



# המרכז להכשרת מנהלים הבינתחומי הרצליה

## Using our Resilience Muscles during the Coronavirus Crisis

By Dr. Sharon Moshayof

Open any business or popular management journal and you will see what a hot topic **resilience** has become. In today's world of constant change and disruption, leaders have long realized that we need to get comfortable with the ambiguity and complexity of this new VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) world. Or as a smart person said to me recently, "We need to get comfortable with being uncomfortable."

There is no doubt that these are unprecedented times as the global coronavirus pandemic has posed an entirely new set of mega-challenges for all of us. In the coming pages I will outline the model of resilience that I have been using over the past decade both while leading a large HR and Change Management practice at one of the world's largest global pharmaceutical companies, Merck, and more recently in my independent consulting practice. I will explain how I see resilience as a critical capability as we face the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis in both our personal and professional lives.

Firstly, what is resilience? We can define it as the ability that some people have to bounce back from challenges and setbacks - to thrive in the face of adversity. Have you ever wondered why some people remain calm and effective in times of major disruptive change (defined as change that poses a major surprise or unanticipated shock, and has a significant effect on people) while others find it much harder, or even fall apart? People who keep their cool, and can remain productive and effective, have what psychologists call resilience.

In terms of major disruptive change, coronavirus is up there with the most disruptive challenges that most of us have ever faced. We look anxiously at the employment and financial implications of the crisis for our families; we worry about our own health and the risks to our family, particularly our parents and elderly relatives (an article in the Wall Street Journal on March 17th reminds us that in the face of the coronavirus, "elderly" means aged 60 and above. So much for believing that "60 is the new 40"!).

The good news is that resilience is not a trait that people either have or do not have. It is a process, and involves behaviors, thoughts and actions that can be learned and developed in anyone (American Psychological Association). The bad news is that being highly resilient is not something we are all born with. Some of us, myself included, have to make a real effort to develop strong resilience. It is hard work but well worth it, as I will go on to explain in this article.

So why is resilience so important during the coronavirus crisis? We already know that dealing with change, challenge and disruption demands significant effort. Each time we face something that disrupts our expectations, we experience a lack of control, and adapting to the new situation requires us to invest significant energy, or "adaptation resources". You are probably familiar with

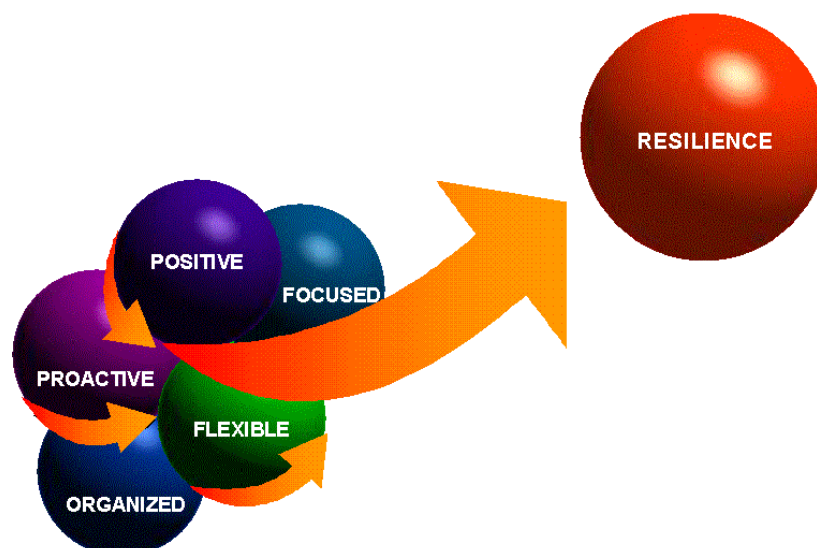
that feeling of emotional, mental and physical exhaustion you experience when you are undergoing a major change.

Here's the key point: the more resilient we are, the greater our ability to absorb high levels of disruptive change and still remain highly productive, effective and healthy. Being resilient is a critical competency for individuals in a VUCA world, and more than ever today in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic which is affecting every one of us. Yet, however resilient we may be, it is hard to handle the current daily news updates and announcements, and it takes time to adapt and return to equilibrium. The question is, how much time? Research tells us that highly resilient people are able to adapt more quickly, and that is the reason for the tremendous interest in this subject, today more than ever.

I use a simple yet powerful research-based model for describing, measuring and assessing resilience. This model was developed over 20 years ago at the US-based change-management firm ODR (now Conner Partners), led by Daryl Conner. In more recent years, the model has been further developed by Atlanta-based Resilience Alliance, an organization with a network of certified practitioners worldwide dedicated to supporting people and their organizations by developing their resilience, led by my colleague and friend, Linda Hoopes, PhD, author of *Managing Change with Personal Resilience and Prosilience*.

