



# ANCHORS FOR RESILIENCE


STRATEGIES AND ROUTINES  
RESILIENT LEADERS USE  
TO BALANCE COMPETING PRIORITIES

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**D**emands on education leaders are changing rapidly, and being a leader isn't getting any easier. Principals, superintendents, and others are pulled and stretched in many directions by staff, parents, community members, and school boards, as well as their own families.

Leaders' roles require them to have an attention to detail, an ability to be strategic and disciplined, and the skills to connect emotionally with others — and to do so all at the same time, and even in trying times.

In this context, resilience is a crucial component of effective leadership. Resilience is made up of mindset and behaviors. It is predicated on the belief that setbacks are temporary and create opportunities to learn. It begins with optimism, mindfulness, clarity about the work to be done, and trust in the intentions and abilities of your team. But it must be



practiced, modeled, and refined over time.

As leaders of complex organizations, the three of us have reviewed literature from diverse fields, including psychology, business, and the military, to understand what strategies and routines resilient leaders use and how they balance competing priorities. According to our review, resilient leadership has three anchors:

- Building psychological safety;
- Maintaining a learning organization; and
- Applying individual discipline.

In this article, we describe why each is important and how each can be cultivated by education leaders for the benefit of their teams. We draw on both our experience and examples as well as those from other highly effective organizations.

## **BUILDING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY**



According to Stanford instructor Laura Delizonna, psychological safety is the belief that you won't be punished when you make a mistake. She explains that it "allows for moderate risk-taking, speaking your mind, creativity, and sticking your neck out without fear of having it cut off" (Delizonna, 2017).

Some leaders dismiss discussions of psychological safety as the touchy-feely stuff that detracts from getting work done, but we do not believe this to be the case. In her book *The Fearless Organization* (2019), Amy Edmondson shows that psychological safety is essential to the completion of the kinds of work that will enable an organization to be forward-thinking and innovative.

When you feel psychologically unsafe, your brain responds in the same way it would in the face of a physical threat: The fight-or-flight response is triggered, placing you in a highly reactive state and shutting down the brain's capacity to think creatively or strategically (Edmondson, 2019).

Studies show that psychological safety leads to team effectiveness. For example, when Google conducted a study to determine what makes for a successful team, researchers found that the key to overall success was not who was on the team, but whether the team provided psychological safety (Duhigg, 2016; re:Work, n.d.).

How might resilient leadership create space to promote psychological safety? It starts with having some fun and incorporating play in your work and with your team. When there is the spirit of having fun or play in work, you are more apt to take calculated risks, share what you don't know, and ask for help. This leads to creativity, learning new things, and getting comfortable with making the necessary mistakes to

getting work done.

What does this look like in education organizations? It may start with being able to laugh at yourself in front of others. We tell self-deprecating jokes, share memes, wear the odd baseball cap from time to time, and share things that are happening in our personal lives — highlights about our kids, moving to a new home, that time we went on a work trip and forgot to pack pants.

We share what we are passionate about, what we are reading, and what we are listening to. We also share challenges, highlighting things we don't fully understand, asking for discussion, and noting when a team member has expertise or insights that can benefit us and the rest of the team.

We use time together not just to talk about our accomplishments, but also our learnings about the things we tried that did not go well. When we share, it encourages others to share, too.

One specific strategy we use to facilitate this kind of communication is starting meetings with check-ins and ending them with check-outs (Kim, Gonzales-Black, & Lai, 2018). A check-in prompt helps team leaders gauge the state of mind of the people in the meeting and allows the group to learn about each other's lives and personalities. Even in weekly meetings as large as 40 people, our check-ins allow each person to get emotionally present and find that psychological safe space.

Check-out prompts are quick reflections on the value of the meeting to each attendee. In addition to giving team leaders feedback they can use to improve future meetings, they implicitly message that they value everyone's time and opinions.

It is important to note that using these practices doesn't mean teams don't have disagreements. On the contrary, as the safety increases, teams will find that people are more comfortable raising concerns and proposing solutions. That makes teams more productive and effective.

### MAINTAINING A LEARNING ORGANIZATION



Learning organizations are those that are continually learning and growing and evolving. They embody the spirit of what Reid Hoffman, the founder of LinkedIn, calls the "infinite learner" (Hoffman, 2017).

Infinite learners are constantly expanding their expertise and continuously overcoming their own shortcomings. Over time, their ability to tackle new challenges is unquestionable. Hoffman (2017) says there are no permanent experts; at our best, we all need to be continually growing and learning.

