

Leading with Resilience in the Face of the Unexpected

By Kathleen M. Sutcliffe

Unexpected events at present seem to be pervasive, but skills to bounce back from these unexpected events are not. Leading in trying times is difficult in part because leaders have been exhorted to anticipate, plan, envision, forecast and strategize. Neglected in all the talk about foresight are the processes of intelligent reaction and improvisation, which reflect a commitment to resilience. The following is a summary of practices that leaders can use to enable their employees and organizations to cope and bounce back from unexpected surprises mindfully.

Assumptions

- Unexpected events show up everywhere in our lives, in our corporate life and in our other lives as well. The future will continue to involve the unexpected. Since unexpected events will crop up in the context of what we expect, they will be easy to miss until they have escalated into a more advanced stage. This means it makes sense to develop capabilities to cope with surprises and bounce back from them.
- It is important to remember that no system is perfect. "Human fallibility is like gravity, weather and terrain, just another foreseeable hazard" (James Reason).
- The tendency after an unexpected event is to blame it on someone, and usually someone or something else. There is a tendency to want to obsess about "what if," "what did we miss" and "what were the early warning signals."
- Systems that are better able to contain and bounce back from unexpected events don't obsess about the "what might have been." Instead, they focus on recovery, restoration, workarounds and improvisation, all which draw on and build the capability for resilience.

Intelligent Reaction

Leaders who manage the unexpected mindfully, react intelligently by staying attuned to what is happening and developing a deeper grasp of what those events mean. The following practices seem to help.

- First and foremost exploit the self-fulfilling prophecy as a way to produce the resilience you expected. Treat people as if they have the expertise to cope. Treat people as if they are talented adults who are confused and scared but still capable of showing up with some common sense and goodwill.
- Resist the temptation to reach for soothing simplicities and speak with candor. Admit there are no easy answers, show care and concern.
- Focus on restoration. Work from moment to moment on the small stuff to rebuild some structure and some alertness. Jettison the unnecessary. People are numb and anything but alert. They need to regain alertness to see what needs to be done. Small wins/successes enacted in parallel at many places and consolidated can provide structure, help people regain a sense of control and feeling that they're moving in the same direction.
- Stay close to the front line and provide support. Be sensitive to operations. What is needed right now and where? Where are operations coming back solidly and quickly? Where are they not? Forget the big picture for the moment; instead try to understand what plot is unfolding and how the pieces are affecting one another.
- Use rich media. Unexpected events are often confusing and people need to use rich media to build some idea of what they face. Face-to-face communication is generally regarded as the richest medium, and richness declines as people move to interaction by telephone, written personal communication (letters and memos), written formal communications (bulletins) and numeric formal communications (printouts). Face to face is richest because of the capacity for timely

feedback, the ability to convey multiple cues, the degree to which the message can be personalized, the variety of language that can be used and the range of meaning that can be conveyed. As richness is lost, so is key information.

- Think and question out loud. When you inquire publicly this helps people understand what is going on and provides a model for them to imitate. Overt displays of thought are a good thing.
- Encourage people to listen and make sure everyone's voice is heard. Discussion is important because it creates a context in which people can make sense of confusing events. But when people discuss confusing events they sometimes think they have to sell or convince others of the validity of their own perspective and fail to listen respectfully and attentively to what others say. When this happens, advocacy replaces analysis; and both richness and the capability to discriminate important details that can help restore and resolve problems are lost.

Improvisation

Leaders who manage the unexpected mindfully, improvise and encourage people to act in order to think more clearly. The following practices seem to help.

