

## FROM BLACKOUTS TO RAINBOWS

“I’m so very sorry, but we couldn’t save your baby. It was an ectopic pregnancy,” my gynecologist said, in a gentle tone.

Silence. Physically, I went numb – I no longer sensed the blood gushing between my legs; the tips of my fingers felt icy; and my stomach was loaded with bullets, or millions of fragments of them, about to slash open at any moment and halt my breath. Eyes closed, I tried to make sense of what Dr Zhang had just announced, but my thoughts stalled too.

I had to scream, or maybe I simply needed to be dragged out of that moment. But the bile travelled up my esophagus fast, with the acid taste burning the insides of my mouth and I choked on my words.

I was drawn out of my grey-colored world with my husband pulling me tightly against his chest. In his embrace, I felt small ... almost embryonic. From the corner of my left eye, I stole a glance at him, and was met with the most desolate sight – his face was visibly contorted in pain and drained of color, except for his reddish lips which he was anxiously chewing upon. And finally, I heard his muffled cries, joined by my own.

The next days were miserable. Seated on the toilet bowl, I spent minutes (or perhaps hours) staring at my blood-soaked sanitary pad and cried myself to sleep whispering its name – Paris, like the city of love.

The coming weeks and months stretched by, endless and empty.

Nearly a year after our loss, I started a new job as a freelance writer for the Canadian Business Matters (CBM)<sup>1</sup> magazine and one day, I opened my mailbox to this query:

“Dear Jonna<sup>2</sup>,

I’m the owner of a Canadian burger chain, which I established two years back as I was laid off from the hospitality industry during the pandemic. Thus far, I’m faring quite well, with increasing year-on-year turnover and profitability.

However, with rumors of a looming recession in Canada<sup>3</sup>, I’m asking for your thoughts about how to process the experience of another sudden economic shock and possibly keep my small business’ doors open and thrive.

I believe this is a tall order, but please, help me! I feel permanently scarred by the pandemic and I’m not sure I’ll be able to take it on the chin once more.

Yours sincerely,

A stressed-out reader”

As I read the correspondence, I realized that what I learned over the past year on resilience may definitely resonate with this reader too. We don’t have distinct work and home versions of rising strong!<sup>4</sup> Hunching over my computer, I immediately started drafting my response, to be published in CBM’s advice column.

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<sup>1</sup> Name changed to keep the company’s identity anonymous.

<sup>2</sup> Fictitious name

<sup>3</sup> McKenzie-Sutter, H. (2023, March 17). *CTV News*. Retrieved from CTV News : <https://www.ctvnews.ca/business/rbc-expects-mild-recession-in-canada-in-middle-of-2023-1.6317460>

<sup>4</sup> Brown, B. (2015). *Rising Strong: How the Ability to Reset Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*. New York: Random House.

“Dear stressed-out reader,

I wish I had been taught earlier that resilience isn’t an innate trait – like our muscles, it can be flexed and sharpened so one enjoys those resilience gains. Like the rest of us, you must have faced a great deal of challenges, and wouldn’t have survived this long if you completely lacked resilience! And surely, you have the capacity to further expand your ability to resist stress, bounce back with new skills (a key one being creativity), create newness for your business and enjoy higher performance. Most importantly, as a resilient entrepreneur, you’ll implicitly be satisfying your self-actualization needs! If I may inject a personal thought: what could be more rewarding than perching atop Maslow’s hierarchy of needs? (Well, clearly, the answer is nothing.)

