Understanding WE-silience

By Chris Tamdjidi Published on 10.03.2023 19 Min.

EXPANDING RESILIENCE FROM 'I' TO 'WE'

- Resilience can't be understood only at the level of the employee.
- Expanding resilience at the organisational level requires businesses to embed new habits and skills at the team level.
- In this blog post, we outline Awaris's methodology to shift firms' habits and rituals, to make them truly 'WE-Silient'.

It's important to understand an individual's resilience. But we also need to shift our understanding of resilience to the team and organisational levels, for three reasons:

- High stress and burnout are endemic – These aren't isolated phenomena, and can't be solely attributed to the individual.
- Individuals alone can't tackle these issues – When an employee gets stressed, they tend to drop the behaviours that support their resilience. Their stress can often be attributed to the way their organisation functions, such as a recent shift to remote working
- Performance and care are inseparable – Most modern work is collaborative. It requires many people to learn new skills and behaviours, together. Teamwork is undermined by high stress. Firms which have a high-performance culture without a culture of care are bound to underperform.

BUILDING ORGANISATIONAL RESILIENCE SKILLS

The key to boosting team and organisational resilience – something we call WE-silience – is to focus on habits.

Aristotle famously said "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit." Most of our daily lives are made up of habits, both at home and in the workplace. Our unconscious routines are there for good reasons. Having our brains on autopilot allows cognitive resources to be preserved for other tasks. Such as problem solving, learning, and creativity. Our habits are comprised of three core elements:

- **A cue** – A trigger.
- **A routine** – An automatic response.
- **A reward** – Something we experience, ideally positive, as a result of this habit.

This equally applies to organisations. Organisations too are made up of habits. With thousands of cues, routines (many hardwired into IT systems), and rewards. Work cultures grow out of **keystone habits**. Whether leaders are aware of them or not.

Keystone habits encourage widespread change, by creating cultures where new habits can emerge. Their visibility forces workers to make clear choices, and to stick to them. We believe many resilience and wellbeing initiatives don't have their intended systemic impact. Simply because they aren't translated into keystone habits.

SHIFTING MINDSETS

In running our programmes, we've seen how rarely organisations are aware of their (unconscious) habits. How they underestimate the power of rituals and routines to drive systemic change. There are a few of reasons for this:

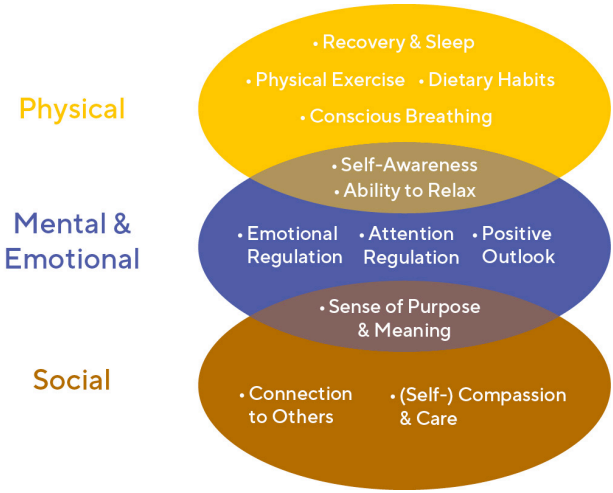
- Some leaders lack the self-reflective tools needed to notice the power of habits over their own lives.
- Some leaders and organisations don't see the value of building habits individually or at the group level.
- In modern workplace cultures the value of habits of attention, emotional awareness, and compassion are rarely acknowledged.

