

Recipe for Resilience: Lessons from Different Generations

The difference between successful and unsuccessful organisations is their ability to bounce back from disruptions. Top organisations in the world today are more likely to have faced and recovered from more setbacks than other organisations, which made them more successful. The same applies to great managers¹ like Steve Jobs, Thomas Edison, Nelson Mandela, and Henry Ford. Resilience is the ability to adapt, recover, and capitalise on adversities, making one stronger for future setbacks. It is about the speed and strength of our response to disruptions.²

Growing up as the first child, I witnessed a remarkable level of resilience from my mum in her business. I remember my mum starting her business, about 15 years ago, in a rented shop with few food spices and cooking oils in stock. But today, she has a booming business with plenty of loyal customers. The first major setback I witnessed her facing was when her shop owner gave her a short notice to vacate her shop. I was about 11 years old then. Someone had bought the shop without the landlord informing my mum about his intention to sell the shop. The new landlady wanted to start using the shop immediately, and my mum's pleas for more time to find another place were to no avail.

My mum was devastated. The business was our major source of livelihood. She was not able to find another shop close by (in order to retain customers). So, she settled for a shop in the outskirts of the market, a place labeled *Ogbọ-ezi* – “a place for pigs.”³ This place was typically the last resort for traders (except butchers) in *Abia Nkpor* market for several reasons, mainly for its dirty surrounding and poor security of goods at night. But today, despite the several adversities she encountered, she has broken the *Ogbọ-ezi* stereotype, and has become popular in *Ogbọ-ezi* for her trade.

Using the experiences of my mum and myself, I will extrapolate the recipe for resilience from different generations.

Recipe for Resilience

The first step to resilience is to humbly accept reality. It is understanding that you cannot change what has happened, but what happens afterwards. When my mum's pleas for the new shop owner to give her more time failed, she accepted her fate and looked for another shop. Resilience requires

¹ “Managers” in this essay context is not restricted to managers or leaders of people. Managers in this essay also include individuals with no leadership position, as one is first a manager of himself.

² Cat Clifford, “Adam Grant: Resilience Is the Secret to Success. Here Are 2 Ways to Improve Yours,” CNBC, June 7, 2017, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/06/06/adam-grant-how-to-improve-resilience...>

³ Pigs used to be sold in *Ogbọ-ezi*

the courage to face painful realities, the faith that a solution is around the corner despite nothing suggesting so, and the drive to not give up amid the feeling of hopelessness.⁴

When she found a shop to rent at Ogbø-ezi, I helped in relocating her goods to the present shop. The shop was literally a hip-level round wooden cupboard. Every day, we had to bring out (and arrange) our goods from the cupboard in the morning, and pack in the goods in the evening. It didn't take long for my mum to adapt in her new environment. She soon observed that for her to make it there, she would need to do something extra, something creative.

My mum majorly sold food condiments, cooking oil and tin tomatoes. So, she diversified, albeit gradually (due to finance), to selling detergents, soaps, nylon bags, and some other food condiments restaurant owners usually buy. Since her shop was situated in the middle of cow and goat abattoirs, she observed that meat buyers often needed nylon bags, and she started selling them. She saw that the butchers needed iron sponges and detergents for their daily activities, and she sold them. Most importantly, she started selling seasonings tailored to the needs of those who buy meat from the butchers. As a result, she started earning more, compared to when she was staying in her former shop. According to Peter Drucker, unexpected changes - failures or successes – are opportunities for innovations.⁵ During the unexpected change of shop, my mum's focus on opportunities enabled her to thrive in Ogbø-ezi.

Nevertheless, she faced greater setbacks as she progressed. Her money and goods were stolen several times during her early years in Ogbø-ezi. Occasionally, we would come in the morning to find out that our money and some costly goods are gone; no security officer to be held accountable. But she persevered until the shop was rebuilt into a more secure type.

Managers must also learn from their failures, to avoid a repeat of history. My mum would learn from her experience with her last landlord. Similar to her previous landlord, the new landlord wanted to sell the shop on short notice. My mum did not see it coming and so, had not save towards buying the shop. But after successfully purchasing and becoming the owner of the shop, she started saving towards another shop in case of future surprises. Today, she owns two other shops which includes one that is inside the “very secure” market.

