

Resilient Leadership: Optimizing Engagement Across Contexts

Roberta Borgen & Cassie Taylor

Life Strategies

Introduction

Leadership, regardless of context, is becoming increasingly challenging. Resilient leaders model adaptability, are responsive to change, and are able to recover from the inevitable setbacks they encounter. They understand the dynamics and interconnectedness of complex systems and attend to the well-being and full engagement of whom they lead.

Career Engagement

Recognizing the unpredictability of the changes we face, many theories informing work in the career development sector speak of chaos (Pryor & Bright, 2019), happenstance (Krumboltz, 2011), and positive uncertainty (Gelatt & Gelatt, 2003; Smith, 2023). The career engagement model (Pickerell & Borgen, 2023) offers a conceptual framework to leaders tasked with keeping their teams fully engaged and productively healthy during such unpredictable times. By attending to the interaction between individuals' capacity and the amount and type of challenges they are facing, leaders can customize interventions to optimize the engagement, well-being, and contributions of each member of the team.

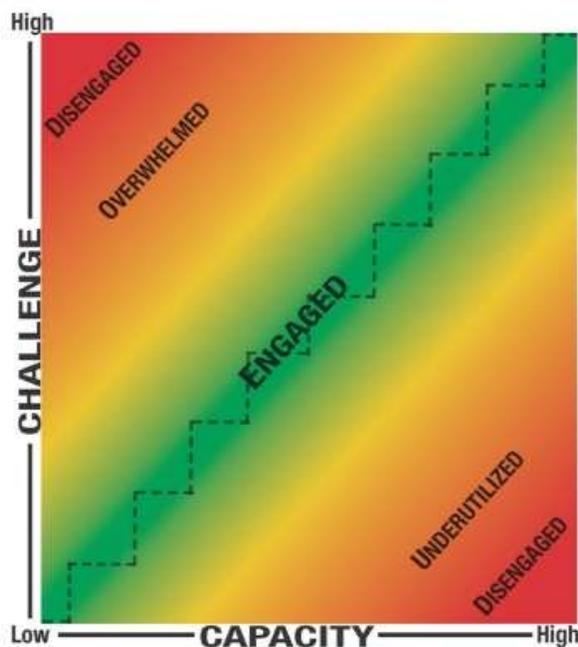
Within the career engagement model, challenge comprises motivating work and meaningful opportunities. Resilient leaders attend to the unique needs and experiences of each member of their teams. They are transparent about the meaning of the tasks they assign so that team members fully understand how their work contributes to the overall success of the project or organization. They also recognize that what one person may find motivating, another may find either overwhelming or tedious.

Challenges also need to be continuously realigned to an individual's current capacity. Capacity, within the career engagement model, comprises a variety of components—some within the individual and others within that individual's environment. Resilient leaders who seek to optimize the engagement of their team members consider such capacity elements as resources, relationships, workload, well-being, and fit. All of these are dynamic, hence the need for ongoing realignment or micro-adjustments. Work that felt meaningful and motivating under one supervisor might be overwhelming and excessively stressful under another. Challenges that felt manageable when a project began may begin to feel overwhelming owing to the loss of a team member, lack of necessary resources, or the intersection of multiple projects. A change in

an individual's health (or the health of a family member) can make previously exciting and motivating challenges feel completely beyond one's ability to manage.

Challenge and capacity misalignment can also happen in the other direction. A project that was engaging to start with can begin to feel boring once skills are developed and the process becomes routine. An entry-level job that pays the bills for a newcomer may soon feel tedious, especially when individuals are not able to bring their "best selves" to work and fully utilize their education and professional skills. Resilient leaders monitor such changes in engagement, in either direction, and are ready to make (or support) the necessary micro-adjustments to help team members get back on track.

