

## The tale of the Tree and the Reed in the age of resilience – part II

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



The Oak and the Reed by Achille Michallon. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, UK

*This article follows on from [part 1](#), where we explored the meaning of the tale, the Tree's point of view and the assumptions associated with resilience. Here we consider the Reed's point of view, adaptability, and how leaders can assist their own and 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. My April post [loss, grief and leadership](#) prefaces this series.*

### The humble Reed's POV

The fable 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. The reed is said to represent humility, endurance, and patience

where successful survival comes from a more flexible or adaptable version of resilience.

So we might say the reed has chosen to incorporate adaptability into its view of what it means to be resilient and to survive and thrive post tempest. Charles Darwin stated 'It is not the strongest of the species that survives...it is the one that is most adaptable to change.'<sup>i</sup> Business has always sought adaptability as a top essential skill.

Adaptability was signalled by HBR in 2011<sup>ii</sup> as a 'new competitive advantage'. The faster we can adapt to change, the better we can accept and embrace our VUCA world. On a personal level, Forbes<sup>iii</sup> describes the 'Adaptability Quotient' or AQ as an individual's ability to adjust to change in real time. Those with high AQ will:

- Keep an open mind to new ideas, including experimenting, failing, and ongoing learning;
- Keep an open heart to see through another's eyes; and,
- Keep an open will, letting go of ego and sitting with the discomfort of the unknown.

Adaptability like resilience is best developed collectively. Mental health expert, Professor Ian Hickie, on ABC TV's *The Drum*<sup>iv</sup> recently stated that resilience comes from the collective vs. some individual stoicism. We will do much better, become more resilient, if we work with friends, families, teams, workplaces, and local communities to support each other get through this tempest.

### Leading to build resilience and adaptable teams

Resilience and adaptability isn't of much use without hope. The tree and the reed both believed that they would survive the great tempest. In [loss, grief and leadership](#) we saw that Victor Frankl's and John Stockdale's POW survival depended on their ability to remain resolved to be free while accepting they lacked control of the 'when'. After all, we will only resile to stay the course, patiently endure and adapt, if we can see a better future, which reinforces our desire to contribute to making that future better.

At this time, leaders can assist their teams deepen their reservoirs of resilience and flex their adaptability muscles via reorienting the team's focus beyond the day to day to a brighter future by resetting goals that delivers on their shared core purpose.

As leaders we know that modelling is key. We will need to regularly check in with ourselves and with our peers on our resilience and adaptability skills as per the AQ list above. Through demonstrating adaptability, taking risks, accepting mistakes, fast learning, and resilient thinking, leaders will find their team members more willing to step up. We can strengthen cultures that celebrate and reward these exemplars. *More on this next time.*

Very importantly, as leaders we can often feel alone shouldering a great weight of expectation to always be strong for others – our team, peers, family and friends. We need to connect with our peers sharing stories – the old saying 'a problem shared is...' Now is the time to strengthen our active, empathetic listening and invest in the time to support each other.

*Accepting it's ok to not always be ok is very ok.*

Resilience partnered with adaptability is a more sustainable surviving, reviving, and thriving formula. We can build our reserves to have the strength to recover from this great tempest while learning from these experiences to create a brighter future. So perhaps the strong tree and the patient reed can team up next time around. Better to be in a partnership in these times of iso!

Next time we look at topping up our building resilience and adaptability skills.

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## References

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- i <https://drexel.edu/goodwin/professional-studies-blog/overview/2019/September/4-ways-to-boost-your-adaptability-skills/>
- ii <https://hbr.org/2011/07/adaptability-the-new-competitive-advantage>
- iii <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robertcerone/2019/12/20/how-and-why-to-boost-your-adaptability-quotient/#796518396918>
- iv <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-05/the-drum:-wednesday-5th-of-august/12528116?nw=0>



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