Creating A Resilient Workplace

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In a colloquial sense, resiliency refers to a person's ability to bounce back and recover a sense of well-being after encountering an unexpected, and most often unpleasant, event. Some people are able to rebound from almost any adversity and carry on with their lives. For others, almost any unexpected event seems to produce a major set back and recovery is slow. In some workplaces, it is relatively easy to be resilient, while in other workplaces, turmoil seems to be ever present and things seem to be always out of balance. Resiliency has both individual and contextual influences. In this paper, a theoretical model for resiliency is summarized to create a conceptual referent for approaching resiliency promotion. The focus of the paper then turns to practical suggestions for creating a workplace that is conducive to being resilient and promotes a sense of well-being.

## Factors Promoting Resilience: A Theoretical Model

Kumpfer (1999) describes a model for identifying and managing the factors influencing resilience. Her model has six main components: stressors, environmental contexts, person-environment transactional process, internal resiliency factors, resilience process, and adaptation and re-integration. These components are outlined below.

Stressors

Virtually all contemporary models for stress and stress control subscribe to a transactional view of stress (cf. Hiebert, 1988; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Malec, et al., 2000). From a transactional perspective, stress arises not from the situations people encounter, per se, but from people's perceptions that they are not able to deal with the situation they encounter in a way they deem satisfactory. When people encounter a demanding situation, they evaluate the

nature and intensity of the demand, the resources available for dealing with the demand (i.e., their own skills and other people they can draw on for help), and the likely consequences that will result, especially if the demand is not dealt with satisfactorily. As long as the person concludes that the situation will be dealt with satisfactorily, or that the consequences are benign, then stress levels will be low. Stress results from a person's appraisal that the demands outweigh their available coping resources and negative consequences are likely to result. See Figure 1.

