

Generating Creative Resilience:

From (Resourceful) Knowledge Worker to (Entrepreneurial) Augment Leader

I sat in silence as the lighting above me flickered intermittently. The smell of antiseptic lingered in the hospital waiting area. My arm was already in agony and now my face started to feel strangely warm and puffy. That was the day I found out what an allergic reaction to medication feels like. It was also the day I fractured my arm. With the University regional league games just 2 weeks away, I was “benched” even before the season commenced.

Fast forward 10 years, I have been a manager at several high-growth startups. And one of the key questions that I continuously grapple with: What determines success amidst certain uncertainty? Furthermore, in a world of abundant information, how does one build and maintain a competitive advantage (at both an individual and team/organisational level)? Early in my career, I presumed the key differentiating strength to be “problem-solving and execution under pressure”. This then postulated into “intelligent risk-taking and execution in the face of failure”. But the answer proved to be deeper and all-encompassing, yet simpler.

I am now convinced that this success-enabling mindset and behaviour is resilience - specifically, creative resilience. I see creative resilience as upstream of problem-solving, execution, and value generation. It is both latent - as a mindset - and active - as a systemic approach and behaviour in response to adversity.

What is Creative Resilience and How Does It Impact the Future of Work?

Resilience is often discussed in terms of recovering from adversity¹. However, I believe it is also about bouncing back higher i.e. deploying learnings and improving with each obstacle encountered. This necessitates a systematic as well as consistent mindset and approach.

As Drucker is often attributed to have said, “The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence – it is to act with yesterday’s logic”. This is where the “creative” aspect of “creative resilience” comes into play. Yesterday’s solutions may not work for the problems of today. Creativity allows for a change in tact and brings about a sense of humility and uniqueness to overcome constraints by engaging in first principles thinking.

An exploration of the application of resilience, however, would be incomplete, without first examining key forces shaping the future. There is an incredible technological trend that is transforming the nature of work. The use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) as well as LLM (language learning models) use cases are transforming value creation in jobs in

profound ways. For instance, an engineer today can code with English language prompts without learning a programming language²! Or a sales manager can prospect and automate personalised automated emails for hundreds of leads. And as adoption increases, this increasingly digitally-native world will require more than a skills-shift to succeed in the workplace. It necessitates a metamorphosis - of leadership skills, value generation, resilience, and the purpose of self.

This leads one to consider: What does this mean, and how does Drucker's idea of the "knowledge worker" factor into this?

The Knowledge Worker of Tomorrow

Drucker remarked that knowledge workers should know more about their work than anyone else in the organisation³. This is very much applicable. However, more of us are generalists today than domain experts - and with AI generating domain knowledge and insights, the need to connect the dots and see the bigger picture becomes more pertinent than the deployment of domain knowledge.

I believe we are on the precipice of what could be called the entrepreneurial augment leader. Many knowledge workers of today will become entrepreneurial augment agents (or augment leaders) of tomorrow. An augment leader works in an environment where AI is utilised to augment our ability to summarise and visualise data as well as obtain insights from these. Most work is done in sprints and projects, not quarterly or annual cadences. Autonomous agents will be adaptive, value-driven, resilient, and force multipliers. These individuals shall bring together insights and people to break down complex problems and drive value. Design thinking, systems thinking and first principles deduction will form the lattice of problem-solving - reducing reliance on typical data analysis and information testing.

Going beyond the abstract, I wonder - what would an average Monday look like for an augment agent in just 5 years (the year 2028)?

A Day In The Life of an Entrepreneurial Augment Agent

Julie is a Senior Program Manager at a large CPG firm, Monolever (similar to P&G), where she is leading supply chain initiatives. She has over 5 years of experience within the industry and is based in Brazil. She will be celebrating her 27th birthday this year on 30th July 2028.

9:00 - 9.30am:

[Julie catches up on key updates, respond accordingly and prioritise next steps]

Julie interacts with her AI personal assistant (available and personalised to every manager within the company). The assistant reviews Julie's calendar, emails, and project updates, and then presents the key points to her. Julie asks the AI to draft responses to some of the less urgent emails and propose key next steps as per day of week and urgency.

9.30am-10.30am:

[Dials in remotely to the weekly meeting: discuss scoping & launch of a new loyalty product]

The team is discussing the design and cost projections for a new customer loyalty product. Julie fires up the internal intelligence tool - which is built on hundreds of hours of user interviews and data from previous launches. While the “first-order” insights are visualised through this AI tool, the business implications of the insights and execution plan is not apparent.

To enable this, Julie leads the team through a brief design thinking exercise to narrow down on a few hypotheses - and links those to key user stories and the overall business objective. She then utilises the AI tool to generate a few product design flow mock-ups (her verbal prompt into the mic: “build me a loyalty app user journey keeping in mind the 5 main personas for our company and recent award winning designs in the industry”). The tool then also details the requirements to build it internally. This “AI-human augmentation” helps generate new product designs and prioritise action items for the engineering and product team. The meeting bot (named “meet.mono”) also shares the meeting transcript - highlighting key discussion points, action items and timelines - with all meeting participants after the call.