“In an entrepreneurial society individuals face a tremendous challenge, a challenge they need to exploit as an opportunity: the need for continual learning and relearning.” ~ Peter Drucker⁶

For my mum, her motivation during these setbacks was her family. Being the breadwinner of the family, she had to work harder than most of her fellow women in the market who, perhaps, were not the breadwinners of their family. Resilience thrives on a sense of one's obligation to others,⁷

⁴ Steven Snyder, “Why Is Resilience So Hard.” *Harvard Business Review*, 2013.

⁵ Peter F. Drucker, *Innovation and Entrepreneurship*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1985.

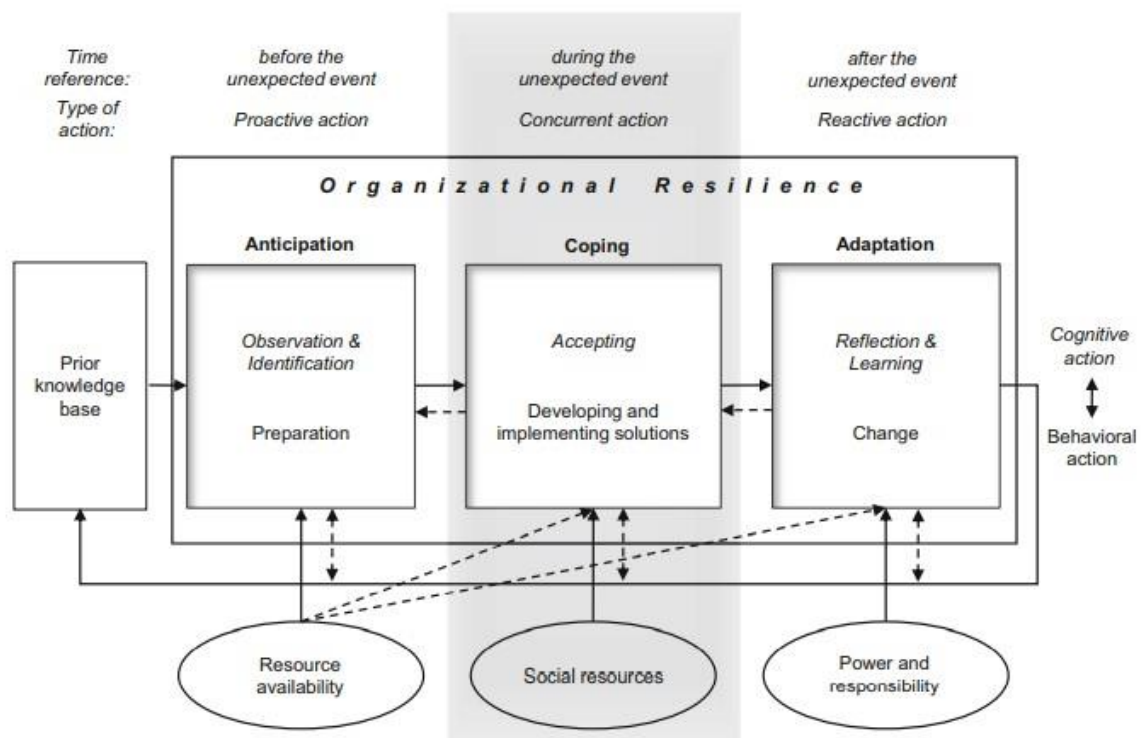
⁶ Peter F. Drucker, *The Essential Drucker*. 1st ed. HarperCollins Publishers, 2001.

⁷ Rosabeth M. Kanter, “Surprises Are the New Normal; Resilience Is the New Skill.” *Harvard Business Review*, 2013.

and the more people can “connect these dots” between their daily job and who benefits from it, the easier it will be to find the resilience to keep pushing despite adversities.⁸

Furthermore, the availability of human and financial resources influences an organisation’s level of resilience during crisis.⁹ The more my mum’s monetary and human (my younger siblings) resources increased over the years, the stronger her business became. Human and financial resources act like shock-absorbers, reducing the impact of adversities.¹⁰ Their availability promotes the development of anticipation, coping and adaptation capabilities – the three inseparable and overlapping stages of organisational resilience.¹¹ Stephanie Duchek defined organisational resilience as an “organisational ability to anticipate potential threats, to cope effectively with adverse events, and to adapt to changing conditions.”¹²

The diagram below best illustrates the recipe for building organisational and individual resilience.



