



Centre for Labour, Employment and Work

The role of managers in developing resilient employees, and resilient organisations in the public sector

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Public organisations are increasingly expected to be flexible and adaptable to new challenges and possible shocks. One way organisations are able to do this, is to provide environments which encourage and enable their staff to be resilient – to address challenges with confidence and to remain adaptive in the face of change. Victoria University research is investigating the role of managers in public sector organisations in fostering resilience in employees. Resilience at the individual level supports resilient functioning for the whole organisation.

Early views of resilience were that it was fixed, like a personality trait – more like a matter of character (Block, 1951). Since then, it is now seen as more shaped by environmental factors, and as something that can be developed in people (e.g. Kuntz, Malinen, Näswall, & Luthans, 2002). In particular, behaviours such as learning, adaptability and collaboration, help people better deal with challenges and keep people developing further skills in an upward cycle. My research has found, not surprisingly, that managers are critical influencers on employee behaviours, both good and bad, resilience enhancing and resilience disabling.

I am using a mixed-methods design (including surveys, interviews, and focus groups) to conduct my research which is still in progress, but there are already some interesting preliminary findings. An initial survey, conducted in a large public organisation, indicated that a paradoxical approach to leadership (e.g. balancing the needs of both the individual and the wider group, and providing both control and autonomy) can be helpful for resilience. Supervisors who are also seen as supportive also help a great deal.

My qualitative findings so far (from interviews with public employees and managers) have provided more context and detail, enhancing some of the ideas that underlie the relationships in my survey findings. Resilience-enabling managers, for example, have higher situational awareness, compared to other managers. This means they are able to match their behaviours to the demands facing both their employees and the wider organisation. In doing so, individuals are better supported to tackle both daily dilemmas and larger public challenges with confidence and clarity. Also, managers who actively encourage and advocate for collaboration between team members are in turn forging the strong interpersonal resources and networks essential for resilience.

Good resilience developing managers strike a balance between providing enough support, but also encouraging self-management. When this balance is struck, employees are comfortable to seek necessary help when they need it, but also have the autonomy to experiment, make mistakes, and learn as a result. This may seem obvious, but instead micromanagement sometimes occurs, where any potential for resilience development is unlikely. When micromanaged, employees lack the agency to think critically and problem solve, mistakes are seen as evidence of dysfunction and not as opportunities for learning and growth, and employees' confidence in their own abilities is thwarted because they lack ownership of processes and outcomes, limiting their willingness to engage in resilient behaviours. Micromanagement is a counter-productive and vicious cycle. My early findings are that it is a product of management style, more than, say a response to a weak employee.

A glimpse at these findings show the study's value in adding to research on resilience in organisations, leadership, and public management. It points to the complexity and relational nature of resilience which may potentially be operationalised in the form of competency frameworks for managers, employees, and organisations. My research will show not only what these competencies are, but how they work to foster employee resilience.

I expect to be able to publish the final results of this study mid-2019.

References

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