

The Ying and Yang of Resilience



In the world of materials science, resilience is the ability of a substance or object to spring back into shape after it has been deformed by a force or load; resilient materials absorb the stress by flexing under the load typically with increasing levels of resistance the further they bend. Provided the material's 'elastic limit' is not reached¹ it will return to its original state once the stress is released. Plastic materials perform similarly under load but retain their new shape after the load is released. Brittle materials do not deflect under load, they retain their original shape until the load exceeds their load resisting capacity (strength) and then they break. Most practical materials used in the modern world combine these attributes in different ways to optimise performance:

- Strong materials typically combine aspects of resilience and plasticity.
- Hard materials combine aspects of brittleness and resilience.
- Fragile materials are brittle with very little in the way of resilience or strength.

For hundreds of years metal smiths have recognised these different aspects of metals. For more than 1000 years, Japanese swordsmiths and have combined resilient steels to provide strength with hard brittle steels



1 the layers of steel in a Saxon sword

to provide a 'cutting edge' in the manufacture of their swords – similar techniques were used by the Celts, Vikings and Saxons. In the days when having a good sword was literally a matter of life-or-death, the best weapons combined steels with different aspects of resilience, hardness and strength – no single option was the 'best'.

Fast forward 1000+ years and everyone is talking about 'resilience' as being desirable, both as a personal attribute and as an organisational characteristic². But is this really the case?

The case for resilience

In terms of a personal or organisations characteristics, resilience is the ability adapt to stressful circumstances and to bounce back from adverse events. This is particularly important when dealing with 'unknown unknowns' in risk management – by definition you do not know these risks exist and therefore cannot put management processes in place to deal with them. Only after the risk eventuates can the

¹ The 'elastic limit' of a resilient material is the point at which it becomes either plastic and deforms, or brittle and breaks – it no longer has the ability to recover its original shape.

² Including me! See '**Persilience: A key to success!**' (Persilience = Resilience + Persistence): <https://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com/2012/04/24/persilience-a-key-to-success/>

organisation start to adapt to the situation and deal with the issues. Flexibility and strength are essential and once the risk is controlled the organisation returns to its original 'shape' and work can resume as planned.

At the individual level resilience is defined as the psychological capacity to adapt to stressful circumstances and to bounce back from adverse events; it is a highly sought-after personality trait in the modern workplace. But is too much resilience a bad thing??

Too much resilience

Too much 'resilience' can easily drift into a stubborn refusal to accept reality. A well-known prayer is '*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, Courage to change the things I can, And wisdom to know the difference*'³. Resilience only applies to the second set of circumstances. In many situations an excess of resilience can be very counterproductive; it can lead to:

- Being overly persistent with attempts to achieve unattainable goals.
- Being overly tolerant of adversity and putting up with boring or demoralizing jobs.
- Reduced leadership effectiveness and, by extension, team and organisational effectiveness.
- Being focused on the original 'goal' at the expense of stakeholder satisfaction.

Persistence and resilience are valuable attributes in the right place at the right time but need to be applied sensibly.

The challenge

As with the manufacture of swords, resilience, plasticity, hardness and softness are all important characteristics that are needed at different times. However, unlike a sword, people can adapt their behaviour to each situation. At times an 'agile/adaptive' approach is best, bending to the needs of other stakeholders and changing the goals you are working towards. At times a 'fragile' approach is best – break the relationship and walk away from the unnecessary stress (but you do need the internal resilience to accept the break and move on). In other circumstances, resilience and persistence are precisely the right response to adverse circumstances.

The difficulty we all face is knowing which option is best in each situation both as an individual and as a member of an organisation or team. Acquiring the practical *wisdom to know the difference* is never going to be easy⁴. Perhaps one solution can be found in an effective team; melding people with different characteristics into a strong and effective solution – it worked for the ancient swordsmiths, why not you??

³ The Serenity Prayer written by the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971).

⁴ This type of wisdom is called **Phronesis** (Ancient Greek: φρόνησις, phronēsis). It is a type of wisdom relevant to practical things, requiring an ability to discern how or why to act virtuously and encourage practical virtue, excellence of character, in others for more on phronesis see:
<https://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com/2017/05/21/phronesis-a-key-attribute-for-project-managers/>

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