

LEADERSHIP RESILIENCE

By Chris Tamdjidi · Published on 31.03.2023 · 18 Min

LEADING FOR WE-RESILIENZ

- Leaders increasingly recognise the importance of building resilient organisations, or WE-silient businesses, as we call them.
- However, they often fail to put this idea into practice. They don't understand the importance of their role, what stresses their teams face, and tend to prioritise output over resilience during busy times.
- At Awaris, our in-house research has helped us develop a five-point path for managers to truly lead for resilience in their teams.

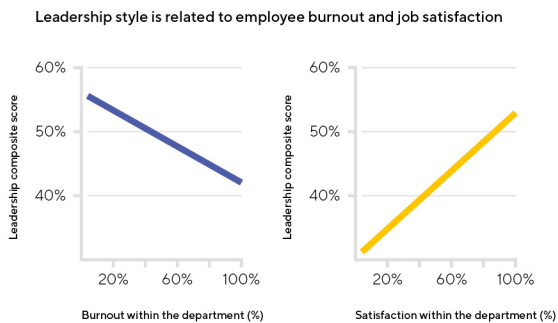
RESILIENCE IS ON THE RADAR

Leaders are increasingly aware of the importance of resilience for their staff and organisations. Sustainable performance, wellbeing, and resilience often come high on the list of priorities in leadership surveys. They wish to build human-centric, organisation-wide resilience (WE-silience). But leaders often fail to put this idea into practice, for a number of reasons.

- Leaders don't acknowledge the importance of their role.
- They don't personally feel the same levels of stress as more junior members of their teams.
- They know resilience is important, but don't know how to boost it at an organisational level.
- When their business faces challenges and deadlines, the idea of resilience moves down the list of their priorities.

LEADERS DON'T REALISE HOW MUCH THEY IMPACT ORGANISATIONAL RESILIENCE

We all know leaders make a difference to a business. What's also becoming more apparent is how they impact the stress and burnout levels of their teams. Many organisations are rife with anecdotal stories of how certain managers might leave a trail of stress and burnout in their wake. And increasingly, research support this. A Mayo Clinic study¹ showed that leadership style was significantly associated with the burnout rate and overall satisfaction within the unit (Figure 1).



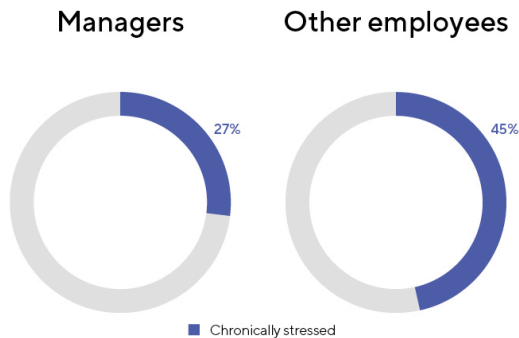
A higher leadership score is negatively related to employee burnout ($r = -0.33$) and positively related to job satisfaction ($r = 0.68$]¹

his means that 33% of the variance of burnout scores of employees can be explained by leadership style – a strong value for a topic as multifaceted as burnout is. The relationship with satisfaction is even stronger, with 68% of the variation in unit satisfaction explained by leadership style. Put simply, a good leadership style is related to higher unit satisfaction scores, and lower unit burnout scores. Thus, a useful starting point for leading for resilience is understanding the impact of leadership styles on resilience in organisations.

LEADERS DON'T FEEL AS STRESSED AS THEIR STAFF

A second obstacle to building WE-silent organisations is that leaders lack the felt experience of stress in their organisations. Our in-house data shows that leaders typically have lower perceived stress levels than employees and middle managers (Figure 2). This reflects several factors. Managers often have more control over their schedule and have more experience with stress management. Some leaders suppress or hide stress when they feel it. And there's likely a selection bias in management roles, towards those better equipped to deal with stress.

