



The second of the Henley Centre for Leadership Webinar series in 2022 took place on 15<sup>th</sup> of February, through Zoom.

In this session, Caroline Rook and Chris Dalton delved further into the concept of leader resilience, with the aim of uncovering questions and assumptions that allow us to meaningfully engage in better practice for healthy and productive post-pandemic workplaces.

### **Part 1**

In the beginning of the seminar, the concept and the meaning of resilience was put into spotlight. Especially, issues of the differences between personal resilience and leader resilience, and how resilience has become a key skill for leadership in the post-pandemic era was discussed. Furthermore, the aim of the webinar in focusing on certain questions that need answers were presented: **“Do we need more resilient leaders? What does creating team resilience mean? What is a resilient organization, and what does a culture of resilience mean in this context?”**

After the introduction, Caroline Rook took the stage and delivered her presentation on Leader Resilience. The main question of which the presentation aimed to answer was **“How can we improve organizational practices to be more resilient?”**. In doing so, the discussion revolved around how we, as leaders and as organizations, are at a rebuild phase post-Covid, and how an intervention around energizing the workforce in this era would be beneficial. One emphasis was on how leaders needed to be resilient not only in the post-Covid era, but how they needed to be resilient before the pandemic as well.

Caroline Rook then defined personal resilience as the ability to cope with adversity, and more importantly, ability to cope with adversity and bounce back with high performance. A special emphasis was put on how resilience was not related to only coming back after a battle with adversity but learning from the experience and going above and beyond the previous performance levels. Moving to a resilient leadership point of view, this part of the webinar covered how we can become more resilient leaders. A special emphasis was put on resilience in order to keep organizations survive in the complex environment. Reflecting back on her research, Caroline argued

that it is the duty of leaders to perform in challenging times and also act as role models for the organization because how you present yourself in these times will affect the followers and the organization as a whole. Caroline described the questions which the leaders need to constantly ask themselves in these times: **“How resilient am I as a leader?”**, **“How am I enabling my team to be resilient?”** and finally **“How am I supporting my team to be resilient?”**

At the final phase of her presentation, Caroline proposed that **“Resilience is a key characteristic of leaders now and post-pandemic”**. In doing so, she delved deeper into the concept of building blocks of resilience. These blocks included **internal locus of control**, or the belief in ability to change, **commitment & tenacity to cause**, which related to seeing challenges as opportunities, **self-awareness**, which related to being aware of what is going on in the external environment, **strengthening work relationships** to foster emotional support and finally, **development through exposure**, in which the more change we endure, the more resilient we become.

## Part 2

At the second part of the webinar, Dr. Chris Dalton focused on the nature of resilience, and how it related to personal development. The second part began with a critique of the first part of the presentation, where Chris argued that the concept of leader resilience is almost always looked at the individual level, situating the notion of resilience within an individual. In contrast, Chris argued that it should be understood as the relationship between people and the environment. Conceptualising resilience as a personality trait or a characteristic is misleading without context. At that point, the importance of understanding resilience in the context of change was highlighted. Chris described resilience as **“a system’s capacity to retain its shape as it changes its shape”**. This indicates resilience as something operating at more than one level.

Looking at resilience from a systems point of view, Chris Dalton highlighted the importance of the need to look at not only the individual level, since it is tangled with story and the context, but also at the system level. Nokia was mentioned as an example of an organisation that retained an identity and coherence at one level, the legal entity or organisation, by retaining an ability to move to completely different industries and markets. Almost everything about Nokia changed, except its ability to change. The example of Nokia was provided at this point, with the aim of showing the importance of not focusing on a single level, highlighting how Nokia kept trying to do different things, and how one level of the organization remained the same while other parts were constantly changing (would delete this).

After this example, another definition of resilience was surfaced: **“Resilience is maintaining the higher-order capacity to regulate change at lower levels. Any system that fixes around a particular change has lost some resilience.”**

Furthermore, Chris Dalton delved into the concept of co-resilience. This says that resilience is a measure of the system and individual, in contrast to definitions of resilience where only the individual level is assessed. The emphasis was on how the environment is liable to change. This plays a very important role in understanding resilience in organizations, and how the relationship between a healthy individual and a healthy environment was the basis for creating resilience.

In doing so, the dynamic relationships between individual and the environment, team and the environment and organization and the environment were emphasised as building blocks on which resilience in organizations should be measured.

Moving onto the topic of the relationship between individual resilience and leader resilience, Chris Dalton started this part with a focus on emotions as a fundamental example of resilience. We should take a much more relational view. Emotions are considered as fluid, rather like water. Water will move according to its context. When under pressure, emotion can be very powerful. In personal and leader resilience emotions flow, so resilience is the capacity to flow freely. When there is an obstacle to this, there is less resilience.

### **Part 3**

The third part of the webinar focused on the question: **“How can we make people function in a toxic environment?”**. Our panellists offered two distinct views in answering this question. While Caroline Rook offered a focus on people and the organization in answering this question, Chris Dalton offered a more relational perspective, focusing on relationships in the organization.

**Questions such as: “How can we help staff to make it through? How can we enable individuals to cope better?”** surfaced in the flow of discussions, and Chris Dalton again emphasised the problem with the environment. He quoted Krishnamurti, **“It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society”**, to illustrate the principle. Chris then argued that the last two years revealed sick systems in our society, where no amount of individual focus would be able to solve.

Apart from the panellists, the attendees of the webinar were also active in driving the discussion through questions and comments. Andrea specifically mentioned the ideas of resilience as a personal trait, but also mentioned the importance of looking at resilience from a systems perspective. Caroline Rook, in response, mentioned how some people are born resilient and gritty, but also how resilience is a capacity that you develop and build up over time. In focusing on the systems perspective, Andrea mentioned the strength of the relationship with the system, and how useful it is to 1) Understand the system and the context and 2) Modify the personal traits and behaviour related to resilience.

Other comments from attendees to the seminar included Aisling, who emphasised the importance of context and network in resilience: **“You are only happy as your least happy child”**. Chris Dalton then argued that in the context of a network, the chain that binds the organization together is not the people, but the relationships within the network, and organizations are indeed as strong as their weakest relationships. Caroline Rook then raised the question: **“Even if leaders are resilient, how do they transfer this to the team/organization?”**. Then came the issue of the task of a leader: to see resilience in relational terms, rather than looking at it through parts of the organization.

Another attendee, Michaela, emphasised the importance of self-awareness in our relationship with the environment. Her argument was based on the idea that if we don't know ourselves, we might end

up in an unhealthy system, even if we try to cope and become resilient. On top of this, she argued that self-awareness grants us the ability to gauge and leave an unhealthy environment.

At the final section of the webinar, the discussion moved towards how to cope and grow in an unhealthy environment and developing resilience. Caroline emphasised the notions of how to cope with the changes, how to grow and learn from the challenges, and especially, learning to be self-aware and understanding that some environments are not right for us.

Chris on the other hand criticised the growing angle, asking where we are growing to and to what extent we are trying to be resilient. Another attendee, Michalea, touched on the issue of personal development, and mentioned that in a narrative where something is wrong, self-awareness and understanding who we are is essential in developing resilience. In response, Chris Dalton argued that getting to know yourself is a doorstep to getting to know the world, and to understand that we are relational beings makes us grasp that it is impossible to be a leader independent of interconnections.

### **Key Takeaways**

In talking about the key takeaways from this webinar, Caroline mentioned the importance for us all to know ourselves within the system and reflect further, how resilience is not really coping but it is adapting to the external environment, and how in a toxic system, the key is to self-realize and understand self-purpose in relation to others, the system, and finally, the environment.