- Adopt an organization-wide mindset of cure. Encourage people to take small steps to treat an anomaly even before they have made a full diagnosis. Doing so can help people gain experience and a clearer picture of what they are treating.
- Maintain some ambivalence as you move forward in resolving the problem. Start to contain the event by doing what experience tells you to do, but remain in doubt that you're doing exactly the right thing. Your goal is to act simultaneously as though the unexpected situation you face is just like every other situation you've faced and like no other situation you've ever faced. Maintaining ambivalence will tend to increase information intake as well as the appropriateness of the action, all while you continue to do something familiar that at least stabilizes the situation.
- Encourage people to make knowledge about the system transparent and widely known. The more people know about the weaknesses of their system and how to manage them, the faster they can notice and correct problems in the making.
- Accelerate feedback. Effective improvisation requires quick feedback so that initial effects of improvisations can be detected quickly and the action altered or abandoned if the effects are making things worse.
- Don't assume the expertise is at the top and disappears as you go down the hierarchy. Create flexible decision structures by creating a set of operating dynamics that shifts leadership to the person who currently has the answer to the problem at hand. Put a premium on expertise over rank and migrate decisions both downward and upward as conditions warrant.
- Encourage alternative frames of reference and try to preserve divergent analytical perspectives. Divergent perspectives provide you with a broader set of assumptions and sensitivity to a great variety of inputs. This increases the chance of enlarging response repertoires or recombining existing competencies in new ways, which ultimately enlarges the capability for resilient action.
- Encourage people to self-organize into ad hoc networks to provide expert problem solving. These networks dissolve as soon as the problem is solved. Such networks allow for rapid pooling of expertise to handle unanticipated events.
- Encourage dense talk and interpersonal relationships. Encourage people to seek feedback, share information, ask for help, talk about what is going right and what is going wrong. It is through these activities that the group can detect changes, learn, improve members' collective understanding of a situation and discover unexpected consequences of previous actions. Through your actions and expectations, create a climate of openness in which people feel safe to surface fears and issues.
- Finally, avoid the temptation to cut capacity. Don't overdo lean mean ideals. When faced with the unexpected, leaders often want to conserve resources by cutting training and development or eliminating excess capacity in the form of "redundant" positions. Of course some conservation may be necessary, but be sure to think this through carefully. Resilience takes deep knowledge. Generalized training, both through frequent job rotation and learning in other ways, is important because it increases people's response repertoires, which in turn enlarges the range of issues that people can notice and deal with. When people enlarge their capability for action, they can see more problems because whatever they see, they will have some way to deal with it. Moreover, when you eliminate "redundant" positions, you sacrifice experience and expertise. That loss also can limit the repertoire of responses available to the organization.

Examples of "Leading with Resilience in the Face of the Unexpected"

Miracle Workers

Five years ago the New York Board of Trade decided to invest \$300,000 per year to rent back-up pits and systems from Comdisco, in spite of internal opposition. When World Trade Center building 4 collapsed, some members of NYBOT were already at the back-up pits in Queens, and many worked through the night and subsequent days to have the market running again. Their success came in part because of their willingness to workaroud and improvise, and in part because they prepared for the unexpected. Employees in other firms, such as Verizon and Merrill Lynch, showed similar preparedness and tenacity.

A New Chapter for Laura Bush

This article is a great example of leadership over history by the First Ladies of the United States. Although Laura Bush is the only woman who can experience the direct impact of their leadership (since she is the current First Lady), their stories serve as a symbol of resilience, courage and faithfulness at a time of hardship. This story goes on to feature Jackie O, Eleanor Roosevelt and Lady Bird Johnson and how they attempted to lead their country during adversity. "Eleanor became FDR's legs, ears and eyes. On a trip to England she experienced the nightly pounding of the Luftwaffe. Walking through bombed-out factories and hospitals and visiting the troops, she stood in for her wheelchair-bound husband." These women's stories are great examples of resilience that everyone can learn from.

A Likely Hero

This is a story specifically about Tom Burnett but it was also about the many other heroes aboard Flight 93. In an interview with Deena, Tom's wife, a piece of the story of what really happened aboard that flight was revealed. Tom and several other passengers decided not to let the hijackers accomplish their feat of terror. They took the job into their own hands despite the fatal outcome they surely thought inevitable. They thought of nothing other than saving lives of other Americans on the ground. It was just like Deena stated, "No, he was not calling to say goodbye. And I think if he had said goodbye, I would have been terrified. He was taking down information, he was planning what they were going to do. And he was not interested in reviewing his life or whispering sweet nothings to the telephone, I assure you. He was problem-solving and he was going to take care of it and come on home."

Footnote:

James Reason's quote is taken from *Managing the Risks of Organizational Accidents* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1997, p. 25).

The ideas about resilience are derived from *Managing the Unexpected*, Karl E. Weick and Kathleen M. Sutcliffe (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).