The model demonstrates that our overall resilience is a function of how seven resilience characteristics, or “muscles”, work together. I love the analogy of “muscles”: just as you need to have all of your physical muscles working together to be strong and healthy, so too do you need all of your resilience muscles working together to support the disruptive change that we all face.

Before we go any further, let's take a look at the model:





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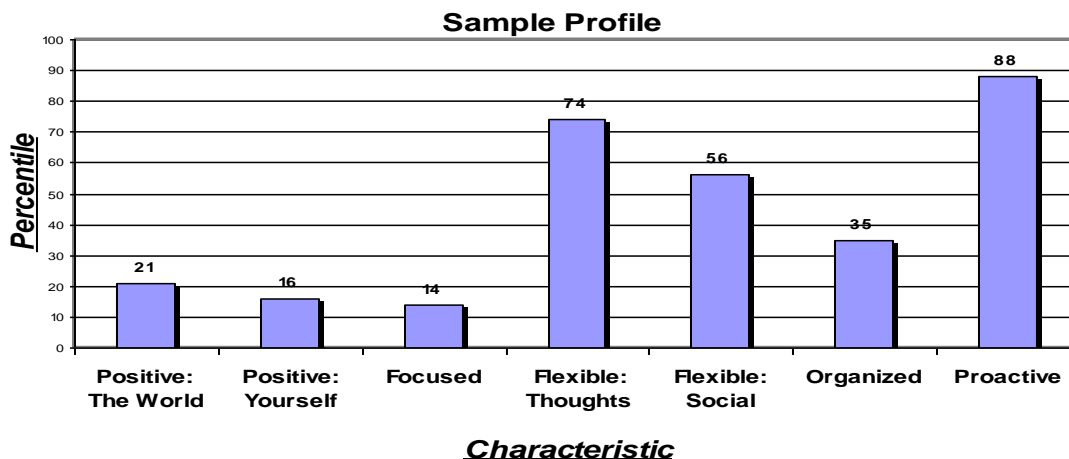
As you can see, the overall construct of “resilience” is comprised of five different areas: Positive, Focused, Flexible, Organized, and Proactive. Two of these break down into two further sub-divisions, giving us a total of seven resilience characteristics, or muscles. Here is a breakdown of the characteristics and how each helps you in times of disruption:

Characteristic	Helps You...
<b>Positive: The World</b>	See possibilities and hope in challenging situations
<b>Positive: Yourself</b>	Engage your energy in approaching challenges
<b>Focused</b>	Direct your energy toward your most important goals
<b>Flexible: Thoughts</b>	Generate a wide range of possibilities and ideas
<b>Flexible: Social</b>	Draw on others for resources and support
<b>Organized</b>	Apply organization and discipline to use energy efficiently
<b>Proactive</b>	Take action in the face of uncertainty and learn by doing

## How do we measure resilience?

The model I have described above can be measured using an online assessment called the PRQ (Personal Resilience Questionnaire), which is available in multiple languages (including Hebrew). After taking a 75-question online survey, individuals receive a personal (and confidential) profile which details their resilience levels for each of the seven areas described above. Scores are reported as percentiles, compared to a database of some 80,000 people who have taken the assessment since it was created in 1991.

Here’s a sample Personal Resilience Profile (PRP). It does not belong to an actual person and is just an example I use for training purposes.





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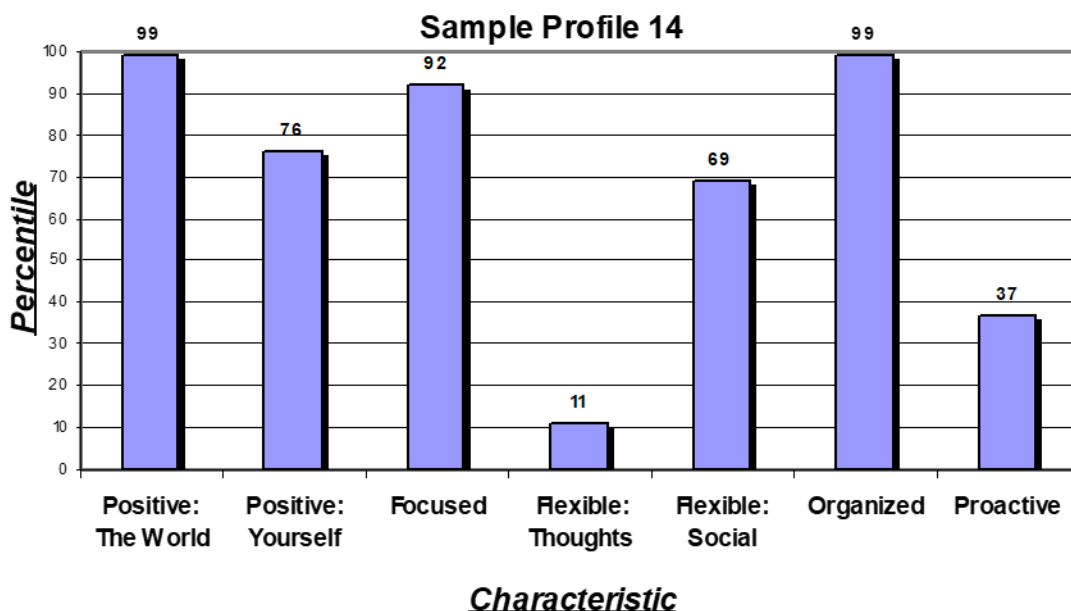
Looking at this sample profile, what do you notice? Would you say that this person is highly resilient? Not resilient at all? Why?