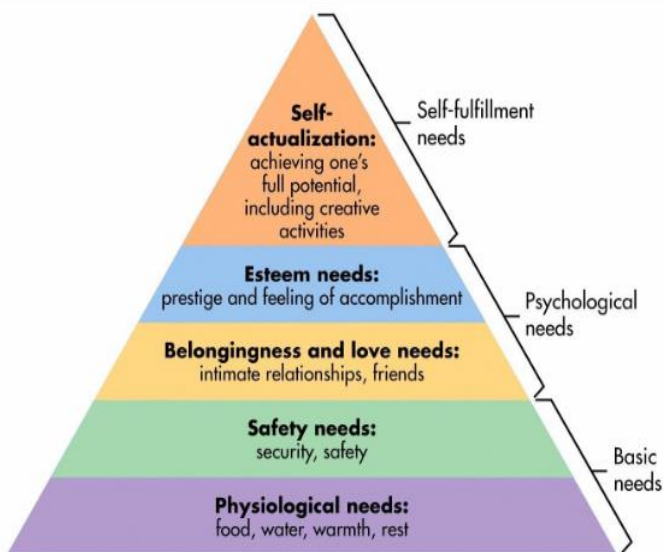


Illustration 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs<sup>5</sup>

Over the years, I developed a strategic response toolkit, consisting of four key steps, to external stressors which I believe can help you absorb

unexpected threats and better navigate future storms. Here goes:

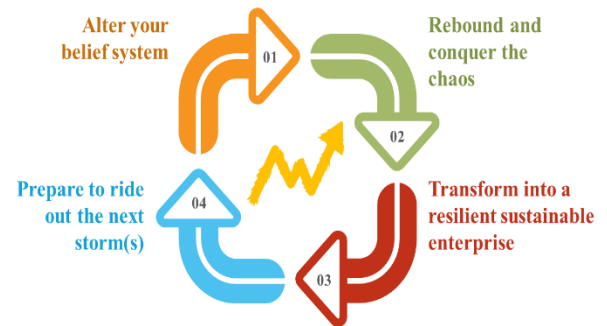


Illustration 2: Steps to build resilience<sup>6</sup>

### Step 1: Alter your belief system

Emotional resilience is the very first step towards success as you seek to ride the crest of the wave. It’s impossible to build upon the other steps without first strengthening your core.

The greatest danger during a time of turbulence is a temptation to deny reality.<sup>7</sup> While obvious, your first port of call is to accept your circumstances. And the faster you do so, the more time you’re leaving for yourself to focus on regaining control (and hence, minimizing the costs associated with inaction). Indeed, in the face of stock market gyrations, cybersecurity attacks, viral outbreaks, and all other financial jujitsu, time is your most valuable currency you wouldn’t want to gamble with.

Next, changing your belief system – your internal compass – will alter how you perceive stressors. Pro tips to alter your belief system include getting rid of the victim mentality and nurturing positivity. In turn, this will help you embrace your problems as “probortunities”, i.e., innovative

<sup>5</sup> McLeod, S. (2018, May 21). Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

<sup>6</sup> Design by [PresentationGo.com](https://www.presentationgo.com)

<sup>7</sup> Drucker, P. F. (1980). *Managing in Turbulent Times*. New York: Butterworth-Heinemann.

opportunities with thorns on.<sup>8</sup> If you aren't expecting a positive outcome, will you push through your predicaments? As a leader, optimism will also help you in exerting greater self-control along with better composure and confidence in the face of adversity. You'll thus be less likely to create distress among your staff, thereby instilling emotional resilience in your workforce as well.

Self-awareness is your best companion, your wingman, your guide during times of extremes. Pause, reflect, and evaluate your current state. What exact fear is holding you back? Leaders who muster emotional resilience recognize that fear cripples the mind and prevents you from visualizing the endless "probortunities". In which areas are you simply incompetent? In such areas, in line with the Druckerian reasoning, as a smart executive, you should delegate.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, no one succeeds alone. No one. *Just as I would never have made it thus far without my numerous circles of support – my husband, my friends and support groups for bereaved families, I thought.*

Once you've firmly believed that "probortunities" are flooding your way, it'll become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Your beliefs, etched in your psyche, generate an internal narrative that become invisible guardrails driving your actions. As you've now built ample reservoirs of energy (i.e., belief systems) during the darkest hours, you're certainly ready for the second step of your resilience journey. Soldier on.