11:30am - 12pm:

[Julie's manager has asked for a summary presentation of her project deliverables & sub-tasks]

Julie adds the links of her Gantt chart and Trello board to the AI chatbot and prompts it to output a presentation with 3 different designs. Upon realising that her manager would also find a risk assessment useful, she asks her AI assistant to crawl through her inbox to look up project projections and match it to current timeline and budget risks. A final sense check ensues. All this takes her just around 15 minutes.

She reminisces about her time as a fresh graduate in 2023 - when similar tasks often took her 3-4 hours to implement, without any internal AI tools or LLM bots.

12:00 - 12:30pm:

[Commute to work]

While her company supports fully remote work globally, Julie likes to be in the office every Monday and Friday to grab lunch with her colleagues.

12.30 - 1.30pm:

[Lunchtime - burrito with chocolate ice-cream on the side!]

12:40pm:

[ALERT! There is an internal alert sent to 25 leaders about a product recall due to a defect]

Her lunch is interrupted by an email and automated calls (via the company's AI HR bot) to join an emergency meeting shortly. Due to a serious manufacturing defect, over 29,000 product units (equating to 3 days' production) will need to be recalled. This is a huge safety, PR, financial and manufacturing issue. It necessitates a swift and effective response across the entire organisation.

1:00 - 3:00pm:

[The emergency meeting is brought to order by the General Manager and a war room is set up]

The GM, George, runs through the contingency plan and lists down potential immediate to short-term actions alongside impact. The issues detection tool conducts pattern matching using over 3 million data points and verbal prompts from George as inputs. This narrows down the root cause to a few scenarios with weighted probabilities.

George wants to deploy the collective creative brainpower of the participants while maintaining a structured action plan. Hence he links the database API to a visualisation tool (called visual.mono) to allow fluid brainstorming, with the ability to map out probabilistic outcomes, draw mind maps, and share notes/documents on one digital board. This also

helps engage those who have joined remotely and empower line employees to test solutions autonomously, rather than gather or structure data.

4:30 - 5:30pm:

[Runs through multiple scenarios with chatbot prompts]

Julie conducts a what-if analysis using chatbot prompts which is linked to an external search engine as well as the internal company database. She asks the chatbot to package these into a series of contingency plans and business cases, and adds her insights. After several iterations, she narrows down to 5 plans spanning well over 26 pages. This may help build up institutional response and resilience to future events - hence she sends it to George.

5:30 - 7:30pm:

[Leadership workshop and solutions mapping]

Based off supervised AI analysis, it appears that the defects occurred due to failed quality checks. While not directly impacted or involved, Julie helps manufacturing leaders strategise on how to maneuver through the morale and performance impact. She also paints a compelling narrative on how to conduct process remapping, utilise AI imaging for manufacturing checks, and instill a culture of psychological safety and empowerment. To help on AI imaging, she instructs the employee directory chatbot (employee.mono) to find 2 relevant subject matter experts and schedule a 30-minute call as per the best available timeslot on Tuesday.

7:30 - 8:00pm:

[Wrap up and look ahead]

She sets a task for her personal AI to scrape key points regarding today's incident from news reports, internal technical reports, distributor emails and colleague messages - and have it in her inbox by 8:00am the next day.

How to Generate and Maintain Creative Resilience?

When Covid struck, I was working for a global food tech start-up - managing a team of 4 in operations strategy and performance. Almost overnight, demand shrunk by over 60% and at the same time, stringent regulations came into effect. The team now had to contend with a different operating model, volatility in demand/supply, adhering to new regulations, and managing cost and morale impact. Add to this, grappling with working from home and the looming specter of unsteady job security.

I initially struggled with juggling all of those balls. How could I maintain confidence and equip the team to emerge from unforeseen challenges stronger as both individuals and a cohesive unit?

After several bouts of deep reflection and sincere experimentation over several years, I have come up with the below 2 and 3 tenets to generate creative resilience at an individual and team/organisational level respectively.

At an individual level:

1. Know Thyself And Regenerate Thy (Stoic) Self

To Drucker's extolment of "Know Thyself", I would propose an addendum: "Know Thyself, and Regenerate Thyself". Regeneration is the aftermath of conscious reflection, and requires the willingness to learn and explore consistently. It is an act of learning and unlearning.

I generally utilise a simple heuristic:

- a. What do I know this week (or month) that I did not know beforehand?
- b. What do I want to explore or learn further?
- c. What current assumptions, fear, or knowledge do I have to let go to enable this?

While one does not need to imbibe stoicism, I am convinced that there are several key stoic principles that augment creative resilience. Marcus Aurelius (a Roman Emperor and famous Stoic) once wrote "You have power over your mind - not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength"⁴.

By separating one's response and limiting the power of external forces, one can build a stronger sense of autonomy and objectivity to bounce back higher.

2. Think in Spectrums, Act in Systems

When things get tough and / or require immediate attention, we often tend to pattern match and engage in binary categorisation ("this is good/bad, this is important/not important").

