



## Tough times, tough measures: organisational resilience

**James Foster** 07 December 2010

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**In recent years, organisations within both the private and public sector have been bombarded with warnings from official bodies to 'toughen up or lose business'. The cry to adopt the 'more for less' approach has been at the top of everyone's agenda. Indeed, for the past eighteen months it's been the private sector that has heeded this advice that was deemed necessary for survival. Now, in the face of drastic government cuts, it's the turn of the public sector.**

In some ways, changes have been made. Some public sector organisations are using redeployment initiatives to best utilise the full range of diverse skills within the workforce without the need for mass redundancies. Some have adopted huge cut backs in recreational spending within departments and others have begun to rely on a body of temporary staff.

Whilst these methods may work to some degree, they are purely reactive rather than proactive. And as experience should tell us, organisations which take the long-view approach are much more likely to survive (and indeed thrive) than organisations that don't.

International HR consultancy, A&DC, stresses the need for resilience within public sector organisations as an essential long-term approach. Organisational resilience, characterised by strong leadership, flexible systems, transparent and regular communications and the implementation of emergency plans to ensure survival in a downturn, needs to be embraced by every public sector organisation.

Yet the role of the individual or employee is often neglected within this approach. Philippa Riley, our senior consultant, says: "Many organisations focus on the need for organisational resilience but in doing so, they tend to forget about the people who make it work: their employees. Individual and organisational resilience should go hand in hand."

Simply put, individual resilience is all down to attitude. The council with optimistic and highly adaptable employees is going to fare better during the downturn than those councils who have highly strung, nervous and pessimistic employees working for them. Yet it is not about weeding these attributes out at interview stage. Rather, it is a skill that can be learned and developed.

The NHS for example, currently employs over 1.3 million people. According to NHS Employers, the NHS, largely seen as 'the employer of choice' is facing recruitment and retention difficulties in the face of a £20 billion deficit. But resilience has always been a key feature of the service which prides itself in its 'investing in staff' attitude. Managerial staff throughout the NHS (encouraged by the NHS Employers in their publication, Leading the NHS workforce through recovery) are teaching their departments about resilience. For an essential service such as the NHS, it is crucial for those dependant on the NHS (ie every British citizen) that they succeed.

Individual resilience means the difference between an organisation or service continuing to thrive during the downturn or actually going under. It is the difference between happy staff and demoralised staff.

"There are three key stages in the development of individual resilience" Philippa explains. "Measurement (analysing the strengths and weaknesses of an individual), feedback (allowing the individual to explore these attributes with meaningful feedback) and development planning."

Development planning, an essential stage of the process, supports the individual using a range of approaches such as challenging self-limiting beliefs, setting specific goals, reflecting on past experiences using reframing techniques and learning relaxation and breathing exercises.

At a time when public sector services are at critical phases throughout the country, it is essential that more organisations take up the concept of resilience and install it into their workforce.

Philippa adds: "This staff investment is likely to create a more flexible, positive workforce which can help public sector services and organisations make opportunities out of adversity."

James Foster works for A&DC

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