Learning organizations are composed of learning individuals. So what do leaders in a successful learning organization do? Leaders create space and time for teams to develop experiences and reflect on them so that they build expertise together.

They regularly practice behaviors and model norms like holding daily team huddles, ensuring all team members have equal amounts of talk time in meetings, and asking team members to reflect at the end of each meeting to share what they learned.

As a leader, you have to model learning by publicly sharing your own

efforts for professional and personal growth. In doing so, your team will see that learning requires discipline, regular reinforcement and activity, sharing and transferring of knowledge, and staying in the zone of proximal development, the optimal range in which individuals are ready to stretch and learn with some support (Vygotsky, 1978).

We model learning in public, taking the risk that we will not be excellent on the first try, and allowing our teams to see us try, fail, learn, and try again. Anthony Kim makes a practice of learning a completely new, high-risk skill every four to five years. One year it was scuba diving, another year it was snowboarding, and recently he started learning how to surf.

This year, after learning from three different instructors, he shared his reflections on his role as a student, and how his experience changed with the instructional style of each teacher (Kim, 2019). In sharing his experience, Kim provided his organization with inspirations about how learning can happen everywhere, but he also models vulnerability.

You also have to show that taking the time to stop and learn is valued. Show real interest in what people are learning and doing. Ask them about that podcast they mentioned or applaud them for sharing an article. When you don't show that you value these efforts, they begin to fall to the bottom of team members' to-do lists as they instead focus on what needs to get done today rather than learning something that might help them in the future.

Becoming a learning organization isn't a one-and-done job. It is a



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continuous state of learning and improvement that requires trying new processes, reflecting on them, and refining or replacing them over time.

### APPLYING INDIVIDUAL DISCIPLINE

Perhaps one of the hardest things about being a leader in a complex organization, especially in those with as many competing priorities as schools, is maintaining focus and individual discipline to achieve your goals.



One way to think about individual discipline is creating (and evolving) habits with intention. When team members can see you engage in those habits of discipline, they see you as more predictable, and predictability creates trust.

Jocko Willink, in *Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win*, shares example after example of how important discipline is in leadership. Whether it's becoming a Navy SEAL, writing a book, or doing a weekly podcast, getting stuff done takes discipline.

Discipline is the act of finding consistent time to work on what you committed to. In fact, he goes further to say that personal discipline "is the pathway to freedom." In other words, the more individual discipline you demonstrate, the more freedom you will receive to practice "decentralized command" (Willink, n.d.).

Willink defines decentralized command as: "To be effectively empowered to make decisions, it is imperative that frontline leaders execute with confidence. Tactical leaders must be confident that they clearly understand the strategic mission. They must have implicit trust that their senior leaders will back their decisions. Without this trust, junior leaders cannot confidently execute"

(Harbourne, 2016).

Teams may look to leaders for examples of how to spend their time, how to act with others, and how to learn and grow. We need to model the approaches we want to see teams put into practice. Reflecting on our habits, then publicly creating positive habits and quitting negative habits is a way to practice discipline and model it for our teams (Duhigg, 2014).

For us, this starts with understanding our values, including why we do our work and how that fits with our family and personal lives, and then meticulously aligning our practices to serve our values and purpose. We create structures to ensure that we can do what matters to us.

We choose to prioritize family, so we make certain to block out the time for teacher conferences for our children and doctor's appointments for ourselves, and we schedule work commitments around them. We create predictable routines, like preparing meals for the week and setting out clothes the night before. We use our commuting time for learning, rest, and preparations for the day so we are more present with others at work and home.

When you engage in these habits over and over again, you realize what works for you and what doesn't. Keep doing the things that work for you, as they will become second nature and create even more time for you. Stop doing the things that don't allow you to keep your commitments consistently.

## MAKE IT YOUR OWN

To be a resilient leader, you will ultimately need to develop your own style. As you embark on or continue your own leadership journey, you may find it helpful to consider insights from Jennifer Garvey Berger's book, *Simple Habits for Complex Times: Powerful Practices for Leaders*.

Berger talks about the importance of connecting leadership and learning, and reminds us that both need to coexist. In essence, as leaders we have to have a vision for a future different than

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today, share it with people around us, and get stuff done (Berger & Johnston, 2016).

As leaders, we need to aim for shifting mindsets so we can move teams forward, recover quickly from setbacks, and maintain optimism and composure. In a complex and fast-changing world, just snapping back from setbacks isn't enough to be resilient. We have to adapt and evolve each time we bounce back. Every time we struggle and recover should be a learning experience.

The role of a modern resilient leader isn't just to withstand difficult conditions. It is to learn and improve because of them and anticipate the future.

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