

MANAGING STAFF WELLBEING & WORKLOAD

Creating a resilient workplace

Commitment, challenge and control are key elements of resilience. **Nickii Messer** explores these and discovers how we can prepare for the toughest of days.

You know that feeling when you lose your mojo? You might not know exactly where or when it went, but it just doesn't seem to be around now. It's been a really tiring, and trying, week, stuff is happening at home, and there is so much bad news in the media. Whatever caused it to go, one thing you know for certain is that today's score is 'life 1 – mojo 0'.

The other thing you can be sure about is that you will bounce back, and soon. You are resilient. You cope. If you get knocked down, you get back up again. And as a school leader, you absolutely must, whatever else might be going on.

But what if you were in a new job, new to an organisation, not sure of yourself or your capabilities? How resilient might you be then?

Individual and organisational resilience

I talk to many school leaders about personal resilience and recently ran a half day training event for headteachers and deputies on creating a more resilient workplace. It was working with this group of senior school leaders which helped me better understand the intrinsic link between individual and organisational resilience. Indeed, the more I looked, the harder it became to separate the two. If school leaders are to be resilient, they must be surrounded by a resilient workforce. But that workforce, in turn, needs the rigour and safety of a resilient organisation.



The Oxford English Living Dictionary defines resilience as ‘the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties’. This means that when the going gets tough, resilient people keep going. Being a school leader, you have to be resilient because a number of people rely on you. But what does resilience look like and how do we get it – for ourselves and our workforce? Leading psychologist Susan Kobasa argued that there are three essential elements to resilience: commitment, challenge and control.

Commitment

Kobasa’s research found that resilient people are committed to both their lives and their goals. When we recruit new colleagues we often question them about their goals, ambitions and career aspirations. But how do we ensure they will also become committed to the school’s goals, while retaining time and energy to commit to their lives?

This can feel like an especially difficult dichotomy for young teachers at the start of their careers. Yet it is an important balance they must maintain if they are to remain resilient. At the start of the new school year, there will be so much information for a new member of staff to absorb. But in many schools this might be the only time the school’s values, goals and development priorities are shared and explained.

When working with the group of heads and deputies, we found that those schools which discussed core values and purpose in daily conversation, as opposed to a September ‘Inset fest’, felt more assured of organisational and personal resilience. Recognising that they are contributing to something worthwhile can make a considerable difference to anyone having a tough day.

Having an organisational wellbeing programme in place to encourage staff to commit to life outside of school is equally important. It can be incredibly difficult for young teachers, beset with lesson plans and marking, when their friends are leading active lives outside of work. Many need help in finding quality time for themselves, their families and friends without feeling overwhelmed by work pressures.



Challenges

Kobasa described resilient people as having the capacity to view difficulties as challenges. Schools are constantly facing difficulties, with funding cuts, reduced resources, worsening behaviour (parents as well as pupils!) and the seemingly constant threat of Ofsted inspection. But those schools who feel able to cope, who say 'bring it on' to Ofsted, who welcome challenges as opportunities to grow and develop, not something to grind them down, will be able to maintain a culture of resilience.

A growth mindset, whether at organisational or individual level, means viewing failures as opportunities to learn. I learned a lot about my own ability to overcome intractable difficulties when preparing for a motorbike test a few years ago. I had fallen off my 750cc motorbike three times in one afternoon trying to carry out a particularly complex manoeuvre (for the uninitiated, a motorbike is heavy enough to hurt when it lands on you). I realised that I was failing to learn, and learning to fail. I saw the difficulty as my nemesis instead of my teacher. It was only when my tutor explained that it was my self-doubt that made me fail, not my lack of ability, that I finally mastered the manoeuvre and moved on.

Control

Kobasa found that resilient people do not waste energy worrying about those things they have no control over but, instead, focus their efforts where they can make a difference. The ability to recognise what is ahead of you and how you feel about it requires a certain degree of mindfulness. For example, resilient schools will understand what their funding situation is likely to be over the next few years, and therefore work to gain a better outcome. Staff will feel comfortable voicing opinions in regular, meaningful consultation.

To use a cliché, change is one of the few constants in schools. All staff, especially those new to this unpredictable world of education, can find change exhausting. When John Fisher considered the impact of change on the individual, he recognised that while we all go through a certain rollercoaster of emotion, the length of time we spend 'in the trough of depression [...] depends on certain factors such as ownership and control'. School leaders



who consult with, and consider the impact on, their staff when determining change, will give them the degree of control that is so integral to resilience.

Whole-school resilience

When working with the group of headteachers and deputies, I showed them a list of ‘signs of resilience’. I asked them to prioritise the ones that they, as leaders, felt they could most influence to ensure resilience within their workforce. These included:

- the ability to bounce back
- the capacity to have courage
- the motivation to move forward
- the power to stay centered
- the awareness of knowing themselves
- the gift of laughter
- the potential of showing promise
- the capacity to ask for help
- the tenacity to accomplish goals
- the willingness to share feelings
- the capability to connect with others
- the inspiration to give back.

The exercise generated a great deal of discussion and an agreement that, overall, they could have a hand in influencing every one of these. What I didn’t tell them until afterwards was that they are in fact ‘signs of a resilient child’ from the book *Raising Our Children to Be Resilient: A Guide to Helping Children Cope with Trauma in Today's World* (2004) by Linda Goldman.

We agreed that having a list such as this at the very centre of the school, along with the core values and vision, can help everyone, staff and pupils alike, to build and maintain essential resilience.



Finally, I turn to Maslow: 'In any given moment we have two options: to step forwards into growth or to step back into safety.' School leaders need to encourage everyone to make the right decision. This means giving staff, be they new or more experienced, the confidence to take those steps forward when the moment is right.

Resilience is like a rubber band. It can stretch, reform and stretch again, but overstretch it too much or too many times and it will snap.

Nickii Messer's next article on 'Wellbeing, productivity and organisational success' will feature in issue 14 of Insight magazine, available January 2018.