

## RESILIENCE FEATURE

**By Michaela Loughney**

It is a scene played out up and down the country, the well meaning HR manager proposing that the company spend money on helping their hard pressed managers cope with what is rapidly becoming the No 1 corporate health issue – work related stress. The boss looks at the manager and sighs in exasperation. ‘We’ll never get it through the board, most of them think that stress is necessary to make managers work hard, they’ll never approve the expenditure.’

This is sadly an all too familiar scenario. While a growing number of organisations are now recognising the benefits of tackling stress in the workplace many more have still to be convinced.

However the wise HR manager knows that there is more than one way to skin a cat and that a different tack can achieve surprising results. ‘How about if we suggest to them that we want to make our managers more resilient, toughen them up a bit to enable them to thrive on the challenges they face and lift their game to a higher level?’

‘Now your talking, that’s definitely something I could sell to the board’, says the boss.

Resilience training is relatively new to the UK although it is well established in the United States . It has traditionally been used in the US by organisations facing a period of change or ‘re-engineering’ to prepare mainly managers but in some cases staff as well, for the challenges they are about to face. However because businesses must react with speed and flexibility in today’s constantly changing environment, this type of training is no longer reserved for what used to be regarded as exceptional circumstances, it is required on a regular basis.

Through my work with leading UK business training company In Equilibrium, I have recognised that with a few exceptions, resilience training, particularly for managers is missing from the standard range of development training offered by UK employers. As a result we have developed a groundbreaking resilience programme, following a visit I made to the ‘father’ of US resilience research Professor Al Siebert at his home in Oregon.

At the heart of his teaching is a surprising fact, that resilience or the ability to 'roll with the punches' is not wholly something you are born with, it can in fact be learned.

While his work at that time was very much focused on helping people to survive adversity, I told him about my own quest to teach people not just how to survive but rather how to thrive through adversity.

I explained how my mother had said that having breast cancer not only taught her how to be a survivor but also added extra meaning to her life and gave her an inner strength she had not possessed before.

You only have to read the inspiring stories of many of the survivors of 9/11 to realise just how incredible the human spirit can be and how good can come out of even the most terrible of situations.

Real growth can happen when we see adversity not as a threat but rather as a challenge and an opportunity to grow as a person.

For example a lot of people get very worried about losing their job and are concerned that they won't be able to go on their dream holiday this year. But through my resilience course I teach them to really question whether or not this is the end of the world – could they in fact instead go and stay with family they haven't seen in ages. Very often this brings an unexpected bonus, they forge closer ties with relatives and realise you can have as much fun with people you care about as you can in an expensive hotel.

Key to being really resilient is consciously living in the present, in the UK we tend to always be thinking about the future, about buying a better car, better job, better house and we don't really spend time appreciating just what we have. While it is good to have goals and being too hedonistic is equally damaging, it is important we have a balance between only living for the day and wishing your life away.

The course I have developed with In Equilibrium teaches six core skills which we believe instil true resilience in managers. The first one is optimism and how to learn to view life in a more positive way. This is based on the teachings of Professor Martin Segliman, who has developed techniques to help people rise above the pessimism and depression that often accompanies negative thinking and can be so emotionally draining.

The second is regulating emotions so that you can think rationally and calmly in stressful situations and see life as challenging but opportunity filled.

The third is engaging in effective relationships. Many managers when under stress and pressure retreat into themselves which is the wrong thing to do as a problem shared really is a problem halved. It is vital that they develop supportive interactions with colleagues so that they can draw on their strengths in difficult times. However it can't be a one way street, they must also make sure they give assistance when a colleague turns to them for help as well.

Fourthly, solving problems effectively is key to a resilient approach and we look at how to re-establish perspectives after significant disruption and how to learn from past experience.

Fifthly, strengthening personal resilience is vitally important for being a resilient manager. To do this you have to recognise what your skills and qualities are to build up your self esteem and you also have to look at what barriers you put up. For example some children grow up believing that they can't make any mistakes at all and if one thing goes wrong then everything is wrong. This perfectionist behaviour is not very helpful for a manager who has to recognise that things will not always go to plan and adapt accordingly.

Many people have these kinds of philosophies on life and don't realise that they have them but encouraging them to think more deeply and uncover their fundamental beliefs can be very freeing and really enable them to make massive changes in their lives.

Lastly we teach managers how to help their team bounce back and flourish after disappointments.

Although the course is all about managers' professional life, the magic of it is that all the skills they learn are also very valuable in their personal lives and can really transform their whole outlook .

***Michaela Loughney has a Postgraduate Diploma and Masters degree in Applied Psychology. For the last twenty years she has worked as a consultant and has extensive experience in delivering stress management and resilience training. She is a consultant with In Equilibrium which was founded in 1998 and offers in-house training courses and consultancy throughout the UK, designed to help organisations create an environment where staff are resilient and well-being is enhanced.***