The short answer is that this person has a “mixed” resilience profile. As you can see, the bars are of varying heights - some are at the high end of the percentile range, others are at the very low end, and a few are around the midpoint. We can clearly see that this is not a balanced profile. Remember that highly resilient people can draw on all seven resilience characteristics, so it’s best if the levels are both high and fairly well-balanced.

Most importantly, both of the “Positive” characteristics are low. In fact, with 21 for “Positive: The World” and 18 for “Positive: Yourself”, they’re in the lowest quartile. This prompts concerns about the individual’s overall energy levels when it comes to engaging with disruption. Also notice the “Focused” score - it is also low, at 14. So not only does this person have low levels of energy, but they also seem to struggle to use that energy where it’s most needed. On the other hand, they seem comfortable with ambiguity and can apply good flexibility, both cognitively and in social interactions. It seems they have a well-developed set of “Proactive” muscles, allowing them to jump in and take action.

Back to my original question about whether this person is highly resilient. Based on the above, my answer would probably be “it depends”. The reason balance is important is that it lets us draw on the appropriate combination of characteristics across situations. If this person were in a situation where flexibility and proactivity were required, they might actually show up as very resilient. I’d be concerned about their low levels of the positive and focused muscles though.

Let’s take a look at a profile belonging to a client of mine, fully anonymized of course:





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Note how “Sample Profile 14” has generally highly developed muscles but their “Flexible: Thoughts” muscle is relatively weaker, leading them to struggle with ambiguity and “out of the box” thinking. These traits are much needed in these unprecedented times where there are no tried and trusted solutions.

When I meet with clients to debrief a profile, we go into a lot of depth, analyzing their different resilience characteristics, how they are working together, and look at how they might want to develop different muscles to increase their overall resilience.

### Strong and Weaker Resilience “Muscles”

I’m often asked about the seven characteristics and whether one or more strong “muscles” can compensate for other weaker ones. This is a great question that I believe is rooted in thinking that focuses on strengths and weaknesses, which is common to many models. These models often advocate working on our strengths rather than “wasting” time on weaknesses which are likely to remain weak regardless of our efforts.

With regards to this way of looking at resilience, I propose a different approach, reflecting what psychologist Carol Dweck refers to as a “growth” rather than a “fixed” mindset. A fixed mindset uses the language of strengths and weaknesses, seeing these as somewhat permanent or fixed, whereas a growth mindset focuses on the individual’s ability to develop and grow through self-awareness and by undertaking development actions with determination and motivation.

I believe that we should consider an individual’s stronger resilience characteristics as *gifts* that a person brings to a situation, whether he/she is facing that situation individually or with others. In a group situation we can consider that a person’s stronger resilience characteristics are part of the value they bring to that group.

Overall, I propose that we focus less on individual resilience characteristics and more on how they work together, synergistically, to enable us to handle disruption effectively. Having a well-balanced profile means that you can call on each of the characteristics for many different situations, and therefore demonstrate more overall resilience. When someone has particularly high scores for a couple of specific characteristics, they tend to draw on these in every situation, and can struggle in scenarios which call for the use of their lower-scoring characteristics.

Another reason not to focus on the “strengths” conversation is that characteristics can actually be overused as well as underused. For this reason, it should not be assumed that “the higher the better” applies to the percentile scores. A score of 98, for example, for one of the resilience characteristics, may lead to the individual over-relying on that characteristic in all situations, even when other characteristics are more suitable for the situation at hand.



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An example of this is a colleague of mine whose “Organized” score is in the high 90s, much higher than all her other characteristics. While having a well-developed “Organized” characteristic can be useful for handling change, it is clear that having this as her only lever is not highly effective. She typically applies structure, process and discipline to every situation, desperately trying to bring order to chaos. What she struggles to bring is **flexibility** – both her “Flexible: Thoughts” and her “Flexible: Social” muscles are weaker, and she needs to work hard to flex these muscles in times of change. As Linda Hoopes writes in her blog, *“A balanced profile is analogous to a well-stocked tool kit, where each tool is available for use. As the saying goes, to a person with a hammer, everything looks like a nail.”*

### Resilience and the “Gym” of Life

At the beginning of this chapter I shared the good news that resilience is not a trait that we either possess or do not possess. We know that resilience can be developed, and just as you’d go to the gym to develop your physical muscles, you can work on developing your resilience muscles at the “gym of life”. The current situation gives us a dramatic example of this.