Figure 1.
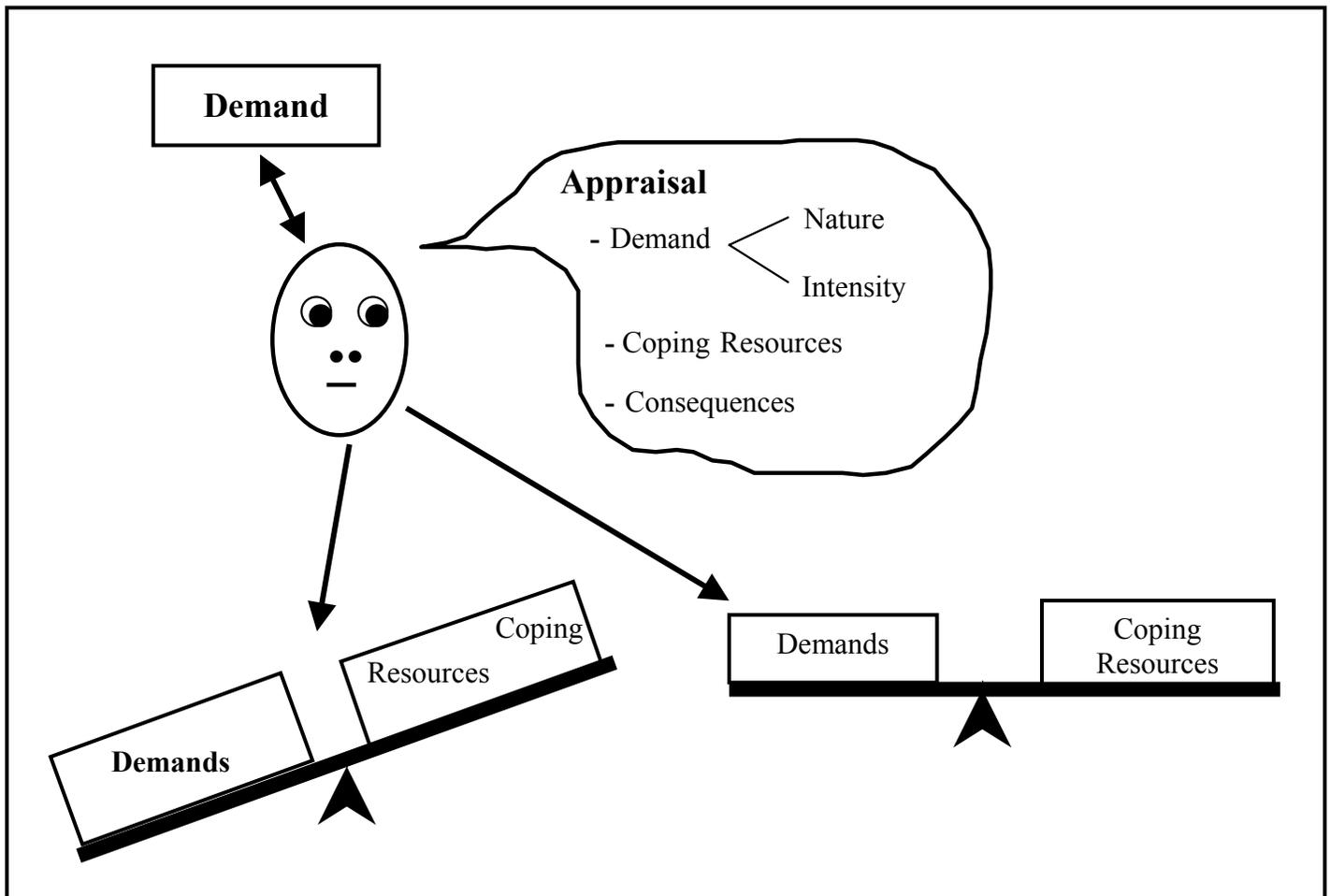
Environmental Contexts

Having identified the important role that cognitive appraisal plays in people's stressful experiences, it is important to emphasize that some situations are more demanding than others, and are hence more likely to overtax one's resources for dealing with the situation satisfactorily. Wolpe (1969) identified three categories of situations in which people predictably feel overtaxed: intensely unpleasant events, situations where there is ambiguity about what is expected, and situations where the consequences are uncertain. Typically, people do not develop extensive coping repertoires for dealing with these types of situations, and therefore often experience stress when engaged in these three types of environments.

Person-Environment Transactional Process

People's relationship with their environments consists of a two-way dynamic interchange. People encounter demanding situations, they attempt to deal with the demand and in so doing they alter the situation. They appraise the altered situation, and continue trying to deal with it. It is a give and take process, thus the term "transaction" is appropriate. Furthermore, it is the degree of match between the demand characteristics of a situation and a person's inventory of available resources that has the greatest impact on how much stress he or she will experience. Thus, two people can be in the same situation, and experience differing degrees of stress because they have differing skills and resources for dealing with those particular demands. In cases where there is a good match between a person's knowledge and skills, and the demands of the workplace they are in, stress levels likely will be low. In cases where a person lacks the knowledge or skill to deal successfully with the demands, stress levels likely will be high. Furthermore, there are some situations in which the demands are so excessive that virtually everyone will be over-taxed, and in those situations if the demands persist unabated, it will be difficult for people to be resilient. In all of these cases, it is the dynamic and ongoing interplay

between situational demands and people's resources for dealing with the situation, that determine the amount of stress a person will experience. A resilience outcome will be more likely when people have the resource base for dealing with the demands they face, and when there is time between periods of intense demand for people to recover.

Internal Resiliency Factors

The intrapersonal factors that impact resiliency stem mostly from personal agency, i.e., the belief that a person is an active agent in how their life unfolds. Personal agency is related to many constructs in the literature, some of which include: self-directedness, self-confidence, self-efficacy, internal locus of control, hopefulness, and optimism. Kumpfer (1999) notes that people who possess these qualities tend to be more persistent and have greater determination, both of which influence resiliency.

