

Beyond Resilience Narrowly Defined: The Practice and Impact of Positive Leadership

— Volume 15, September 2020

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

— Viktor Frankl

The year 2020 to date has presented no shortage of examples of humanity and strength as people across the globe have rolled up their sleeves to confront the abrupt changes facing the world at large and their lives directly. In our work, we have had the privilege of witnessing stunning leadership during this crisis. Since the onset of the pandemic, we have talked with and listened to well over a thousand leaders as they have grappled with difficult questions and unforgiving choices. We have watched them show up repeatedly and face the formidable challenges of running their businesses and caring for their employees.

Many of these leaders are telling us that they are currently feeling energized by the ongoing challenges they're facing and driven to keep exploring new, efficient ways to deliver on both performance and care. All over, we are seeing leaders exercising positive, judicious leadership that highlights the idea of business as a force for good and places human relations at the heart of how businesses operate.

Leaders all over the world are now technically moving beyond resilience as it's strictly defined (the ability to endure or bounce back) and increasingly leading from a more emboldened and optimistic place. Following the

thinking of such notable authors as Nassim Nicholas Taleb, we are calling this broader view of resilience “antifragility,” which implies the ability to not only recover from shocks but also to grow and flourish. “Antifragile is beyond resilience or robustness. The resilient resists shocks and stays the same; the antifragile gains from disorder and gets better,” Taleb has explained.

As CEOs make this shift and work to drive new opportunities in the present moment, they will need to consider how best to communicate a positive outlook across their organizations. Going forward, their perspective will be key in order to move their organizations toward the possibilities that can facilitate positive growth and development. “It's precisely in the midst of a setback or challenging time, that leaders should be actively encouraging positivity,” conclude the two bestselling authors, Shawn Achor and Michelle Gielan, in a recent article in the Harvard Business Review, “What Leading with Optimism Really Looks Like.”

As CEOs work to forge a positive perspective across their organizations, instilling an attitude of gratitude, strengthening connectedness, and doubling-down on the sense of purpose will prove especially binding.

The Power of Gratitude

According to the Harvard Medical School, study after study in positive psychology research has shown that practicing gratitude helps people feel more positive emotions and shifts the focus from concentrating on what is going wrong to what is going right. Too many people misunderstand gratitude as being thankful alone, but it is more than this. Gratitude helps develop deep appreciation for what you have, where you are and who you are right now which, in turn, decidedly helps fuel optimism and the energy of positivity for moving ahead.

“Expressions of gratitude can have long-lasting effects on those who receive them,” explains Francesca Gino, a Harvard Business School professor. In a study with the renowned organizational psychologist, Adam Grant, Gino found that “expressions of gratitude increased prosocial behavior by enabling people to feel socially valued.” When people are grateful, they come alive. Feeling grateful, we are more apt to uncover the means of pushing ahead, being more secure in the recognition of having what we need to do so, of having enough—rather than withdrawing from or sinking into fears of scarcity or greater loss. CEOs who communicate gratitude can lift the collective ambition and activate the greater good of their organizations.

Among several tactics for cultivating gratitude in businesses, Dan Cable, professor of organizational behavior at London Business School, recommends the production of “highlight reels,” which focus on strengths, not flaws. In the midst of obstacles, a highlight reel can suggest an alternative narrative and remind people of the impact they are capable of making. “This is what world-class athletes do all the time—watch tapes of themselves at peak performance and find ways to re-create or even better their finest moments,” Cable explains. “Reading these stories of your best possible self triggers post-traumatic growth as you relive those memories.”

The Importance of Connectedness

Leaders who open themselves to those around them inspire openness and display an availability and warmth that encourages others. According to Frederic Laloux, the

author of *Reinventing Organizations*, what is most needed to lead effectively today is to “listen for the ‘We’ that wants to be lived through the ‘I.’” This involves really tapping into the collective consciousness of an organization.

From the many losses and severe upheavals of this year, leaders have the ability to generate greater understanding and unity across their organizations by putting empathy into action. “Part of the way out,” says Amy Fox, the CEO of our partner, Mobius Leadership, “is extending the circle of care and the circle of who you feel entwined with, interdependent to, responsible for . . . wider and wider.” More leaders are recognizing that the difficult emotions they and their employees may be experiencing do not need to become destructive. When shared and constructively addressed, they can be reframed to turn loss into inspiration. “Don’t run away, don’t numb,” Fox advises. “Notice, name, and hold in great compassion together.”

This, of course, requires deliberate and conscientious action and is hardly simple. Candor and positivity must be balanced carefully to reinforce each other. Leaders who encourage listening and truth-telling can build the foundation their organizations will need. This can be done in several ways to fortify a culture of authenticity and care. Increased communication from the CEO to the teams reinforces connectedness and can establish the transparency needed for others to trust and possibly call forth their own “antifragility.” Storytelling, too, is to be encouraged. Storytelling from leaders as well as across the organization creates relatability and inspiration and helps solidify the human connections upon which a company’s future is so dependent.

Leading with Purpose

Embodied in every struggle is greater meaning. Viktor Frankl offered us this wise lesson in the 1940s. Now is the time for leaders to double-down on it and create an even greater sense of purpose across their organizations. By focusing on the positive contributions and future possibilities of their companies, CEOs can lead others out of negativity and create confidence and motivation. They will be further driven and brought together by their values and commitments, to not only soldier on but to work together for a new, promising future.

Leadership is very much a choice we make every day. Setting goals in a world with so much uncertainty and ambiguity can be daunting. Making the choices necessary calls for leaders who courageously listen to both their inner selves and the pulse and direction of their stakeholders. Now more than ever is the time to move

beyond resilience alone—beyond maintenance or even the restoration of what was—and embrace the emerging opportunities to reach for more, for better. Principled, positive leadership is magnetic and indelible. It is what the second half of 2020 is calling for.

For more information, contact:



Julia Nenke

San Francisco

julia.nenke@egonzehnder.com

Egon Zehnder's global CEO Practice is active in chief executive leadership succession, recruitment, and professional development. We recognize that the selection of a CEO is the midpoint of a process, not the end. We understand that the Chief Executive role is unique, particularly in the current atmosphere of complexity and volatility. These uncertainties call for a pragmatic and aligned view on the business and leadership requirements of the CEO. To learn more about the CEO Practice, please visit <https://www.egonzehnder.com/what-we-do/ceo-search-succession>