*"Become a possibilitarian. No matter how dark things seem to be or actually are, raise your*

*sights and see possibilities – always see them, for they're always there."* – **Norman Vincent Peale**

## Step 2: Rebound and conquer the chaos

At this stage, you should have gathered a strong understanding of the challenge facing your enterprise, and should be asking yourself: "How can we exploit this change as an opportunity for our business?"<sup>9</sup>

*Now* is different. Therefore, you should recognize that perpetuating yesterday's vision, thought processes and promises no longer generates added value for your enterprise. In fact, doing so limits its capacity to adapt and survive. Amid chaos, should you continue suffering from the consequences of the wrong business model? Innovation means, first, systematically sloughing off yesterday.<sup>7</sup>

In my opinion, the best example of a company which demonstrated resilience by cutting off yesterday's fat is Victorinox, the manufacturer of the iconic Swiss army knife. Following the 9/11 attacks, new airline regulations prevented passengers from carrying multi-tool pocketknives in their hand luggage.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, Victorinox witnessed plummeting sales of its star product. Yet, early on, the company recognized that to succeed, it must get rid of the unproductive and work *today* on the goals and products of tomorrow.<sup>11</sup> It thus reacted creatively by strengthening its focus on its other product lines such as household knives and the Swiss army watches and was met with success.

<sup>8</sup> Webb, L. (2013). *Resilience: How to cope when everything around you keeps changing*. Chichester: Capstone Publishing Ltd.

<sup>9</sup> Drucker, P. F. (1967). *The Effective Executive*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

<sup>10</sup> Taipei Times. (2005, July 10). *Business Focus*. Retrieved from Terrorism deals a blow to Swiss army knife: <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/bizfocus/archives/2005/07/10/2003262978>

<sup>11</sup> Drucker, P. F. (1969). *The Age of Discontinuity: Guidelines to our Changing Society*. London: William Heinemann Ltd.

Thereafter, devising different options as potential solutions to your setback is crucial. When you generate a plethora of new options as compelling alternatives to dying strategies, you're actually forcing yourself to dig deeper and scrutinize the problem from different viewpoints.<sup>12</sup> Your final decision will likely be more comprehensive. After all, resilience depends on variety.<sup>12</sup> In devising your alternatives, look outside the standard toolbox of solutions – be ready to branch out in new directions and make new discoveries. However, be cautious and venture out only in areas you understand. Also, be prepared to re-adjust your options in case of an avalanche (i.e., a change followed by many more).

Once you've defined your options, lay out the specifications for each of them. How will this option address our revised vision? How is it meeting our minimum goals? Do we have the resources, especially the capital and talent, to execute it?<sup>9</sup> Answering these will enable you to make the ultimate choice between the alternatives. While you may retrospectively find out that this final decision was not the ideal one, what could be worse than the alternative of doing nothing?

In parallel, as you're exploring the potential solution options, always consult with your colleagues. To overcome your blind spots and attain a balanced view, you need to onboard the optimist, the pessimist, the realist, the opportunist etc. In short, involve everyone to 'sense check', stimulate disciplined disagreement and harness imagination. Isn't the ability to embrace feedback – what I like to term as “the fuel of progress” – itself a sign of community resilience? As an example, as one of the key lessons after his battle against Ravana (the multi-headed demon), Rama (a Hindu deity) emphasized the importance of

listening to others' perspectives before undertaking important decisions.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, as Peter Drucker points out: “One starts something new with people of tested and proven strength, that is, with veterans.”<sup>9</sup>

You may stop here if your sole objectives are to enable your business recover from unprecedented times and re-establish a sense of normalcy. But, if you want to build a truly resilient business and attain new heights, proceed to step 3.

*“Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.” – Confucius*

### **Step 3: Transform into a resilient sustainable enterprise**

I hope you recognize by now that resilience is more than bouncing back. *Today, when I face myself in the mirror, what I see is a metamorphosed version of myself – from a caterpillar, I have soared into a butterfly. This is the outcome of my resilient spirit over the past year, I thought.*

A robust integrated corporate resilience framework renders your organization capable of continually anticipating and adjusting to external trends, thus creating long-term value for stakeholders.<sup>12</sup> Ideally, this framework should already be in place and fully operational in the pre-disruption stage. Nonetheless, it's never too late! The framework encompasses various areas, as follows:

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<sup>12</sup> Hamel, G., & Välikangas, L. (2003). The Quest for Resilience. *Harvard Business Review*, 1-25.

