



The tale of the Tree and the Reed in the age of resilience - Part I

Lessons from Aesop's Fables may help us survive, revive, and thrive beyond this great tempest



The Tree and Reed in the Tempest

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Since my April post of **loss, grief, and leadership** I've had plenty of feedback and decided to reflect more on what many are calling 'resilience'. With Melbourne in a stage 4 lockdown, time to review this overused, perhaps misunderstood, critical human skill and how we can further develop it. This paper is in three parts. Part 1- the Tree's point of view and the assumptions often associated with resilience. Part 2 - the Reed's point of view, its use of adaptability, and how leaders can assist their teams' resilience and adaptability. Part 3 will bring together a range of resources to help us all top up our resilience reserves and adaptability skills.

Part 1 - The fable of the Tree and the Reed

The fableⁱ deals with the contrasting behaviour of a large tree, which trusts in its strength to withstand the tempest

being eventually blown over, while the reed that bends with the wind survives the flood. Many cultures have similar proverbs; the Chinese proverb 'A tree that is unbending is easily broken' and the Jewish Talmud (*Taanit* 20b), says 'A person should be pliable like a reed, not hard like a cedar.'ⁱⁱ Most scholars see the lesson as a test of strength, toughness, and even pride, versus humility, endurance and patience, offering advice on how to survive in turbulent times.

The mighty Tree's POV

Resilience, derived from *resile*, the 'ability to recover quickly to the original shape after a shock'.ⁱⁱⁱ We often refer to resilience in terms of toughness and firmness in the face of adversity. This view of resilience assumes: a limited tempest; that falling back to 'the original shape' or the old normal is preferred; and, that we are

somehow lesser if we don't have resilience reserves ready to deploy to 'toughen up'.

Let's now consider some of these assumptions.

A limited tempest? Scientists tell us that a safe, highly effective and universally available vaccine is most likely at least 12 - 18 months away. Early vaccines may not be fully effective so the current health precautions may continue for some time as vaccine development continues.^{iv} Meanwhile the economic effects, as measured by employment recovering to pre-crisis levels, are estimated by Deloitte Economics to go out to 2023 and beyond.^v We may need to be resilient for a longer tempest.

Going back to the old normal? Australians are globetrotters and while some maybe dreaming of a long overseas flight, many have no interest in rushing back to the office commutes even when a safe and fully effective vaccine is available. Others will be rushing back to socialise with their colleagues. While Zoom fatigue is setting in many are appreciating the unexpected gift that has arrived – an epiphany that we don't need so many business trips. The 'genie out of the bottle' - workplace flexibility is finally a non-issue.

At a societal level, many are asking what we want to change? To not do this would be to: disrespect the loss of those that have passed early isolated from their family; continue to devalue

our already undervalued essential workers; and forget our grief for the

huge economic and mental health impact to families and lost youth opportunities. As the supposed 'lucky country', Covid 19 has exposed the fragility of our health, disability and aged care systems, our over-casualised workforce, and the inequity of our income support systems. Does resilience really mean we should simply return to our 'original shape'?

Resilience as a learned skill or reservoir – we all start from different bases upon which we have accumulated our reserves of resilience based on our own life experience. Those from a fortunate background may have had less hardship from which to build resilience skills. Equally those that may have been through great adversity may have built up but could have equally depleted their reserves. *Psychology Today*^{vi} reminds us that we can build our resilience reserves by developing good support networks, increasing self-care, understanding what we can control, setting some new challenges, and finding our purpose.

Resilience alone is not going to optimise our ability to survive, revive and thrive in this great tempest. In part 2 we look at the Reeds' experience and building resilient and adaptable teams.

I was recently reminded of an old expression that could sum up this crisis for many: 'sometimes the best gifts come poorly wrapped.'

End of part 1.

References

¹ <https://fablesfaesop.com/the-tree-and-the-reed.html>

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Oak_and_the_Reed

¹ <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/resilience>

¹ <https://theconversation.com/creating-a-covid-19-vaccine-is-only-the-first-step-itll-take-years-to-manufacture-and-distribute-144352>

<https://www.bcg.com/en-au/publications/2020/covid-vaccines-timelines-implications>

¹ <https://www2.deloitte.com/au/en/pages/media-releases/articles/lockdown-downturn-journey-toward-post-pandemic-job-recovery-200520.html>

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/basics/resilience>



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