However, the ability to consistently think across a spectrum of probabilities is critical for creative resilience. Probabilistic thinking embraces uncertainty and helps navigate the world of imperfect information, multifaceted drivers, and multiple outcomes⁵. It allows for the planning of multiple scenarios, balancing of risk/reward with effort, and to some extent fostering a growth mindset (as failure is seen as a low-probability outcome and not a "bad" result).

On the other side of the spectrum (no pun intended), we have systems thinking. Systems thinking is a way to see the "whole" with interrelationships and patterns - decisions or actions in one area can have a cascading and unintuitive impact on other parts of the whole (Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*). More simply put, augment agents should take a holistic view and understand the underlying incentive structure for behaviour and relationships of all entities within a system. This helps to anticipate ripple effects, address root cause and act in a way that minimises unintended impact.

The above 2 "mantras" have allowed me to reorient my mental model during challenging times.

At an organisational or team level:

3. Redefine Control: Decentralise and Empower

Information flow and decision-making takes time. In order to be agile when responding to a conflict, employees should be empowered to bring up concerns. This can be done via some degree of decentralisation of decision-making (what most start-ups do anyway). I have enabled this in my teams by creating a rough prioritisation matrix and increasing delegation.

The concept of one-way and two-way door decisions is a gospel I preach often. Popularised by Bezos, one-way door decisions are almost impossible to reverse while two-way door

decisions can be done so relatively easily⁶. My direct reports know that they are empowered to act in the best interest of our customer and can take the call on most two-way door decisions.

4. Embrace Purpose and Psychological Safety

Aligning towards a tangible well-defined purpose during a crisis makes it easier to steer the ship - I have seen how it can serve as a rallying call. I initially grappled with the concept of psychological safety. Isn't the fact that I share information, reward good results and enable personal development, enough to enable psychological safety?

Psychological safety is built via trust and vulnerability - the latter I had learnt how to optimise for, but the former I had to uncover and build slowly. This was a hard-won lesson, and growing up in the school of "charismatic, loud" leadership, it was not revealed to me easily. I slowly evolved from celebrating just quick wins, to lauding failures as well - framing the latter as important learning opportunities. I also use all forums to engage the team to both contribute and dissent, while feeling valued as part of one tribe.

5. Encourage Creative Destruction and Entrepreneurialism

I regularly engage my team in - (a) Quarterly Fire Drills, (b) Monthly Reimagination Exercises. With the Fire Drill, I propose a series of controllable and uncontrollable scenarios across a range of probabilities and impact. I then engage the team in a guided brainstorming to understand how to analyse and act in these challenging situations, and why. Incidentally, my inspiration for the fire drill exercise came from an actual fire drill going off during lunch!

With the Reimagination Exercises, I ask my team to throw away existing processes and metrics, and "reimagine" (or recreate) from the ground up (using first principles) on how to become more productive and agile (or any other key objective).

Despite conceptualising and implementing the above, I was initially skeptical about its efficacy. But that concern soon dissipated after the second Reimagination Exercise - when two of my direct reports collaborated behind the scenes to create a revamped onboarding process which reduced errors and cost. Also, two of the scenarios in the Fire Drill (linked to regulatory action and demand fluctuations) actually materialised - the team responded resiliently and came back more energised and impact-driven.

Drucker put forward that entrepreneurship is a behaviour rather than a personality trait and the essence of any decision or pursuit is uncertainty⁵. The above activities are meant to foster comfort with uncertainty and the willingness to experiment and take risks i.e. become entrepreneurial leaders.

How Creative Resilience is A Key Enabler

Now back to the hospital waiting area 10 years ago.

The months of training, disciplined diet, and obsessing over game videos, had all gone to utter waste. While the physical pain and lifestyle adjustment of a fractured arm was significant, it was the emotional despair that gnawed at me the most. I felt almost ashamed at letting my teammates and coaches down. That night and over the next day, I kept replaying the injury incident in my head, trying to grapple with the “why” and “what if”.

But then, a flutter of obstinate resolve started to take form.

“So what if I cannot play - surely, I can contribute off the field?!”

“Maybe this accident is supposed to teach me something?”

“This fracture is nothing compared to what could have happened!”

I picked myself up and turned up to team training armed (pun intended) with a camera. I had decided to track team performance by taking videos and sharing my post-video analysis for each player. I also started to obsess about game strategies and gave input on how we could improve the current set-up. It eventually led me to the path to train for and become a Level 1 Qualified Coach on the side during my undergraduate years.

This was around 10 years ago - but the experience left an indelible reminder on utilising obstacles as a driving force for success. To be creatively resilient. And I have done so ever since, when faced with significant unforeseen challenges.

What prompted that “bounce back” within me? I cannot say exactly. But I can hypothesise that it was a combination of entrepreneurial grit, stoic thinking, and embracing my purpose and values.

I remain confident in the future and value of applied creative resilience - knowledge workers and augment agents alike shall continuously bounce back stronger and higher from the tête-à-tête with adversity!

References

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