Resilience Process

Largely through social interactions, people acquire beliefs about themselves and their place in the world. Kanfer (1999) refers to this as secure attachment. Children who encounter an adequate number of success experiences develop a belief that the world around them is supportive and that they are making a valued contribution to the world in which they live. People who believe that they can influence their world, and that their own actions are largely responsible for the experiences they encounter, tend to have greater ability to bounce back from unexpected adversity.

Adaptation and Reintegration

The above five components tend to operate in a dynamic and transactional fashion. People face challenges, learn new ways for dealing with those challenges, become more capable

of dealing with a greater variety situations, and thus increase their adaptability. Reciprocally, people sometimes face challenges for which they are ill equipped, they experience a set back, regroup their resources, and reintegrate into the situation. The old adage "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger" has an element of truth in it. For parents and workplace managers, it becomes important to make sure that demands lie within a persons coping repertoire and that there is sufficient time for recovery after periods of over-demand. For individuals, it is important to reflect on experiences and treat them as learning opportunities. As one of my colleagues remarked recently "Have you noticed how some people have 10 years of experience, but others have 1 year of experience 10 times?" This is the heart of contemporary resiliency models. People who have adequate repertoires for dealing with the demands they face, and an ability to bounce back from the challenges they encounter, tend to be more flexible and adaptable, qualities which most career theorists and career practitioners see as essential for success.

Creating Resilient Workplaces

Ultimately, it is the responsibility of those in leadership roles (managers and supervisors) to create a workplace climate that fosters well-being and facilitates resilience. An appropriate place to begin is to examine the three types of situations mentioned earlier (Wolpe, 1969). Intense and unpleasant demands tend to overload people, especially when the demands are unrelenting and there is insufficient time to regain balance. Even when people are coping well and stress levels are low, prolonged over-demand can lead to burn out and a subsequent negative impact on workers as well as the economy of an organization (Hiebert, 2006). It is managers who are charged with making sure that workplace demands are reasonable and that employees have the appropriate skill and knowledge for dealing with the demands they face. It is interesting to note that productivity and quality of life is high in Nordic countries, yet on average employees work only two-thirds the number of hours compared to North American workers. Several years ago,

software developer SAS mandated a reduction from a 50 hour to a 35 hour work week, and sales

doubled. (For a summary the human resources management approaches at SAS, see

http://www.sas.com/solutions/hrmanagement.) In a similar way, it also is the manager's

responsibility to make sure that employee expectations are clear (not ambiguous) and that there is

a clear link between employee actions and anticipated outcomes. Whatever a leader can do to

increase consistency and reduce ambiguity regarding performance expectations, as well as reduce

uncertainty regarding the outcomes attached to employee behaviour, the more they will be

contributing to the creation of a resilience fostering workplace.

Managers who wish to take responsibility for creating a workplace that fosters resilience,

can do much more. They can model the importance of creating a positive workplace by marketing

employee accomplishments. Managers have a choice: to notice and comment on mistakes, or

draw attention to successes. A success-oriented workplace is more productive and has higher

employee morale. Kotylak and Lundvall (2000) draw our attention to a new approach to

leadership that fosters worker motivation and commitment: If something goes wrong, say "I did

it." If something goes sort of OK, say "we did it." If something goes really well, say "you did it."

Reduce "Look at me, look at me." And replace it with "Look at us" or better yet, "Look at them."

(p. 339) It is a manager's job also to motivate employees. Martin and Martin (1983) point out that

typically people are motivated when two key ingredients are present: (a) they are working

towards a goal that they value, and (b) the goal is perceived to be achievable. Managers working

collaboratively with employees, to construct a shared vision of where the organization is heading,

and the vital role that each person plays in helping achieve that vision, are headed in the right

direction. They might also consider making work-life balance a criterion in their hiring process.

The first step is for managers to accept that they are responsible for creating a healthy and

resilient work place. Once that attitude is adopted, attention can be turned to modeling a positive

orientation, marketing accomplishments, supporting self-care initiatives, and creating a structure that encourages worker well-being.