When looking at resilience, the first shift from 'I' to 'We' comes through understanding group habits. Starting by building a realistic assessment of existing habits and then committing to measurable habit building. There are two useful analogies to help understand this:

- **Most businesses know that improving workplace safety requires a focus on keystone habits**. These include routines around safety. Like what to wear, how to walk, safety checks, among others. There are many benefits of this. Firms have a moral duty to preserve life and ensure workplace safety. Unsafe workplaces can also lead to property damage and financial loss. But interestingly, research shows that **workplace safety leads to improved employee productivity, engagement, and service quality**. Against this backdrop, it's perhaps no wonder why the term 'safety first' is so ubiquitous in industry. We suggest 'resilience first' could one day be as powerful for companies in the knowledge economy.
- **Firms often have hundreds of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), but few indicators of resilience**. Someone leading five or more departments might have over a hundred KPIs that they track. While this can be helpful, there's also emerging evidence that too many KPIs are counterproductive.1 And most leaders don't have KPIs or any ongoing measurements which relate to care or resilience. Many modern workers have seen their lives turned upside down by constant emails, and an expectation to be reachable on their days off. Measuring the application of habits to combat these challenges, as well as how much space individuals have for deep work as an example, is crucial. If companies in the knowledge economy want to succeed, they'll need to get serious about mental and emotional wellbeing.

SHIFTING TEAM HABITS AND RITUALS

To promote resilience, businesses will have to build key skills and habits at the team and organisational level. These habits should define their working culture. In our last article, we laid out core resilience skills an individual can cultivate to help them regulate their own state. Below, we've located them in the team context to reflect their translation from 'I' to 'We'.



Physical skills are shown in the yellow ring. They boost resilience and relate primarily to the individual. Companies can support the building of healthy physical habits by providing a good cafeteria, a gym, or health checks, for example. Indeed, many already do.

However, we believe many of these physical resilience skills have less impact on overall workplace culture than **mental & emotional** (blue ring) and **social** (brown ring) resilience skills. Thus, we'll focus on these areas to support WE-Silience. The below chart also identifies three skill areas that exist only at the 'We' level and not at the 'I' level.

Individual resilience skills	Team and organisational resilience skills
Attention / Presence ↔	Attention / Focus
Positivity ↔	Positive outlook
Emotional regulation ↔	Emotional regulation
Self awareneness / Reflection ↔	Meta awareness / Reflexivity
Rest and recovery ↔	Relaxation
Connection ↔	Connection / Communication
Compassion / Care ↔	Compassion / Care
Connection to purpose ↔	Purpose
	+ Synchronisation + Integration / Listening + Leadership

The table below summarises how Awaris helps extend individual resilience skills to the team and organisational levels.

Individual Resilience skill	Individual habits that build the skill	Team & organisational resilience skill	Team & organisational habits that build the skill
Attention	Avoiding multi-tasking, batch e-mail processing, dealing with digital devices, and mindfulness practices.	Cognitive load management, team task prioritisation, and clarity around team focus.	Team or organisation agreements around e-mail processing, reducing information channels, focus times, no-meeting Fridays, and shorter standard meetings.
Positive Outlook	Appreciating positive events and practicing gratitude.	Positive and appreciative team climate and frequent positive feedback.	Noticing what is going well, appreciating employees, expressing positive feedback, and regular company events to share successes.

Emotional Regulation	Mindfulness practices that focus on the body and breath (e.g. bodyscan), reframing, labelling emotions.	Emotionally-intelligent work culture.	Acknowledging team and group emotions, naming them, and reflecting on how to shift group emotions.
Self Awareness/ Reflection	Journaling, coaching sessions, and mindfulness practices.	Team or organisational reflexivity.	Retrospectives, formal reflection points, and fishbowl dialogs.
Relaxation	Reading, resting, being in nature, and mindfulness practices.	Enabling the team to take rest and recover.	Clear boundaries for e-mail and meeting times, overtime tracking.
Empathy/ Connection	Listening well, tuning into others, and ensuring people feel heard.	Connection and communication.	Listening well, communicating openly about human/resilience issues, and sharing data on core resilience measures.
Compassion	Extending ourselves to others and offering to help people.	Culture of care.	Identifying those that need help, supporting them through Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), coaching, and other measures.
Purpose and Meaning	Reflecting on purpose, coaching, and mindfulness practices.	Leading with purpose.	Anchoring purpose in leadership and teams.

In another blog, we explained the above skills and habits for individuals in more detail. For the purpose of this blog, we'll share two examples of extending individual resilience skills to the 'We' level:

- **Meeting-free Fridays –** Implementing meeting-free time has positive effects on both Performance and Care. It allows work to be wrapped up before the weekend, and helps workers relax in their time off.