Figure 1: Neault and Pickerell (2011)



Ten Tips for Sustaining Resilience

A corporate research and investigation group based in the Middle East identified

seven traits of resilient leaders, including empathy, adaptability and the ability to improvise, self-awareness and openness to feedback, willingness to take calculated risks, a positive attitude, a commitment to helping others, and effective communication (Corporate Research and Investigators, n.d.). These traits of resilience, however, are not static characteristics of leaders. Rather, much like engagement, resilience needs to be continuously monitored, nurtured, and, at times, restored.

1. **It starts with you.** Similar to the consistent message from flight attendants that, in case of an emergency, you need to put on your own oxygen mask before helping others, resilient leaders need to take care of themselves. The chronic, relentless stress associated with unpredictability and constant change can result in burnout, impacting the ability to think, feel, and act effectively (Canadian Association for Mental Health, n.d.; Marks, 2022; World Health Organization, 2023). Self-care—including sleep, exercise, meditation, eating well, and engaging in healthy relationships—is not something that can be set aside. It is essential to resiliency and the ability to lead others (Sorsdahl, 2018).

2. **Continuous stress is not sustainable—for you or those you lead.** Most leaders can push through an emergency, carrying the occasional excessive load. This is also true for most employees. However, as a leader, it is your responsibility to design breaks, manage workloads, set priorities, adjust timelines, and ensure that the necessary resources are available to complete projects without burning out yourself or others.

3. **Be aware—and empathic.** Notice the sometimes subtle changes from typical

levels of engagement in yourself and others. This could be in the direction of becoming overwhelmed by too much challenge or limited capacity—or it could be in the completely opposite direction of boredom or feeling unneeded and underutilized. Symptoms of excessive stress can vary widely, impacting thinking (e.g., difficulty concentrating, ruminating), feelings (e.g., irritability, cynicism, hopelessness), and the physical body (e.g., headache, upset stomach, fatigue, chronic illness). Symptoms of boredom can be more challenging to spot but are equally important to notice, as underutilized workers can underperform, sabotage projects, or simply invest their time and energy in non-work-related activities. Although ebbs and flows in engagement are normal, address more significant shifts in either direction as soon as you notice them to prevent problems from becoming too severe to resolve.

- 4. Collaborate to realign challenge and capacity.** People tend to become disengaged or experience burnout (Psychology Today, n.d.) when they feel a lack of control over how they perform their work or when there is a misalignment between their personal values and goals and the tasks they are expected to complete. Trying to fix an engagement problem in isolation rarely works; realigning challenge and capacity is both a personal and team endeavor. People have complex lives, so you need to collaborate with individual team members in their unique contexts to examine what is working, what is not, and why. There will be some things you can do, as a leader, to bolster capacity at the organizational level (e.g., adjusting deadlines, expanding the team,

introducing new technologies, redistributing tasks). However, it may sometimes be necessary to lower (or raise) the level of challenge to meet the available capacity. Sometimes shifting tasks so that team members can each work to their strengths and passions can re-engage everyone. Consider skill-building initiatives such as cross-training or secondments or explore ways to make work more meaningful (e.g., discussing how a project aligns with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals; United Nations, n.d.). Moreover, recognize the need for “white space” (Gardner, n.d.); avoid filling each day so completely that there is no time to catch up, reflect, or plan ahead.

- 5. Foster hope and optimism.** Optimism is more than simply having a positive attitude or finding the bright side of a situation. It is a significant predictor of both career success and job satisfaction (Neault, 2002) and, therefore, important to you and to every individual you lead. Although there will be difficult times, be sure not to lose sight of better days ahead. Provide opportunities to share stories of hope, inspiring your team to envision and co-create a positive future.
- 6. Build a culture of kindness.** Relationships matter. Model treating people with respect, compassion, and a genuine interest in their overall well-being. Set the tone and expectations for caring—deeply—about each team member's dreams and goals. When someone feels underutilized or overwhelmed, it is difficult for them to contribute effectively. Temper your expectations, show grace, and believe the best. Create an environment where team members feel safe to share challenges and concerns, knowing that

they will not be judged or punished for struggling.

