

# Not if, but when we need resilience in the workplace

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## Summary

Workplace resilience is a necessity for organizations and employees given it assists them in overcoming adversity and ultimately succeeding. However, organizational scholars have largely overlooked this construct. In this *Incubator*, we briefly summarize extant research on workplace resilience to highlight opportunities for theory building and advancement of empirical research. Copyright © 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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There is really no need to remind readers of the turbulent nature of the environment facing today's organizations. Regardless of size, type, level, or location, this environment has caused all organizations to undergo dramatic change, become increasingly complex, and experience competitive pressures. For example, organizations have had to incorporate technological advances into their business models, meet the differential needs of diverse employees and clients, and deal with changing government policies and regulations. The result has been, is, and will be severe challenges and adversity for individuals, groups/teams, and organizations. How they respond to this now-inevitable adversity, that is, their resilience, has emerged as a key, strategically important organizational behavior for success, growth, and even survival.

Although resilience has been recognized in theory, measurement, and research for a number of years in other fields (e.g., clinical and developmental psychology) and applied to the workplace at all levels of analysis, it still needs much better understanding, and is severely under-researched in Organizational Behavior. We feel resilience in the workplace meets Wright's (2013) call for incubation of very important, impactful organizational behavior constructs that are more than germinations, but also are not fully evolved. Our intent with this *Incubator* is to present some of the background and meaning of resilience to help identify and stimulate needed theory development and research on its application in the workplace.

## Background on Resilience

Although the roots of resilience theory and research go all the way back to the identification of risk factors that led to mental dysfunctions, the first recognized wave in the historical evolution of resilience focused on individual, social, and environmental factors and characteristics of those who overcame adversity versus those who did not. This was followed by investigations of how these factors contributed to resilience, then resilience-building developmental interventions, and finally to the so-called fourth-wave role that genetic, neurological, and developmental factors may play. There has also been considerable supporting research that has focused on the first wave of individual

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protective factors such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and optimism, which relate to resiliency and their desired adjustment outcomes and related constructs such as hardiness (for a recent comprehensive review including the historical waves and meta-analytic findings, see Van Hove, Herian, Harms, & Luthans, 2015). However, this existing body of knowledge has mainly focused on at-risk youth and clinical applications, and to date, there has been limited focus on the workplace.

Although there has been substantial attention to resilience in applications such as the military and sports management (e.g., the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness training program and resilience training for athletes, Seligman & Fowler, 2011; DeCano, Varela, & Cook, 2015) and a growing recognition of the importance of resilience in the workplace as found in psychological capital or PsyCap (Luthans, 2002; Luthans, Youssef-Morgan, & Avolio, 2015; Newman, Ucbasaran, Zhu, & Hirst, 2014) and positive organizational scholarship (Caza & Milton, 2012), to date, very little research has examined the factors that foster resilience in the workplace at different levels of analysis and its resultant influence on work outcomes. In addition, there has been only very limited integration of different theoretical perspectives to describe how resilience develops at both the individual and collective level and the mechanisms through which it transmits its effects. After first examining the meaning of resilience, we will turn to highlighting opportunities for theoretical advancement and avenues for empirical research as we incubate it for the field of organizational behavior.

## The Meaning of Resilience

As indicated in the introductory comments, resilience is an interdisciplinary construct that has been defined in multiple ways through the years. Some conceptualizations consider resilience to be a trait or capacity that helps individuals to deal with and adjust positively to adversity (Jackson, Firtko, & Edenborough, 2007). In this trait conceptualization, researchers have used the terms ego-resiliency and psychological resilience to define resilience as the capacity to move on in a positive way from negative, traumatic, or stressful experiences (Block & Kremen, 1996; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). In line with this dispositional meaning of resilience, researchers have developed and validated a number of scales that capture an individual's capacity to deal with adversity (e.g., Block & Kremen, 1996).

Others have treated resilience as a dynamic process consisting of disruption and reintegration in which an individual displays positive adaptation despite experienced adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). For example, Luthar et al. (2000) defined it as "a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (p. 543). This perspective treats resilience as state like (i.e., a malleable phenomenon that can be developed). In support of this definition, there is growing evidence that resilience can be developed through the use of cognitive transformation and personal growth training (Tebes, Irish, Puglisi-Vasquez, & Perkins, 2004). Considerable research on psychological capital also demonstrates this state-like nature of the PsyCap component of resilience and that it can be developed (Luthans, 2002; Luthans, Avey, Avolio, & Peterson, 2010). In line with this state-like meaning, scales have been developed to examine protective factors and resilient states (e.g., Friborg, Hjemdal, Rosenvinge, & Martinussen, 2003). In an effort to resolve the issue of inconsistent terminology, Luthar et al. (2000) stated that the term "resiliency" should be used only when referring to a trait and "resilience" when referring to the process or phenomenon of positive adjustment despite adversity.