Managers feel less stressed compared to other employee groups



Awaris Data: Perceived stress compared between managers and employees, N=686

Leaders also navigated the COVID-19 pandemic more easily than junior employees. The Microsoft 2021 WorkTrends report showed **leaders were twice as likely to be flourishing than young single employees after the pandemic.**² A 2022 report by The Economist³ showed that 61% of managers felt the pandemic improved their work-life balance, compared to 21% who felt it worsened it. For other employee groups, the changes felt a bit different. Just 25% felt their work-life balance improved, while 41% felt it worsened. This makes sense. Many managers might sit in their quiet home studies, with children at university, looking out at their garden. They simply have a different experience compared to more junior employees that may be perched at a kitchen table, a child on one lap, trying to get work done while needing to cook.

A manager's resilience is also supported by their purpose, which is largely absent for junior employees. A McKinsey study⁴ showed that 85% of senior leaders strongly agree that they're connected to their purpose in their day-to-day work, compared to just 15% of other employee groups. Leaders are nourished and energised by purpose. It can contribute to their resilience. Whereas more junior employees simply don't thrive on work in the same way. Taken together, managers simply don't feel stress in their bodies in the same way their teams do. So perhaps it's no surprise they don't give burnout the importance it deserves.

LEADERS DON'T KNOW HOW TO BOOST WE-SILIENCE

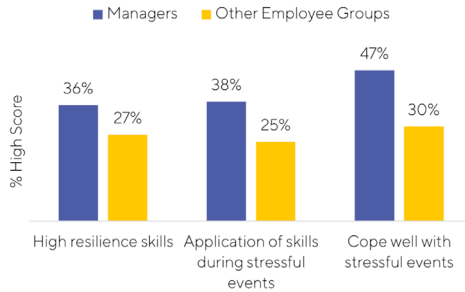
Awaris met with a senior institutional leader recently. The manager confessed that he wasn't a good example of actively engaging in resilience behaviours. He said he is someone who just "happened to be tough." But when we pushed him further on this, he revealed three things which helped him. He took time to breathe deeply during the day. He made sure he was home with his family for dinner (even if he had to work again afterwards). And he went to the gym several times a week.

Working through Awaris' resilience skills model together, we showed him he was engaging in three strong resilience behaviours on a regular basis: conscious breathing, social connection, and movement/exercise. **He hadn't realised he was actively supporting resilience with these behaviours.** He then shared this with a number of people in his organisation. They'd previously assumed he was just one of the tough ones. But to hear that he did breathing exercises regularly to cope surprised everyone.

Many leaders have built up regular resilience behaviours. But they've become so automatic they're not really conscious of them. Our data suggests these skills and behaviours explain why managers tend to be more resilient than average employees, rather than them simply being tougher (Figure 3). Since some managers don't understand that their resilience behaviours are skills, they fail to see that they can be nurtured over time. Much like

the skills of project management or leadership, building resilience skills takes time, attention, training, and measurement. Some programmes suggest that resilience can be learned in a couple of hours, and appear merely as a “box ticking” exercise for HR. But in truth, there are no quick fixes. Resilience is a long-term journey of skill development.

Managers demonstrate higher resilience skills which may influence their stress management ability.



Awaris Data: N=436 participants of the resilience screening

PERFORMANCE OFTEN TAKES PRIORITY IN BUSY TIMES

In busy times, such as the end of month or working on specific client projects, we’ve noticed that any existing focus on resilience can fall away. And almost all attention shifts back towards work output. This implies leaders believe there’s a conflict between performance and care. Whereas in fact, they are inextricably linked. **Indeed, by focusing relentlessly on performance during tough times, some managers are undermining their team’s resilience and performance in the long run.**

The working world has changed enormously in the past 20 years. The rise of digital communication tools often designed to hijack our attention leads to an increased busyness and negatively impacts the ability to focus. A chronically fragmented attention can in turn lead to chronic stress which is associated with a large number of health risks such as hypertension, heart disease, and depression. All of these naturally negatively impact productivity, innovation, collaboration, and focus. Numerous studies have demonstrated that work output is impaired by ill health and presenteeism. Perhaps it used to be enough to go on holiday. But today, this isn’t enough. We need to help individuals take care of themselves, as well as improving WE-silience at the organisational level.

