis, careful planning, and making proper adjustments during implementation. A manager's mindset going into a project significantly impacts its likelihood of success.

Gordon (2017) indicates that pessimistic managers give up because of the difficult struggle, negativity, frustration, fear, rejection, naysayers, and circumstances. Such managers also give up because they do not have the optimism, positivity, and confidence to keep moving forward. The philosophy of Blue Ocean Shift counters pessimism by advocating that managers should “see opportunities where before only constraints were visible” (Kim & Mauborgne, 2017, p. 54). Shores’ (2017) ideology in Conscious Communications is relevant to managers combating pessimism. Shores (2017) states that “Conscious Communications is a simple process that consists of eliminating negative language, using words that work, and focusing on what you want” (p. 4).

Managers who are realistic optimists have a sense of self-control that leads to enhanced confidence and the motivation to create solutions for overcoming difficult situations. They create solutions by expanding their fields of vision in which opportunities exist to overcome adversity, inspire and support others, and work hard to implement solutions (Kim & Mauborgne, 2017). These managers seek out what is needed to flourish and achieve goals (Charan, Willigan, & Giffen, 2017). Some realistic, optimistic managers adhere to the adage “Hope for the best but prepare for the worst” (Collingwood, 2016, p. 3).

4.0 Social Intelligence³

Gardner (1993) explains social intelligence as one broad concept that he terms *interpersonal intelligence*, which is the capacity to notice distinction among others’ moods, temperaments, motivations, and intentions as well as their desires. Lievens and Chang (2010) break down social intelligence into two factors: (1) cognitive (also called crystalized), which is the *knowledge to understand* how to decode verbal and non-verbal behaviors of others; and (2) behavioral (also called fluid), which is *taking actions* on the cognitive knowledge in a given situation. Goleman (2006) has a similar holistic conceptualization and lumps the ingredients of social intelligence into the two broad categories of *social awareness* (what we sense about others) and *social facility* (what we do behaviorally with knowledge of this social awareness).

The following basic skills pertain to social intelligence for managers effectively utilizing social intelligence based on the aforementioned overarching concepts: (1) empathy; (2) attunement; (3) organizational awareness; (4) influence; (5) personal connection; (6) development of others; (7) organizing groups; (8) teamwork; (9) inspiration; (10) social analysis; (11) situational awareness; (12) social expressiveness; (13) presence; (14) negotiating solutions; (15) authenticity; (16) clarity; (17) social sensitivity; (18) knowledge of social roles, rules, and scripts; and (19) social control.

- *Empathy* means being sensitive to the needs of others, demonstrating an effort to understand their particular situations, building connections between self and others, and identifying what motivates them. The focus is on establishing rapport.
- *Attunement* means listening carefully to determine how others feel and connecting with their moods. This includes positive communication through non-verbal behaviors.
- *Organizational awareness* means understanding the social networks in the work environment; being cognizant of their apparent intended purpose, meaning, and unspoken norms; and appreciating the culture and values of the organization and work unit.
- *Influence* is getting support from others by appealing to their interests, thereby persuading them to be engaged in discussions and openly expose their thoughts. This is especially important to develop in the individuals who are well-respected by their peers.
- *Personal connection* is recognizing and responding properly to people’s feelings and concerns to establish “connectedness” that results in positive relationships.
- *Development of others* means demonstrating interest and providing meaningful feedback that is helpful to them. This involves the commitment of personal time and energy in compassionate coaching, mentoring, and assisting others.
- *Organizing groups* is initiating and coordinating the efforts of a network of people (e.g., groups, task forces, committees, and social media linkage).
- *Teamwork* involves providing psychological support for members and creating a cooperative spirit in which everyone participates for the common good of the team. This includes providing support and demonstrating a personal interest in each team member.
- *Inspiration* is communicating a compelling vision, building pride, establishing a positive emotional tone, and motivating individuals to *be their best*.

- *Social analysis* is being able to identify and have insights about people's feelings, motives, and concerns that can be used to develop rapport and intimacy with others to build positive relationships.
- *Situational awareness* means utilizing skills in observing and understanding the context of a situation and the ways it dominates or shapes the behaviors of people, including *hidden agendas*.
- *Social expressiveness* is engaging others meaningfully through social interaction and the proper context of the setting.
- *Presence* is the overall impression or *total message* sent to others by one's behavior. (Presence involves the inferences that others make about your character, competency, and a general sense of you based on behaviors they observe.)
- *Negotiating solutions* is preventing conflicts, or resolving those that exist, and effectively mediating differences among people.
- *Authenticity* is the extent to which others perceive you as acting from honest and ethical motives, and the extent to which others sense that your behaviors are congruent with your personal values and that you are *playing it straight*.
- *Clarity* is the skill of expressing your ideas clearly, effectively, and with impact. It includes paraphrasing, semantic flexibility, skillful use of language, effective use of metaphors and figures of speech, and concise explanations.
- *Social sensitivity* is reading the meaning and context of a social situation, understanding the expectations of how to behave in a given social situation (social norms), and knowing what others are feeling and thinking.
- *Knowledge of social roles, rules, and scripts* means understanding the informal rules that govern social interaction in a setting. It is *knowing how to play the game* of social interaction and being viewed as socially sophisticated.
- *Social control* is behaving tastefully within an expected role and being tactful. It means making an impactful self-presentation by knowing "what to do," as well as exuding confidence and self-efficacy (Goleman & Boyatzis, 2013; Riggio, 2014; Goleman, 2006; Riggio & Reichard, 2018).

Characteristics used by managers with high social intelligence through in-person, telephone, electronic, and traditional written communications are:

1. Do not try to elicit a strong emotional response from others.
2. Do not speak in absolutes about people, politics, or ideas.
3. Speak with precision and choose words carefully.
4. Avoid making others feel ignorant.
5. Do not post anything online that would be embarrassing to show family members.
6. Do not overgeneralize (do not use "you always" or "you never").
7. Listen to and entertain perspectives other than their own.
8. Do not waste time arguing.
9. Listen to understand, rather than merely reply.
10. Do not judge people by the opinions of others or confuse their opinions with facts about others.
11. Do not avoid or take dissenting opinions and criticism personally.
12. Accept apologies and apologize when wrong.
13. Holistically comprehend the context of interaction and the message.
14. Be excellent at observing and "people watching" (Wiest, 2016; Nollan, 2017; Goleman, 2013; Sampson, 2015).

5.0 Concluding Thoughts

Resilience and realistic optimism are concepts that go together "hand-and-glove" because each supports the other. Resilience and realistic optimism create *inner strengths* for managers that keep them going in difficult times and provide an objective mindset for future challenges and events. Most importantly, resilience and realistic optimism provide a solid platform for a manager's long-term success. Strengths management represents a skill set that aides the manager in enlisting the assets of others to help all involved *be their best* collectively. The positive and bonding relationship established through social intelligence provides managers with positive emotions that are rewarding and motivational. Effective use of social intelligence by managers provides them with strong *human factors* for their long-term career success.

6.0 Footnotes

¹Based in part on Bartz, D.E. & Bartz, D.T. (2018). Focus, resilience, and realistic optimism: A triangulation of skills key to managers' effective performance. *International Journal of Management, Business, and Administration*, 21(1), 1-8.

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³Based in part on Bartz, D.E., Hall, L. & Greenwood, S. (2018). Social intelligence: A needed friend of school administrators. *National Forum of Educational Administration and Supervision Journal*, 36(4), 1-13.

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