<sup>13</sup> Pandey, V. (2023, April 06). *Leadership Lessons from Ramayana: Principles for CEOs to Build and Grow Their Organizations*. Retrieved from LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/leadership-lessons-from-ramayana-principles-ceos-build-pandey>

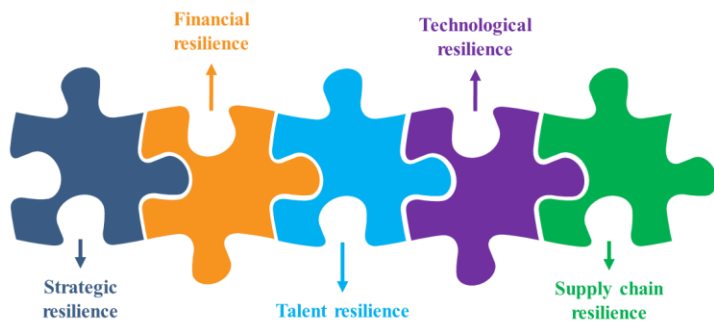


Illustration 3: The mix of corporate resilience levers<sup>6</sup>

To render your business strategically resilient, you should question its activities and product portfolio periodically – say yearly, or even every three months given the current fast-changing trends – with regards to their contribution to your business. Strategic resilience implies recognizing that your business’ product or service becomes obsolete from the very first day it’s introduced in the market. It involves continually revisiting your business model and reinforcing your competitive position. For me, Du Pont Co. symbolizes a strategically resilient company. When nylon first came out, it immediately began investing in the invention of new synthetic fibers.<sup>14</sup>

Your business can survive all sorts of stress tests without profits, provided it has adequate cash flow.<sup>14</sup> You’ll agree with me that you need liquidity to conquer the chaos (i.e., fulfill step 2), right? Growth demands to be fed. Thus, it’s essential that you draw up and maintain an opportunities budget to financially feed new ventures and avoid the unnecessary time pressures in raising cash during a crisis.<sup>7</sup> You should build financial accountability into this budget to ensure that it is being tapped into to generate the best possible returns. It’s equally important not to splurge on money in good times as nothing ever lasts.

The backbone of a resilient workforce is continuous learning and development (including resilience training) to perform better what is already being done well, even during uncertainty.<sup>14</sup> As such, from the Druckerian viewpoint, service people learn the most when they teach. I’d thus suggest that the best way for you to further increase the productivity of your star waiter is to provide him with opportunities such as monthly quality circles to reveal his secrets of success to his fellow waiters.<sup>14</sup> Resilience is a team sport and authentic relationships may be our most undervalued assets to survive the punches!<sup>15</sup>

In the ideal and truly resilient organization, there is a lot of excitement, but without any trauma.<sup>12</sup> As a leader, you should recognize the positive correlation between your employees’ health & wellbeing and resilience. Lead from your heart! In tragic times, don’t hesitate to demonstrate compassion as this will most probably unleash a favorable response throughout your organization.<sup>16</sup> Instead of putting your employees through the distress associated with massive layoffs, collectively channel your efforts and energy into re-designing and re-structuring operations to heal, adapt, and excel. Allow enough freedom in your workforce so it moves freely within your core business and can be “loaned out” to support the swarm of resulting strategy experiments (described in step 2) in the quest for high-return projects and ultimately, resilience.<sup>12</sup>

In this digital era, you should showcase technological resilience, an enabler of business growth. At a minimum, you need to have “shock absorbers” such as sophisticated technological

<sup>14</sup> Drucker, P. F. (2011). *Managing for the Future*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>15</sup> Cross, R., Dillon, K., & Greenberg, D. (2021). The Secret to Building Resilience. *Harvard Business Review*, 1-9.