7. **Communicate with transparency and keep information flowing.** Recognize that some information you have access to as a leader simply cannot be widely shared. However, be open about what you can share and remain consistent in that openness. Use a variety of methods to communicate with your team, building trust and a sense of safety. Although change can take time and people may become impatient while waiting, regular updates reinforce the message that you are working toward a better future.
8. **Invite feedback—and take action on it.** Good communication is multi-directional. Establish effective ways for team members to provide feedback and share the information you need to lead them well (e.g., suggestion boxes, surveys, focus groups, interviews, an open-door policy). Respond quickly to feedback and be sure to “walk your talk,” clearly demonstrating how that feedback has been implemented—or why some changes may need to wait. Where feasible, empower your team members to take action as well.
9. **Commit to continuous improvement.** Resilient leaders are adaptable. They thrive in dynamic environments and always strive to do better. As Gandhi is reported to have said, “Be the change that you wish to see in the world.” Identify the improvements you want to make, measure your progress toward those goals, share that progress, and invite others to hold you accountable. Use your sphere of influence to make the world a better place.
10. **Be strategic and courageous in making adjustments.** As leaders, you understand that many problems reside

within organizational systems and structures, not within individual team members. System changes are complex and time-consuming and often have a spillover effect on other interconnected systems. Although small fixes may offer temporary relief, sustaining engagement and resiliency may require addressing underlying systemic issues to prevent the same problems from recurring.

Resilient leaders are contagious. Their positive energy, adaptability, innovation, and commitment to helping others support their teams to thrive, creating environments where everyone can bring their best selves to all that they do.

REFERENCES

- Canadian Association for Mental Health. (n.d.). Stress. <https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-illness-and-addiction-index/stress>
- Corporate Research and Investigators Group. (n.d.). 7 traits of a resilient leader. <https://crigroup.com/7-traits-of-a-resilient-leader/>
- Gardner, B. (n.d.). Why the white space in our life matters. No Sidebar. <https://nosidebar.com/white-space/>
- Gelatt, H. B., & Gelatt, C. (2003). The power of positive uncertainty: Making creative career decisions. Crisp Learning.
- Krumboltz, J. D. (2011). Capitalizing on happenstance. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 48(4), 156–158. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1920.2011.tb01101.x>
- Marks, J. (2022). The stress response cycle. Psych Central. <https://psychcentral.com/stress/the-stress-response-cycle#Stages-of-the-stress-cycle>
- Neault, R. (2002). Thriving in the new millennium: Career management in the changing world of work. *Canadian Journal of Career Development*, 1(1), 11–21.
- Neault, R. A., & Pickerell, D. A. (2011). Career engagement: Bridging career counseling and employee engagement. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 48(4), 185–188. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1920.2011.tb01111.x>

- Pickerell, D. A., & Borgen, R. A. (2023). Optimizing career engagement: A guide for enhancing careers and other life roles. Cognella.
- Pryor, R. G., & Bright, J. E. H. (2019). Chaos theory for career counsellors. In N. Arthur, R. Neault, & M. McMahon (Eds.), *Career theories and models at work: Ideas for practice* (pp. 347–358). CERIC.
- Psychology Today. (n.d.). Burnout. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/burnout>
- Smith, B. A. (2013). Theory corner: The need for positive uncertainty in the globalization era. CERIC. <https://ceric.ca/2013/01/theory-corner-the-need-for-positive-uncertainty-in-the-globalization-era-2/>
- Sorsdahl, M. (2018). Self-care can combat burnout for career development practitioners. CERIC. <https://ceric.ca/2018/11/self-care-can-combat-burnout-for-career-development-practitioners/>
- World Health Organization. (2023). Stress. <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/stress>
- United Nations. (n.d.). The 17 goals. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>