4 Steps for Building Your Team's Resilience

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Resilience is crucial for the success of teams as well as individuals. While typically we think of resilience as a personal trait that someone either has or doesn't have, resilience is also a team trait. In the context of teams, resilience can be developed and shaped by leaders. By proactively helping your team build resilience, you will benefit from more engaged and productive employees and better short- and long-term outcomes – especially in the era of COVID-19.

What resilient teams look like

Resilience is the ability and motivation to overcome adversity. The American Psychological Association defines it as "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress."

Harvard Business Review shared a study on resilience that looked at thousands of teams in sports and other industries to determine the traits that resilient teams had in common. The study found four characteristics that were common to all resilient teams:

1. The belief that the team can effectively complete tasks together
2. An accurate and shared understanding of roles and a common model of teamwork

3. An ability to improvise
4. A sense of trust and a feeling of safety

In addition to these common traits, other characteristics resilient teams have in common include optimism, a supportive and encouraging culture and shared values and purpose. Plus, resilient teams generally have clarity of purpose, strong connections and a can-do attitude. Finally, they are well-aligned to the needs of internal and external stakeholders and, most importantly, get things done.

Steps for building team resilience

In the course of business, all teams face setbacks and challenges. Whether it's organizational changes, demanding clients, pressing deadlines or the many unforeseen obstacles that inevitably come, all teams will find themselves under stress and facing adverse circumstances.

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Resilient teams not only overcome obstacles but also understand that setbacks can be beneficial. Sometimes failure provides essential feedback and builds a team's ability to bounce back, which is vital for strong teams.

This ability to grow from challenges and the other benefits of a resilient team make it essential for leaders to develop resilience in their team proactively. Here are some practical ways to cultivate resilience.

1. Be an ally

Trust and safety are critical components of resilient teams. A first step towards building trust and a sense of safety is building healthy relationships among team members. Leaders should set the tone for building strong and supportive relationships by being an ally for all team members.

Being an ally to your team members doesn’t mean you can’t provide critical feedback or set high expectations. Instead, it means actively working to support employees through struggles, regularly providing positive feedback to balance out negative feedback and meaningfully building a sense of self-worth among all employees.

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Being an ally will not only help to build a foundation of trust among team members, but it will also model the encouraging and supporting atmosphere that you want all team members to help create.

2. Be purpose-driven

Employees are more engaged when they connect with what they are doing and see their efforts’ impact. You want your team to have clarity of purpose and to work together to achieve team goals. You can accomplish this is by being a purpose-driven leader.

Being a purpose-driven leader means regularly reminding your team why it does what it does and finding ways to connect it to its purpose. Get creative about keeping yourself and your team purpose-driven, whether by posting signs throughout workspaces, visiting clients or making regular trips to job sites. Just make sure your larger purpose is always at the center of what you and your team do.

3. Set clear goals and benchmarks for your team

A key to your resilience is knowing what you’re working towards. Teams that have clarity of purpose are better able to overcome adversity and to push towards those goals. Your team should clearly understand long and short-term goals. Avoid the

mistake of assuming that everyone knows the goals by taking the time to share goals explicitly and to ensure that all team members understand and align with them.

4. Build a culture of mutual trust

Teams in which employees feel safe and trust one another are more resilient. While natural team dynamics can build some level of trust, don’t assume that a culture of trust will naturally develop on its own. Instead, take steps to create a culture of respect, inclusivity and trust.

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A few ways to build trust include highlighting the distinct roles of each team member, naming the contributions that each team member makes, allowing for times of group reflection to name successes and failures and encouraging honest communication. Teams that appreciate each member’s unique gifts, celebrate wins and talk honestly but respectfully about things that have gone wrong are well on their way towards building a culture of mutual trust.

Resilient teams produce better results and can ride out the inevitable ups and downs that all teams experience. Regardless of your definition of success, a resilient and authentic team will help you achieve it. While some individuals are more resilient than others, team resilience is something that leaders can shape and develop. Don’t wait for the next setback or challenge to address your team’s resilience. Instead, be proactive about making your team stronger and more resilient.

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