Workforce leaders operate in an increasingly complex and fast-paced climate. As new competitors emerge and customer demands rise, leaders know that their products and services can turn obsolete quickly and that they must find ways to pivot effectively when change becomes necessary. To make their organizations more nimble, they outsource, eliminate layers of management and downsize. They often forget, however, that employees can find turbulence incredibly taxing on the emotional resources they need to continue working effectively.

In response, organizational leaders must help employees build resiliency and agility. Resiliency is the ability to adapt and grow stronger in response to adversity. Resilient employees absorb change and remain tough through times of organizational change. They are more productive as a result of not allowing uncertainty to become a distraction.

Agility, defined as the ability to spot and exploit opportunities in the environment, is a capacity for being proactive. Agile employees possess a flexible mindset that allows them to generate and implement novel ideas.

Put simply, resilient employees withstand change, while agile employees capitalize on opportunities and create change. Both resiliency and agility are critical adaptive capacities for surviving and thriving in turbulent times. Employees need to be proactive in terms of generating and implementing innovative ideas, but they also must have the capacity to handle unforeseen challenges.

**How to Build Resiliency**

**Be a Good Role Model**

People have what neuroscientists call mirror neurons—cellular circuits that activate when we watch someone else perform an action. Essentially, mirror neurons make no distinction between what one sees and what one does. Mirror neurons are distributed throughout many areas of our brain and are critical for learning new skills by imitation.

A great way to build employee resiliency, then, is simply to exhibit resilient behaviors. Display confidence, express optimism about the future, set meaningful goals, address problems rather than withdrawing from them and engage in courageous communication. Employees will key on those actions and recreate (in subtle ways) the inner experiences that their manager or supervisor has when performing them.

**Stimulate Thought and Creativity**

Leaders who demonstrate effective problem solving by challenging assumptions, asking questions in different ways and seeking
different perspectives foster employees’ resilience by stimulating intellectual reflection and creative solutions. When that happens, crises get viewed as new opportunities that can be explored and overcome productively rather than in a hurried, stress-driven way.

One important thing to mention is that, in the face of problems, people often become locked in their own heads and overcomplicate matters. Breaking through a mental block often requires creating intellectual distance from the problem. Leaders can help employees create brain space by asking them to imagine they are giving advice to a colleague who is in the same position. People who perform this exercise can start seeing the big picture and focusing on the most important aspects of the issue.

Know Your People
Effective leaders treat each employee as an individual and strives to make everyone feel valued and respected by responding to each employee’s unique needs. Mentoring and coaching makes doing this possible because such initiatives involve encouraging ongoing professional development, listening to concerns and remembering the protégé’s needs, values and skills. Providing personalized attention helps each employee develop the sense that they matter to their boss and the organization. Employees are then more likely to feel competent, interpret stressful situations positively and put forth their best efforts in the face of adversity.

How to Encourage Agility
Curb Your Negativity Bias
While many executives espouse the importance of novel ideas, they often exhibit a subtle, perhaps unconscious, bias against creativity in times of uncertainty. When people experience uncertainty, the negative aspects of novel ideas—potential for failure and social rejection—become prominent in leaders’ minds, and they eschew innovation in the name of practicality. Holding a bias against creativity can interfere with someone’s ability to recognize better ideas when they arise. It is important, then, for leaders to become aware of this bias, prepare for it and consciously counteract it.

Prompt Discourse and Debate
Innovation emerges from diversity and productive conflict. In 2014’s Collective Genius: The Art and Practice of Leading Innovation, researchers Linda A. Hill, Greg Brandeau, Emily Truelove and Kent Lineback highlighted how leaders of innovative organizations accentuate differences in viewpoints among employees and encourage debate and discourse to generate a wide array of potential solutions. The best leaders also test ideas and integrate even seemingly opposing ideas when making decisions.

Bill Coughran, who served as Google’s senior vice president of engineering from 2003 to 2011, exemplified this approach. At the start of Coughran’s tenure, Google used Google File System (GFS) to store the enormous amount of data required to support its search function. Coughran recognized that the rapid growth of web searches, Gmail and other Google applications made replacing GFS with something that could handle more and different kinds of data.

Google engineers generally fell into two camps, with one faction wanting to add a system on top of the existing GFS platform and the other wanting to scrap GFS entirely and build a new system from scratch. Coughran encouraged each group to develop and test their solutions. During meetings to evaluate progress, he deliberately stoked tension and encouraged vigorous debate because he saw challenging and questioning team members as an important part of his role. “You don’t want an organization that just salutes and does whatever you say,” he told the Collective Genius authors. You want an organization that argues with you.”

Organizational leaders looking to cultivate an innovative, agile workforce could take a cue from Coughran. Hiring people willing to disagree and drawing attention to differences in opinion can encourage active debates that yield the best solutions.

Give Employees Freedom
Employees thrive when they are allowed to exercise some degree of autonomy over how tasks and assignments get completed. An effective leader must establish goals so team members know where they are headed, but employees should be granted freedom to determine how they reach the goals. Empowering employees to use approaches that suit them and their strengths increases motivation and confers ownership over work processes and products. Managers often fall short on this aspect of promoting innovation by constantly changing goals, failing to define goals clearly and micromanaging.

Whatever the future holds, one thing is certain: Workplace realities will change. Organizational leaders can help employees develop mindsets and attitudes that prepare them to remain productive and innovative through times of uncertainty. Resiliency and agility stem from being psychologically equipped to adapt to change and capitalize on opportunities.

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