Employees need to appreciate that even though it may be a manager's responsibility to foster a wellness-oriented workplace, they should not wait for their bosses to take the initiative. Employees need to learn how to work with their bosses. For starters, the cardinal rule in learning to train your boss is: Don't approach your boss with problems, instead, approach your boss with potential solutions. Don't become an additional problem for your boss. Instead, learn to keep problems from landing on your boss's desk. If you want your boss to notice your good work, be sure to notice and comment on your boss's good work. What goes around, comes around, especially in one's interaction with their boss. Workers can do much to create a positive, resiliency oriented workplace, independently of their manager's reactions. Workers need to realize that they can make a difference in their own emotional climate. Not all demands are reasonable, so learn to negotiate the demands that you accept. It is important to remember that the scope of work is limitless, but our role within the scope of work is negotiable.

Some common sense things are also important. In the quest for creating a positive workplace, remember to say something nice to your colleagues, every day, especially when your colleague is being grumpy or hard to get along with. Your comment might help the other person feel more balanced, but more importantly, when you focus on the positive, it will help you feel more balanced. Thus, also say something nice to yourself, about yourself, every day, in fact several times each day. Remember that a message seen is much stronger than a message heard. So, support your colleagues for being pleasant, it will reap benefits for you. Some people find it useful to create signs and post them in strategic places to serve as reminders of things they need to hear. Some examples are provided in Figure 2.

Keeping a Positive Focus

- Walk the Talk
- No one can insult you without your permission
- I am lovable and capable
- Stop Psychosclerosis (hardening of the attitudes)
- I will not should on my self today
- When life hands out lemons, make lemonaide
- Change is inevitable, growth is optional
- It is easier to beg forgiveness, than get permission
- All things, to all people, all the time, is … all over

Figure 2. Examples of Positive Slogans that Help Sustain a Resilient Workplace

Conclusions

Work-life imbalance is multi-faceted and creating a positive organizational culture has many layers. Therefore, there are many places where it is possible to begin to create a resiliency-oriented workplace. There is a life-style component to workplace wellness and there are major spill-over effects between work and non-work situations. Therefore, it is important to resolve personal dilemmas in order to prevent them from contributing to a workplace problem (and vice-versa). There is a public education component, therefore, it is important to educate your public regarding what it is reasonable for them to expect from you. There is an organizational structure component, therefore it may be important to lobby for structural changes that will make your workplace demands more reasonable. Some people always will feel they have no control over their work situation, but most people have more influence than they realize, as long as they do not give away their voice.

Remember that personal agency is a central ingredient in resiliency. Many people feel like the clocks are controlled at head office. If that is the case, consider getting rid of the clocks. It is reasonable for managers and employees to examine what is a reasonable expectation. Everyone

in an organization has a boss, but just because your boss expects you to do something, does not make it a reasonable expectation. Not all expectations are reasonable. Remember, that demands tend to gravitate towards those who are most competent. (Who wants to give an important project to a person who everyone knows will mess it up?) So, be prepared to deal with an endless supply of requests, or consider being less competent. Some basic assertiveness will be a big help in this regard. Finally, it is important for all people at all levels of an organization to develop a resilient personal and professional identity. The intrapersonal factors identified by Kumpfer (1999) are all personal characteristics that can be cultivated and enhanced. It is in everyone's best interest to take charge of that part of their own personal and professional development.

Resiliency is the ability to bounce back when faced with an unexpected challenge. Resiliency comes in people, but in some contexts it is easier to be resilient, while others make it more difficult. Workers at all levels of an organization might do well to ask themselves questions like the following: How do I contribute to my own resiliency and how do I interfere with it? What have I done to make my work environment more resilient? Fostering resiliency is a leadership role, so, how have I encouraged my boss to do more to foster resiliency? and How have I helped others be more resilient? It is in our own personal best interest for each of us to take steps to create a wellness-oriented workplace that fosters resiliency.

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