A capability-based conceptualisation of organisational resilience¹³

⁸ In a research Adam Grant carried out among employees of a charity organisation, he brought a benefactor of the organisation to meet the employees. The benefactor expressed how grateful he was to the workers for what they did, and explained the impact their efforts in his life. After this event, the employees worked harder and in a week, the average money an employee raised increased by 142% (Clifford, “Adam Grant: Resilience Is the Secret to Success. Here Are 2 Ways to Improve Yours.”)

⁹ Stephanie Duchek, “Organizational Resilience: A Capability-Based Conceptualization,” *Business Research* 13 (2019): 215–46, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40685-019-0085-7>.

¹⁰ Duchek, “Organizational Resilience: A Capability-Based Conceptualization.”

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² *ibid*

¹³ *ibid*

Trust and communication are equally key to resilience. This duo work *pari passu*. I experienced how important they are to organisational resilience when I was the editor-in-chief of my department's magazine publication. Amid a short semester and the cumbersome final year stress, our course advisors gave us two weeks to publish the magazine.¹⁴ This task tore my resilience muscles to shreds. I knew the editor-in-chief role was going to be very demanding when I was nominated by my classmates, but I didn't expect it to be depressing. We faced setbacks which eventually made us miss the deadline. We were not able to finish editing the magazine articles on time; few issues came up too; the publisher did not meet up to the agreed time; and most importantly, I had to juggle doing my assignments, my final year research project, seminars, tests, and exams!

Those days were the most stressful period of my life. My lack of trust and confidence in my proficient editorial team took a toll on me physically and mentally, making my team less resilient to the setbacks. Being a perfectionist and wanting the magazine articles to be at the highest standards, I edited almost all the selected articles again, after they had been edited by the desk editors and then the sub editors. I should have delegated duties more. I should have trusted and communicated (my challenges) with my editorial team more.

Just as money is the currency for transactions, trust is the currency of creative resilience.¹⁵ An organisation built on trust is key to thriving and leading in this age of discontinuity.¹⁶ Drucker too observed that organisations are no longer built on force, but on trust.¹⁷ When the stress of publishing my department's magazine got to a breaking point, I had to start trusting my team more. To be honest, I had no choice. Knowing the individuals in my editorial team, I began to utilise their various strengths. Their diverse opinions and suggestions made us more resilient to the daily challenges we encountered.¹⁸ Together, we were more resilient and bounced back from each setback. When you trust and communicate with your team or employees, they care more. When they care, the organisation is made more resilient¹⁹ because resilience is a team sport.²⁰ It is therefore crucial for managers to constantly communicate their actions, ideas and challenges to their team. Managers should encourage their subordinates to always feel free to communicate too. This way, organisations' crisis can be nipped in the bud before they escalate.

¹⁴ The magazine publication was a (final year) course of its own

¹⁵ Terence Mauri, "In Trust, We Thrive." Drucker Forum, May 3, 2023. <https://www.druckerforum.org/blog/in-trust-we-thrive-by-terence-mauri/>

¹⁶ Mauri, "In Trust, We Thrive."

¹⁷ Peter F. Drucker, *Managing Oneself*. Harvard Business Press, 2008.

¹⁸ Tim Harford, *Messy: How to Be Creative and Resilient in a Tidy-Minded World*. Little, Brown Book Group, 2016.

¹⁹ Kanter, "Surprises Are the New Normal; Resilience Is the New Skill."

²⁰ Rob Cross, Karen Dilllon, and Danna Greenberg, "The Secret to Building Resilience." *Harvard Business Review*, 2021.

How important is improving organisational and individual resilience?