<sup>16</sup> Dutton, J. E., Frost, P. J., Worline, M. C., Lilius, J. M., & Kanov, J. M. (2002). Leading in Times of Trauma. *Harvard Business Review*, 1-17.

tools, a solid cybersecurity framework and a disaster recovery plan in place. As a matter of fact, experts and pundits found that businesses which increased their pre-pandemic technology sophistication by one standard deviation experienced a 3.8 percentage points increase in monthly sales during the pandemic.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, resilient technology shares certain key attributes – flexible, uninterrupted, and scalable – to help maintain acceptable service levels if worst-case scenarios were to materialize.

In the face of the new extremes, supply chain continuity and resilience make more sense than ever. You must've witnessed this principle in nature as well – the squirrels sourcing extra food and putting it away for the upcoming harsh winters. In our corporate world, an example of an entity having made the responsible choice of ensuring its supply chain continuity during the pandemic is BCDVideo, a security system vendor. The latter quadrupled its inventory of components at the early start of COVID-19. Consequently, they were on top of it early, shielded themselves from the ensuing longer lead times and timeously fulfilled their client orders.<sup>18</sup> While this build-up of buffer stocks contravenes the Just-In-Time inventory management and manufacturing philosophy, it's important to recognize that at times, extraordinary events call for out-of-the-ordinary measures.

*“In a period of upheaval, such as the one we are living in, change is the norm.” – Peter Drucker*

#### **Step 4: Prepare to ride out the next storm(s)**

During your transformation journey into a resilient enterprise, you'll likely encounter at least

one catastrophic event. In the spirit of cultivating an organizational culture underpinned by continuous learning and improvement (and free of blame), it's crucial that each time after the dust settles, you conduct and document a postmortem analysis. The resulting action plans from this postmortem exercise should bear a designated action owner, whose primary responsibility is to track and ensure their timely implementation. In parallel, lessons learned should be widely disseminated to all concerned parties and put into practice as soon as feasible to avoid making the same mistakes again and again and raise the bar.

Moreover, you should regularly conduct independent reviews and tabletop exercises to challenge the maturity level of your enterprise's resilience capabilities. Ideally, you'd seek to be self-reliant, but do ask for help if necessary. When you can't cut your own hair, you head to the hairdresser to let him trim it for a more beautiful re-growth, right? Similarly, you may consider appointing an external consultant if you need assistance in meeting or even surpassing your resiliency requirements.

*“If you are going through hell, keep going.” – Winston Churchill*

#### **My parting thoughts**

Now that you've been armed with this toolkit, will you fight (and adapt) or flight (and resist the urge to adapt)? I hope you'll opt for the former. The call to adventure may be traumatic, but don't refuse it. You may not come out of this battle as a hero, but for sure, the rewards you shall reap are abundant – a sense of triumph, a new vibrancy in life and enthusiasm for whatever lies ahead.

<sup>17</sup> Comin, D. A., Cruz, M., Cirera, X., Lee, K. M., & Torres, J. (2022). Technology and Resilience. *National Bureau of Economic Research*, 1-38.

<sup>18</sup> BCDVideo. (2021, September 2021). *Global Inventory Challenges*. Retrieved from BCDVideo: <https://www.bcdvideo.com/blog/how-bcd-tackles-global-inventory-challenges/>

I hope that overall, this stuff didn't leave you feeling overwhelmed. If you do, bear in mind that resilience is neither made up of grandiose theories nor grand gestures. I also hope that you're now convinced that the small size of your organization isn't a barrier to resilience. In fact, the real hindrance to resilience is when one falls prey to the delusion that success is self-perpetuating.<sup>12</sup>

Going forward, please remember that the success of your enterprise is built sequentially, and that resilience is a lifetime project. There is no quick fix to disruptions, and the question isn't whether these shock events will concretize. Certainly, they will. We, people, will continue to face disruption as long as we live (and hence, do business), but the good news is that each of us is endowed with the ability to overcome the challenges! Therefore, please take it easy. After all, growth is never tidy. If need be, take it one step at a time and build your individual and corporate resilience at your own pace. The key simply is not to procrastinate.

All the best!"

**Word count: 2,864**