## What We Know about Resilience in the Workplace

At present, limited work has examined organizational or team-level factors that may promote resilience in individuals, organizations and teams, and its subsequent influence on both attitudinal and behavioral work outcomes. Of the limited

work that has been done on the antecedents of resilience, the majority of it has been done at the individual level of analysis, focusing on identifying personal characteristics that predict individual resilience such as length of work experience, self-efficacy, and competence. Other work has found that resilience can be fostered through the provision of workplace support (e.g., Grant, Curtayne, & Burton, 2009). Although some work has examined the relationship between resilience and attitudinal work outcomes such as turnover intentions, organizational commitment, commitment to change, job satisfaction, and work engagement (e.g., Shin, Taylor, & Seo, 2012; Youssef & Luthans, 2007), most of it relies on cross-sectional self-report data. In contrast, only limited work has begun to examine the dynamic processes by which, and situations under which, resilience impacts employee work behaviors (Youssef & Luthans, 2005, 2007).

## Opportunities for Theory Building of Workplace Resilience

In prior work on resilience, there has been only a limited integration of theory to explain how resilience develops within organizations and individual employees and how resilience leads to positive outcomes in the workplace. In order to further our understanding of this important phenomenon, we believe it is crucial to integrate a number of key theoretical perspectives. First, we call on organizational behavior researchers to consider how resilience might be conceptualized as a team or organizational-level phenomenon and more clearly distinguish collective resilience from psychological resilience at the individual level. In doing this, researchers might consider utilizing well-known perspectives from Weick's "Sensemaking" and also Tajfel and Turner's "Social Identity Theory" to examine how collective resilience develops within teams and organizations. For example, future research might examine whether through trying to collectively make sense of shared adversity in the workplace, individuals within teams and organizations begin to identify more strongly with others and develop collective resilience.

Second, researchers might consider using theories such as Demerouti and colleagues' "Job Demands/Resources Theory" and Fredrickson's "Broaden and Build Theory" to explain how resilience assists individuals in dealing with workplace demands and performing effectively in the workplace. Such work could advance the early investigations of resilience—the "first-wave" identified in the introductory comments, which sought to uncover the protective factors necessary to overcome adversity. Future research could draw from these theories to determine the effect that protective resources (e.g., self-esteem, positive emotions, and developmental experiences) have on the establishment and maintenance of workplace resilience.

Finally, researchers might consider utilizing appropriate theoretical perspectives to more clearly distinguish resilience from other key psychological capital resources such as self-efficacy, hope, and optimism (Luthans et al., 2015). For example, drawing on the two main tenets of Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources Theory, future research might investigate whether resilience might be better conceptualized as a loss-oriented resource that prevents resource loss and helps the individual to maintain the status quo through assisting them in recovering from adverse events, rather than a gain-oriented resource that assists the individual in acquiring further resources.

## Avenues for Advancing Research on Workplace Resilience

We believe a better understanding of resilience can be achieved through research in a number of ways. First, as limited empirical work has been conducted on how organizational or team-level factors promote resilience in individuals, teams, and organizations, we believe that researchers need to adopt a multilevel approach when studying resilience at work. For example, researchers might look at the relative importance of supportive organizational and managerial practices in fostering both individual and collective resilience and consider the differential effects of collective and individual resilience on workplace outcomes at different levels of analysis. In doing this, researchers

might consider whether the effectiveness of different practices depends on the personal characteristics of the individuals and teams concerned and/or the contexts in which they are implemented. Empirical work might also determine the mechanisms through which resilience influences work outcomes. As well as establishing a nomological network between resilience and related constructs, empirical research can inform the development of resilience interventions aimed at fostering positive workplace outcomes (e.g., performance, well-being, and retention). As a result, future empirical research at multiple levels of analysis, as well as multiple methods (quantitative, qualitative, and mixed), has the value-added potential to make practical and theoretical contributions.

Second, we feel that more empirical research needs to be done to test the validity of different measures of resilience and demonstrate the incremental predictive validity of different resilience measures beyond related constructs such as thriving, grit, and hardiness. Empirically demonstrating discriminant validity is necessary to avoid construct proliferation, which could stifle the progress of research on workplace resilience and related areas. Thus, researchers should establish the unique role resilience plays in workplace effects to contribute to its construct validation, development, and utility.

Finally, we believe that it is critical for researchers to conduct longitudinal research to further our understanding of the dynamic processes under which resilience develops and influences workplace outcomes at different levels of analysis. For example, research might be done to examine how organizational socialization and change and team dynamics influence resilience over time at both the individual and collective levels of analysis. In addition, through the use of experience-sampling methodology, future research might examine how quickly more resilient and less resilient individuals return to their baseline after experiencing an adverse event in the workplace. Future research might also examine whether the speed at which different individuals return to their equilibrium psychological state after experiencing an adverse event is dependent on the level of adversity experienced and/or the extent of organizational or managerial support provided to the individual during and after the adverse event. From a positive psychology perspective, research also needs to determine how and why some individuals and teams are able to perform at higher levels than before after “bouncing back” from adversity.

## Conclusion

Although the topic of resilience has been the focus of academic attention in other fields, it has only just begun to attract the attention of organizational behavior researchers. Given adversity is an unavoidable reality for all individuals, teams, and organizations, it is “not if, but when” resilience is necessary. We believe that a more systematic investigation of the factors that shape resilience at work and the mechanisms, mediators, and moderators by which it influences workplace outcomes at different levels of analysis is critical. Through presenting an agenda for future theory building and research, we hope this *Incubator* will have its intended effect of making a significant contribution to the understanding and practice of resilience in the workplace.

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