If disruptive surprises have become a normal in our society, then managers must constantly develop their resilience skill set. Studies show that resilience is the difference between successful and unsuccessful organisations.²¹ It is arguably the most critical skill for success.²² For instance, nine out of ten senior executives consider resilience a priority for business, while eight out of ten believe resilience to be indispensable for long-term growth, according to a research carried out by BSI and the Economist Intelligence Unit.²³ Since resilience skills is very important to the long-term success of individuals and organisations, it is imperative that building resilience be made a priority by managers.

Take a look at Ford (lead by Henry Ford), Apple (lead by Steve Jobs), and Delta Airlines – some of the most successful organisations in the world today. If not for their remarkable resilience (especially exhibited by their leaders) during turbulent times, these companies would have been history by now. These organisations and individuals witnessed herculean challenges which looked like their doom. But during the turmoil, they persevered; they focused more on the opportunities than on solving the problems, and creatively turned around the situation to come back stronger than before. Top organisations and great individuals share similar stories of facing crisis and coming back stronger. Simply put, high-level resilience is a must-have for anyone aiming for the top.

Experience remains the Best teacher

Arguably the most resilient profession in the world, soldiers perfectly understand that it takes only genius – which is rare – to beat years of experience. That is why experience is the difference between major generals and lieutenants. Also, organisations emphasise more on experience when hiring workers. This is because the probability of an experienced person doing well in a job is close to certain. On the other hand, one cannot, no matter the potential, be certain of an unexperienced person performing well. The more experience managers gain, the calmer and less fazed they become during disruptions. This calmness gives them the ability to think clearly and come up with creative solutions.

Experience influences managers' perspectives on setbacks. As their experiences increase, they develop this perspective of focusing more on opportunities during turbulent times. This attitude makes them more effective as executives.²⁴

²¹ Kanter, 2013; Ducheck, 2017; Cross et al., 2021.

²² Clifford, "Adam Grant: Resilience Is the Secret to Success. Here Are 2 Ways to Improve Yours."

²³ David Denyer, "Organizational Resilience: A Summary of Academic Evidence, Business Insights and New Thinking." *BSI and Cranfield School of Management*, 2017.

²⁴ Peter Drucker, *The Effective Executive*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2006.

How individuals view calamities determine how resilient they can be when faced with impediments. If they see calamities as opportunities to grow, they have more chance of recovering and coming back stronger. But if they only focus on solving the problems, the lower their chances of surviving, and the worse their chance of becoming better.

For 15+ years, I have watched my mum grow thick-skinned to setbacks. During crisis, she no longer wastes time in complaining about “what should have been”, but on “what needs to be done.”²⁵ I too have become mentally strong from experience, and my perspective has positively influenced my resilience. During those tough days as the magazine editor-in-chief, what kept me going was the viewpoint that challenges were opportunities for growth, for becoming a better writer, a better editor, and a better manager of people and myself. People who have this growth mindset perform significantly better on difficult and challenging tasks.²⁶ I also had the mindset that “this (challenge) too, like every other situation in the world, shall pass. So, why give up without a fight?”

Practice Makes Resilient; Not Books or Lectures

Receiving lectures and reading books about resilience can only play a limited role in building one’s resilience. They can help us in “learning about” resilience, but they cannot help us in “learning” resilience. The difference between the two lies in knowing and in doing, in the brain and in the heart. Thriving in turbulent times requires a strong heart. It is less about the countless theories or textbooks we know on resilience.

Resilience is best learned through practice. Drucker acknowledged this when he declared that the best way to learn and develop oneself is through “doing,” practicing and practicing again.²⁷ An effective executive must therefore practice resilience until it becomes a habit. Look once again at the soldiers, how they train a lot, creating many scenarios of impediments ahead of real-world combats. We should learn from them.

But how we can practice resilience? Is it by creating setbacks for ourselves in the name of practice? Do we sit down and wait for experience (from adversities) to teach us instead? I too had these questions. We can learn resilience by starting with tough or unfamiliar activities which goes out of our comfort zones. Examples include: learning a new language, asking for a tough assignment from your boss, and engaging in activities that you have always been poor at – your weaknesses.²⁸

²⁵ One of the practices of an effective executive is that they ask “what needs to be done?” (Drucker, *The Effective Executive*, xi)

²⁶ Snyder, “Why Is Resilience So Hard.”