- **Focus time –** In a recent survey, Microsoft shared data that showed implementing 'focus time' helped boost employees' sense of work/life balance by 30%.2 By doing something as simple as setting aside meeting- and email-free time, they were given space for deep work.

We've identified over 30 more organisational skills that boost individual resilience and WE-silience. Their beauty is that they also build a felt sense of human culture, which is lacking in so many organisations. We believe Awaris can help businesses identify, implement, and measure these habits.

WE-SILIENCE SKILLS AND HABITS

There are three specific skills which only apply at the 'We' level, which companies need to master in order to flourish.

1. Synchronisation – We are social creatures. When we are together, we synchronise our breathing and heart rates.3 Flexible and home working can boost productivity for some. But research shows it can stymie collaboration4 and wellbeing.5 People can feel more disconnected and also struggle with shared focus and productivity.

It's important for teams to be synchronised, for both performance and care outcomes. We've seen the importance of being explicit about collaborative work times. Setting boundaries for when employees are reachable and when they aren't. Agreeing focus times and clear off times. In our experience, over 70% of the teams we've worked with had not yet reached agreements like these when we started supporting them.6 We feel that teams, departments, and organisations need to synchronise fully – agreeing ON times and OFF times. Indeed, one study showed that synchronising OFF times helps collective regeneration.7 The study showed a significant decrease in antidepressant prescriptions during periods when Swedes were on holiday simultaneously, while knowing that work wasn't piling up.

2. Integration – Work on diversity and inclusion has shown the importance of making people feel safe and included. Research at the team level also demonstrates that equality of turn taking is an excellent predictor of the collective intelligence and performance of a team.8 There's also evidence that psychological safety predicts team performance, because it creates the atmosphere in which team members feel heard and included.9

With growth in hybrid work and working from home, there are additional challenges to integration. Many employees struggle with a lack of belonging and engagement. Hybrid work in particular comes with a number of biases. This includes evidence that those less visible (not in the office) are seen to be less productive and receive fewer interesting projects.

Against this backdrop, teams and organisations need to improve habits of integration. These could include teaming up people who are in the office with those who aren't. Being explicit about soliciting opinions of those that primarily work from home (WFH). Examining the different needs of employees that WFH and how they can be integrated. Their sense of being integrated at work has a strong impact on care and performance outcomes.

3. Leadership – Finally, the third set of resilience skills at the 'We' level is leadership. We'll address these skills in much more detail in an upcoming blog post.

RESILIENCE AND WE-SILIENCE COMPETENCIES

When businesses embark on building their resilience and WE-silience skills, new competencies emerge.

- **Energy management** – Organisations are excellent at financial management. But the burnout endemic shows that they are poor at employee energy management. Building resilience at the organisational level will allow the competence of energy management to emerge naturally.

- **Self-regulation and workload management** – Our experience shows us that while businesses often have multiple KPIs and a clearly defined strategic focus, they're often poor at reducing tasks or letting processes go. This was a liberating experience in the pandemic; seeing how many sub-optimal processes were set aside. In our experience, the skill in workload management comes from taking recovery and focus time seriously. When these are valued, it's easier for individuals and organisations to set boundaries and focus on the things that lead to positive outcomes.

- **Learning and adaptability** – Many businesses, and particularly large ones, struggle to be adaptable. But when we boost overall energy and workload management, resilience improves. As a result, adaptability and learning naturally flourishes.

- **Social belonging** – A final competence that emerges at the organisational level is a sense of shared belonging and purpose, something we at Awaris view as a crucial component of any flourishing company.

Previous and upcoming blogs:

Blog 1 – From Resilience to We-Silience: a multi-level view of resilience

Blog 2 – How to build individual resilience: the 12 key resilience skills

Blog 3 – How to build We-silience: building team and organisational habits

Blog 4 – Leading with We-silience: building leaders' resilience intelligence

Blog 5 – Discuss the role of mindfulness in building resilience.

Blog 6 – Resilience profiles