Getting Through the Storm:
Developing Organizational Resilience During A Time of Crisis

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Amid crisis, organizations are faced with difficult questions. Their business strategies, their values, and their very existence are challenged. Can we survive a 75% decline in revenue? Should we lay off some staff to save others? What if we have to close our doors?

The ability to weather whatever storm may come is critical for long-term business success. That's why organizational psychologists tout the need for organizational resilience. **Resilience is the ability of an organization to bounce back to a profitable state following a downturn.** It's also the reason your financial advisor tells you to diversify your portfolio and why you have insurance. Resilience is the reason so many organizations have business continuity plans for dealing with natural disasters.

Leaders and HR professionals rush to identify best practices to make their organizations more resilient once they encounter a hardship. The good news is that there is plenty of research on what helps organizations bounce back after suffering a challenge. Pulakos, Kantrowitz, and Schneider (2019) identify three factors that indicate an organization's ability to adapt to change and show resilience:

- ✔ *Leadership's ability to foster confidence and a sense of stability*

- ✔ *Collaborative and technology-supported teamwork*

- ✔ *Relentless course correction driven by monitoring key metrics*

Moreover, the researchers found that financial success is directly related to agility-resilience, which is directly related to the three organizational attributes listed above.

If you consider these factors carefully, you'll realize they include a mix of proactive and reactive elements. Some components can be implemented in the face of a crisis, such as introducing new technologies and outcome metrics. Others need to be established long beforehand, such as trust in leadership and a culture of continuous improvement.

But perhaps resilience shouldn't be the goal. Perhaps resilience isn't enough. **What if there were a way to turn disruptive change into competitive advantage?**

A talent recruiter who was so frustrated with his organization's unwillingness to improve hiring process once told me "I wish we would get sued. Then I would have the burning platform I need to make changes." This recruiter understood that the organization had become a victim of its own success and would not be able to break out of its complacency unless something drastic happened.

For many organizations, COVID-19 is the burning platform that forces everyone to rethink assumptions about how work gets done, where it gets done, and by whom.
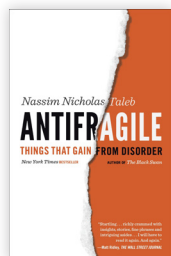
In his book Anti-Fragile: Things That Gain From Disorder, Nassim Nicholas Taleb makes it clear why we need to take advantage of crises and setbacks when they occur: "Antifragility is beyond resilience or robustness. The resilient resists shocks and stays the same; the antifragile gets better."

Here are **six ways** you can help your organization thrive as a result of—not in spite of—a crisis.

1. Add collaborative technology

With the increase in number of stay-at-home and shelter-in-place orders forcing companies to close their brick-and-mortar locations, many employers found themselves quickly implementing new online tools and technologies to enable employees to work from home. Numerous apps sprang up seemingly overnight to address common challenges. Take advantage of this. HRIS managers know it is rare to have such high rates of adoption of new technological tools and systems. Even the most change-averse employee has been forced to use modern technology to be effective. Don't lose this momentum. Use this as a chance to build the business case to keep these technological tools around even after doors have reopened. Gather data on ways technology has helped and use it to feed future business cases for enhanced systems and tools that employees need.

2. Expand your talent pool

Now that organizations have taken the plunge into remote working arrangements, it's time to consider whether this could be effective long-term for some groups and roles. Some leaders were so wedded to having their teams "in the office" that they would never have considered hiring a remote worker before COVID-19. But now that managers have been forced to find ways to make it work, they may see it's really not so bad. Employees still get their work done, they are still engaged, and they are still available for that quick call when needed. Talent acquisition leaders can use this as an opportunity to convince leaders to open up requisitions to non-local candidates. When it is time to hire staff again—and that time will come, although it may not seem like it now—encourage hiring managers to consider remote work options. It will expand your candidate pool exponentially and grant you access to top talent who may not be willing to relocate to your city but would love to work for your company. You'll fill positions faster and have confidence that you've found the most qualified candidate.

3. Establish regular pulse checks

In an effort to stay connected to employees, many managers are now scheduling more frequent calls and video chats. I have also seen an uptick in the number of pulse surveys going out. Leaders want to know what resources employees need, if they feel supported by their managers, if they are receiving timely communication, and where morale levels are. The opportunity here is to establish regular employee feedback channels. If managers haven't routinely held one-to-one meetings with direct reports, now is the time to start—and keep it going! If your organization doesn't have a standard employee survey or feedback process established, start now—and make it a consistent process. Some organizations choose to survey their employees on an annual basis, some do it quarterly, and others choose to do brief pulse surveys on a monthly or even weekly basis to discover how employees are feeling and what their needs are. These pulse checks are important, even when things start to feel "normal" again.

4. Fail fast and fail forward

Dr. Linda Hoopes, organizational researcher and president of Resilience Alliance, has written about the importance of using hard times as catalysts for creativity, productivity, and development in her book [Managing Change with Personal Resilience](). Anti-fragile organizations look at failure as merely a stepping stone in the learning and growth process. Responsible risks are encouraged—required, even—and mistakes are openly discussed to determine what was learned. If your business is slower than usual, take this time to engage in thoughtful critiques of your work processes and deliverables and determine how they can be improved. If a venture is going to fail, it's best that it fails quickly and that everyone can learn from it so you can move on to what will work. Take a lesson from the airline industry. Every airplane has a black box on it. If the plane goes down, the airline is able to use information recorded on the black box to determine what went wrong and strengthen other planes.

5. Identify your top contributors

The devastating truth is that many organizations have been forced to make difficult staffing decisions, including furloughs and reductions in force. Recent estimates suggest that almost 17 million new claims for unemployment have been received in the last month. Relaying messages of layoffs or furloughs is not a pleasant task for any leader or HR manager. A few of the HR leaders I know have shed tears recently because they have had to let go of cherished coworkers and friends. There is no silver lining to this process—it is difficult and awful. The only way to salvage this dreadful task is to ensure you are evaluating talent against appropriate metrics—such as goal attainment, behaviors, and competencies—and are retaining as many top performers and high potential employees as you can. For those who have transferable skills, consider moving them into another department temporarily where they can contribute, learn a new function, and hopefully come back to their regular role (or something better) after business picks up again. The importance of understanding who your top talent is becomes even clearer when you have to make these types of difficult choices between employees. And be sure to continuously look for ways to improve performance tracking and metrics—they feed directly into feedback, coaching, and professional development activities that will continue for the employee lifecycle.

6. Strengthen your hiring process now

It may seem counter-intuitive to talk about laying off employees and bolstering your hiring process in the same article. Many organizations are barely keeping their heads above water at this point, and it is difficult to imagine spending time or precious resources on staffing. If your organization has relied on traditional methods such as resume reviews and face-to-face interviews for all qualified candidates, then your process isn't as efficient as it could be. When you post available positions with an unemployment rate that is through the roof, you are going to find a lot more candidates applying. You will need help to sort through those individuals to focus your time on those who are most likely to be successful. Whether you have 30 candidates or 300, the right hiring tools, such as pre-screening questions and competency assessments, can help you find the best fit without requiring you to review every resume or speak to every applicant. Get ahead of the curve and implement hiring tools that will benefit you long after the COVID-19 crisis is over.

The challenges we face during these times are tough, but they are weatherable—especially if your organization is able to take advantage of the changes in the landscape and see the opportunity to adapt to new ways of working, hiring, and retaining talent.

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