

On resilience

It seems that the age of crisis is upon us. Covid-19 is probably just another one in a long list of global crises that affect us. Quite often these global crises trigger personal crisis from job loss over depression up to relationship break-ups. So, if crisis is ever-present, we should definitely talk more about how to master it.

Personal calamity can strike at any time and it can hit anyone, anywhere. If this is true it makes sense to look for patterns within people who came out of their own crisis successfully and maybe even stronger. Here's when resilience comes into play.

The Latin word "resilio" was actually first used in material science to describe substances that spring back, rebound or shrink back into form. If we transfer this to humans, resilience actually refers to the ability to recover quickly from misfortune or to rebound after being literally stretched out of shape.

Examples? Well there's Thomas Edison and his journey to developing a functional light bulb. He classified his many attempts by famously saying: "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." Or Ernest Shackleton who failed thrice in his expeditions to reach Antarctica but gained fame for rescuing his entire team after their ship was crushed and after being locked in wintery packed ice for 12 months. The name of his ship? "Endurance".

So, what characterizes both men Edison and Shackleton? Sure, both men were very persistent. But is this enough to bounce back? Certainly not. What is needed is a strong and supportive social network, analytical and communication skills and, most of all, optimism.

Let's go one by one:

Social network: Edison famously founded the first industrial research laboratory. Many of the legendary experiments attributed to him were actually carried out by others under his guidance. Edison's most celebrated invention, the phonograph, was also a communication masterpiece. He presented it in a live demo that baffled the audience and earned him the nickname "The Wizard of Menlo Park". Shackleton was known for his comradery and reliability. Although he was referred to as "the boss" he would never demand a task from other crew members that he wouldn't do himself. He was in constant contact with his crew, keeping morale high and maintaining a strict regimen of routine tasks to keep the group functioning. In between he also allowed for games of football or singing contests.

Analytical skills: More than anything Edison is attributed for his improvements of existing solutions. He didn't invent the light bulb, but he improved it, strengthened it and made it commercially usable. He was a critical thinker and as such he was able to analyze weaknesses and find better solutions. Shackleton, while often seen as an ambitious adventurer, was in fact known for his cautious planning and for never losing his head. If a solution didn't work, like manually freeing his ship from the packed ice, he would rethink his approach and resort to alternatives which actually saved him and his men.

Optimism: Shackleton never gave up. Whether he had to let go of his mission or his ship the "Endurance" he would continue to push forward and achieve what many would see as undoable. Edison also kept his optimism in the face of adversity, which is most clearly reflected in his famous quote mentioned above.

So, what are the lessons learnt here? Those who bounce back successfully are usually gifted with a strong and supportive social network they can rely on. This can be family or friends or a support group which helps you to get past your personal drama. Neither Edison nor Shackleton would even dream of solving their challenges alone. But it also takes calm analysis to understand the situation you are in, to redefine the course of action and to think through the obstacles in your way. Lastly staying positive and avoiding victimization is pivotal. Being able to understand that there is opportunity in every crisis and that every cloud has a silver lining must be the mantra.

H.N. Wright once compared resilience with the behavior of a boxer after he gets knocked down. I would say this is a great example. If the boxer is only persistent and optimistic, he will jump up and, after

several more knock-downs will face the final knock-out. But if he has the right men in his corner and is still able to reflect while lying on the ground, he will adjust tactics and thus can still emerge victorious.

Resilience is a precious character trait and just like precious diamonds it only develops under pressure.

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