

Resiliency and Trust – An Unbeatable Combination for Modern Times

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Can a company be successful and competitive on the market and at the same time trusted?

Eric Greitens, a former Navy Seal and Naval Officer once said on resilience:

“We all have battles to fight. And it’s often in those battles that we are most alive: it’s on the frontlines of our lives that we earn wisdom, create joy, forge friendships, discover happiness, find love, and do purposeful work.”

There are two ways to look at the world we are living in the present moment.

At one level, we are facing unprecedented opportunity. An interconnected world with tremendous, possibly unlimited, potential. Our ability to communicate instantly through multiple mediums is phenomenal. Online educational capabilities can elevate entire nations. An internet connection and a phone can give anyone access to the greatest literature, music and art ever created. The speed with which electric cars have been adopted, internet-based video as a communication method has been embraced by an aging population, and the ability to start a business in one’s home and grow it online is astounding.

At another level, we are facing unprecedented risk – a war with no end in sight, raging inflation, fractured supply chains leading to food insecurity, millions of migrating people seeking safety, opportunity or both, and climate change resulting in stronger hurricanes, floods, wildfires and other catastrophes, not to mention deep political divisions in many countries, as well as a seemingly never-ending pandemic risk.

The challenge for people and businesses today is how to navigate through these two views, both of which are very real. We clearly cannot predict the future, given that in early 2019 no businesses had been expecting to be shuttered for months at a time in 2020 and 2021 due to a pandemic. Perhaps only a few military and political experts were expecting a Russia - Ukraine war but the unified free world response to Russian aggression, was not expected, nor were the resultant rising fuel costs.

What this means is we live, work, build our careers, and operate our businesses in a time that is highly unpredictable. So, how do we thrive despite this uncertainty?

This is the question that we pondered over coffee recently. As two authors, one of whom specializes in leadership and teamwork learnings from famous Polar explorers and other events in history such as the building of the Panama Canal and the great railways, and the other, highly experienced in management of modern global businesses, we concluded that there were two key skills needed. These are resiliency and trust.

Resiliency – three strategies

Resiliency is in great demand at the individual, team, manager, executive and organizational levels. It is the ability to bounce back from any setback or contingency encountered. Resiliency is a skill that can be learned, and the more one exercises their resiliency fibers, the more adaptable a person or entity becomes in a world brimming with opportunity, yet subject to grave risk.

Here are three strategies to build resilience gleaned from our experiences.

First, stop striving to make the perfect decision. Instead focus on having the skills to recover quickly from bad decisions. When there is an unpredictable future, like present times, there may only be a 50-50 chance of a decision generating a positive result in the first instance. A three-step ability, to assess, refine and try again, forged in the knowledge that you and your team have the wherewithal to “have another go,” is what successfully saved many polar expeditions as well as polar explorers’ lives.

Second, being able to inspire is key, and that inspiration has to be spoken communication, not email or text. Theodore Roosevelt in the early 1900s, Winston Churchill in 1940s and John F. Kennedy in the 1960s, were the great orators of their generations. They didn’t have email or text in those days, but they certainly could write telegrams and letters. Yet their inspiring words were spoken. That ability to inspire resilience through words is becoming a lost art. Theodore Roosevelt talked about individuals being able to “dare mighty things” in pursuit of “glorious triumphs”, and stating it’s not the critic who counts, it the person “in the arena” who is to be admired, even if they fail in their pursuit. It only takes one dynamic leader with the right words to inspire a generation to overcome setbacks.

Third, plan that every endeavor of any merit will inevitably hit obstacles. Resiliency comes not from never encountering adversity, but from repeatedly overcoming it in pursuit of a noble goal. Individuals, teams and organizations build resiliency by pursuing goals they believe in, and while doing their best to avoid challenges, being firm in their belief that the goal is what matters, and discomfort, in whatever form whether it is financial risk or physical discomfort (in the case of the Antarctic explorers), these were just part of the day-to-day pursuit of the goal, and to be taken in stride.

The other side of the equation is trust.

Trust – three strategies

Trust matters. There are just a few elemental forces that hold our world together. The one that is the glue of society is called trust. Its presence cements relationships by allowing people, organizations and nations to live, work and collaborate together. Trust enables a feeling of safety and standards and enables belonging to a group.

Trust allows organisations and communities to flourish, while the absence of trust can cause fragmentation, conflict and even war. Our focus is organizations. Based on our experiences in looking at C-level leaders, organizations, stakeholders, managers and teams, co-workers, suppliers, customers, industry bodies, regulators and other groupings, it becomes clear that for trust to flourish, it needs to be multi-directional. Trust needs to flow among and between all these sectors.

Here are three strategies to invest in, rebuild, and renew trust.

First, recognize that trust is personal. In the words of British writer George Eliot, “Those who trust us, educate us.” Truly building trust with our stakeholders – understanding their concerns and their priorities – involves a willingness to listen, to learn, and to hear. Building trust requires business leaders to make conscious daily choices, and especially to act on those choices.

And it needs to be mutual. When leaders trust their stakeholders, they enter an exchange that engenders opportunity: Leaders can prove their trustworthiness, and stakeholders in return can empower their strategic choices and innovations. In essence, mutual trust creates a followership that allows organizations to break new ground, traverse the seismic changes taking place, and emerge thriving on the other side of crisis.

Second, trust becomes established through vulnerability and honesty. Business leaders willing to acknowledge what they don't know are more likely to create trust with their stakeholders than those leaders who mistakenly believe their greatest source of influence is knowledge – or at least acting as though they know.

A similar paradox exists for organizations responding to a one-time breach of trust. Stakeholders are likely to regain – and even strengthen – trust in the organization when leaders admit the mistake, are apologetic, and are transparent in how they move forward.

Third, authenticity is essential, and this matters most to your stakeholders. Intent connects the leader to their humanity and the importance of acting with transparency. But at the end of the day, intent is just a promise; leaders must be able to act on that promise, and do so competently, reliably, and capably. And they must be able to do so in the areas – whether physical, emotional, digital, or financial – that matter most to their stakeholders at that given time.

Resiliency and Trust – an unbeatable combination

A discussion and running theme that seems to be on every executive's mind is, "What is required to be an effective leader in today's totally disruptive business world?"

Businesses of all shapes and sizes in all regions of the world are responding to a vision and set of common values across resiliency and trust. Companies have reported embedding resiliency and regaining trust as the new guiding star for a world in constant change, and in the interconnected environment in which businesses operate.

Organisations can gain resiliency and trust through having sound leadership at all levels and strong cultures founded on purpose, responsibility, accountability. Long term agility and growth comes from that.

If this is implemented in conjunction with clear, concise direction from top management, and in such a way that the middle and lower layers within the company are fully engaged, then the results can be meaningful. However, it is not a one-and-done endeavor. Even after the company is fully aligned behind a compelling strategy, leaders must continue to reinforce resiliency and trust from the top. You can't just adopt it. It must be driven, operationally and in-depth, by the CEO and the top leadership team.

After all, the goal is not to simply navigate today's needed changes but also to create an organization poised for more change. A resilient and trusted team ready for the next battle – whenever that may be.



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A former senior director at leading high tech companies, Brad is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, Vice-Chair of the Friends of the Scott Polar Research Institute, and a member of the Society of Authors.

Brad has presented at business and Antarctic conferences and appeared on numerous historical and business-focused podcasts. Brad’s expertise is in the themes of leadership, teamwork, and the modern lessons we can learn from people who dared greatly and succeeded against all odds.

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