We once worked with engineers and leaders tasked with clearing up a scandal in an automotive company. The sums involved were mind boggling. The pressures on staff crushing. Senior executives, while hearing that their employees were exhausted, simply shrugged their shoulders. "What can we do? The issue simply has to be fixed." Interestingly, it was a medical doctor who eventually managed to get ongoing resilience support for those involved.

The first sessions Awaris ran with the company were challenging. We knew the workload wouldn't get better for at least a year. But over time, in our weekly sessions, things started improving for those involved. We worked with mindfulness. Helping staff acknowledge the stress and pressures they faced. Sharing experiences and discussing emotional regulation and focus strategies. They were given time and ongoing support in skill development and processing their stress. Ultimately, the care they received helped them perform. And indeed, when some of them look back on this time, they felt satisfaction. Proud that they emerged stronger. More resilient and conscious, from this challenging time.

CULTIVATING RESILIENCE INTELLIGENCE IN LEADERS

Research shows the importance of leaders' stress mindsets, of having an awareness of their own mental state in the face of work pressures. It can impact their perception of stress in their team and how they support the unit. A study by Kaluza and colleagues posits that a "leader's stress mindset," impacts the "degree to which leaders intend to show health-promoting support."⁵ In other words, managers who are aware of their own stress are more likely to lead for We-silience in their teams.

Our experience at Awaris shows that it's effective to take leaders on a resilience journey which includes 24/7 measurement of their heart rate variability (HRV). This helps them reflect on the percentage of time they're stressed, and how it impacts their sleep and recovery. It also shows them which activities help regulate their stress levels. In doing so, it helps managers understand the importance of building resilience skills in their working life.

LEADING FOR WE-SILIENCE

When there's a readiness and emerging skills in resilience leadership, only then can resilience behaviours take root in an organisation. Awaris sees five areas that managers need to focus on to lead for resilience.

1. Living resilience.
2. Making the time for management.
3. Leading well.
4. Supporting employees.
5. Anchoring habits.

1. LIVING RESILIENCE

Leaders need to live resilience. Life is short. Living with a positive mindset, as well as having healthy social connections, habits of movement, and diet, can extend a life on average by 10 years!⁶ Living resilience really benefits leaders themselves.

But it also benefits managers' teams and organisations. Evidence from organisational wellbeing interventions show leaders' behaviour impacts the quality of organisational wellbeing initiatives. So it pays for leaders to engage in a life-long journey of learning the habits of resilience. And then sharing their experiences with their team.

2. MAKING THE TIME FOR MANAGEMENT

Recent surveys point to surprising data. Many leaders spend less than 5% of their time actually managing people. That is, having one-to-one's, reviewing progress, and giving feedback. Surveys by Gallup and others have demonstrated that when leaders spend more time engaging with their team – prioritising management – team happiness and productivity increase. Leaders need to prioritise managing. Helping their employees, who face endless demands on their time, to say 'no' to certain tasks. Research shows managers have a positive impact on employee resilience when they:

- ◉ Organise well.
- ◉ Communicate frequently.
- ◉ Pay attention to workload and help prioritise.
- ◉ Are reachable.
- ◉ Provide staff with necessary resources.
- ◉ Manage conflicts.

3. LEADING WELL

Systematic reviews also suggest leaders can have a positive impact on wellbeing and resilience through their leadership style, in particular if they demonstrate some of the following specific leadership behaviours :

- ◉ Provide a compelling vision of the future and a wider purpose.
- ◉ Act as positive role models, reflect positive organisational values, and appear as authentic human beings.
- ◉ Coach and listen well.
- ◉ Encourage people to solve problems themselves, to learn and grow.

All of these empowering styles of leadership help employees feel emotionally safer, more agency and more ability to manage their own resilience.

4. SUPPORTING EMPLOYEES

Leaders also act as gatekeepers. Helping to signpost employees in particular directions, giving them access to wider organisational resources. Taking this role seriously is important. This doesn't mean leaders should become employees' therapists. But it does mean they actively check in and see what the employee needs and what resources are available to help.

5. ANCHORING HABITS

Finally, leaders can lead for WE-silience when they anchor habits in their teams and organisational units which further resilience as we have discussed in the previous blog post.

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