²⁷ Drucker, *The Effective Executive*, 168.

²⁸ It is worth noting that Peter Drucker in his article ‘Managing Oneself’ advised against concentrating on weaknesses rather than our strength; but he did not mention that our weaknesses should never be attempted, which validates Kolovou’s statement about trying out our weakness in order to build resilience.

These activities increase our “resilience threshold”, making us better prepared for adversities.²⁹ Because we have subjected our self to repeated failures and retries in unfamiliar activities, we become stronger and more adaptive for future setbacks.

Nevertheless, resilience is not enduring unnecessary suffering, nor is it to intentionally protract our sufferings.

“Resilience and the strength that it involves is not learned by reading a book, or sitting in a classroom training. It is learned by practicing again and again, in the trenches of everyday life.” ~ Tatiana Kolovou³⁰

The Difference in Generations and Economies

At first, I believed an obvious gap existed between each generation’s resilience ability – the past three generations in particular. Having lived with my grandma at times for the past 5 years, I have perceived an unbelievable level of resilience in her. Still in her early 60’s, she has faced several setbacks in life that I sometimes thought my mum was not as resilient. Looking inwardly, I didn’t think I measured up to half of my mum’s resilience either. It was fair to say that resilience capabilities diminished as new generations emerge (Gen X, Gen Y or millennials, and Gen Z), and as new economies formed (industrial, knowledge, and passion economies).

For instance, during Gen X generation, adversities were less predictable. Individuals and businesses faced each adversity as it came, and survived. But for the Gen Zs, advancements in technology and innovation seemed to tackle adversities faster, and some setbacks could be predicted through research and artificial intelligence. The rising dependence on technology seemed to reduce the natural resilience of humans but as a whole, artificially made them more resilient. These assumptions are quite fair.

However, to assume that a generation of managers have more resilient capabilities than another, is flawed. The arguments are always going to be hypothetical, which cannot be dwelt on. That being said, I argue that Gen Z managers and leaders are not more or less resilient than previous generations. Disruptive changes are relative and unique for each generation and economies. The older generation bounced back from the natural, political and economic disruptions (like pandemics, natural disasters, wars and the Great Recession), while we – the current generation – survived the Covid-19, just like we are going to survive the next adversity.³¹ Industrial workers faced the disruptions of their time and survived, while knowledge workers continue to face and survive their own challenges today.

²⁹ Tatiana Kolovou, “Building Resilience: What, Why, and How to Become Resilient,” 2019. Accessed May 23, 2023. <https://www.linkedin.com/learning/building-resilience/what-why-and-how-to-become-resilient?u=42275329>.

³⁰ Kolovou, “Building Resilience: What, Why, and How to Become Resilient.”

³¹ That next adversity might be the consequences of ChatGPT, or climate change.

Setbacks and our resilience abilities may be shifting to being less physical and more mental, but man's capacity to bounce back remains the same. The ability to thrive during setbacks lies in the individual's personality and the circumstance, not the generation, or the economy. So, my resilience ability may not be lesser than my mum's after all, and my mum might be as resilient as my grandma. That is to say, if this current generation had existed in the past one, they would have thrived as well. We will never know anyway.

Resilience, the Basic Superpower

Drucker may not have specifically discussed the concept of resilience, but his teachings emphasised the need for managers and organisations to prepare for adversities and see them as opportunities. In my dialect, we have an adage that says: *mgberede nyiri dike, mana mgberede ka eji ama dike* – meaning “unexpected events are tough for a warrior, but it is the unexpected events that show who a warrior is.” Life is a daily war, and we are the warriors – me, my mum, grandma, the soldiers, and you. Resilience is our basic superpower, and only those armed with this superpower will emerge stronger from emergencies. Only those who continuously develop this superpower can maintain themselves at the top.

“More than education, more than training, a person's level of resilience will determine who succeeds and who fails. That's true in the cancer ward, it's true in the Olympics, and it's true in the board room.” ~ Dean Becker (Founder, Adaptive Learning Systems).³²

³² Diane Coutu, “How Resilience Works,” *Harvard Business Review*, 2002, <https://hbr.org/2002/05/how-resilience-works>.

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