When change or adversity occurs, I recommend my clients to treat the situation as a “workout” and to consciously and deliberately “flex their muscles”. Let’s see how this might work as we all deal with the coronavirus crisis.

1. **Positive: The World** – Related to optimism or a positive outlook on life, this resilience characteristic is about how we view the crisis. While there is no minimizing its health and economic ramifications, strengthening this muscle will help us avoid fretting and worrying more than necessary about what might happen, and instead focus on believing that we will get through this, and maybe even come out stronger. This is actually my weakest muscle, and one I’ve been working on strengthening for years. One thing that has helped me tremendously is taking a few minutes each evening to write down 3 things I am grateful for. Even in these difficult times, I find that there are so many, and the act of writing them down actually helps me be more positive.
2. **Positive: Yourself** – This characteristic is about our sense of belief in our ability to handle whatever challenges life throws at us. It’s about confidence and self-efficacy, and believing that whatever this crisis brings, we will be able to handle it. Note that although characteristics #1 and #2 are both in the “Positive” cluster, they are independent characteristics. So, we can have a highly developed “Positive: The World” muscle and a less developed “Positive: Yourself” muscle or vice versa, or both can be high or low.
3. **Focused** – We get our energy for dealing with change from our “Positive” muscles, and then our “Focused” characteristic determines how effectively we use that energy. Do we step back



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and consider where we really need to invest time and energy in times of change, or do we tend to fritter away our limited resources across all kinds of activities? Having a highly developed “Focused” muscle includes being able to say “no” where appropriate and to stick to priorities.

4. **Flexible: Thoughts** – This muscle is all about how comfortable we are with ambiguity and our ability to consider a wide range of options in any situation, rather than sticking to the tried and trusted. It’s about being creative, thinking outside of the box, and being willing to remain open rather than needing to come down firmly in favor of one option or another. I think this one is particularly critical in the coronavirus crisis, precisely because this is a whole new ball game and we are dealing with real unknowns.
5. **Flexible: Social** – This muscle relates to being open with others and having a supportive reciprocal network from which to draw upon. Individuals with a highly developed “Flexible: Social” characteristic will readily reach out to others for support, advice and assistance, and will be those people whom others reach out to. This muscle is related to extroversion and interpersonal comfort. This is my strongest "muscle" so it comes naturally to me to connect with family, friends and colleagues all over the world. With tools such as WhatsApp, Zoom, and others, it is thankfully so easy to stay in close touch, which I find reassuring.
6. **Organized** - This muscle helps us plan, sort, structure, and bring discipline and process to the way we manage that change. Those of us who have a highly developed “Organized” muscle will often enjoy planning and organizing, rather than just letting things happen. This is my other strongest characteristic, so it comes naturally to me to have a plan!
7. **Proactive** – This final characteristic is about being willing to jump in and take action in the face of uncertainty; to act without having all the facts or knowledge of what we are doing. When our “Proactive” muscle is well-developed, we are able to take calculated risks, and we don’t need to stay within the confines of the “status quo.” The current situation is, by definition, all about uncertainty so being willing to try things out is important.

### Summary

As we increase our self-awareness of our resilience levels, we can learn to pay attention to our automatic reactions to disruption – and to challenge them. We **can** adopt more resilient responses to the situation, if we make a deliberate effort to do so.

I encourage each one of us to consider how we can increase our own resilience levels so we can continue to support our organizations, and of course our families and friends, as we deal with



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the coronavirus crisis. Think about each of the resilience muscles described above. Which one(s) do you think are your strongest / most well-developed? Which tend to be your weaker muscles? Remember that we automatically turn to our strongest muscles and struggle to use our weaker ones, regardless of what is actually needed to handle the disruption.

While the coronavirus crisis is a perfect example of the need for all seven muscles to be working well together, there are three in particular that stand out for me right now:

- **My Positive: The World** muscle will help me see the light in the darkness, to realize that “this too shall pass”, to focus on the many good things that are going on around us. If this is one of your strong muscles, you are probably already doing this. Spare a thought for those of us who find it harder to be optimistic. Empathize and encourage us to look on the bright side!
- Deliberately using my **Flexible: Thoughts** muscle guides me to look for creative solutions to deal with the previously unknown challenges we are facing. If this is not one of your stronger muscles, you may find yourself desperately looking for proven solutions. Realize that you need to deliberately go outside of your comfort zone and look for new options. I see this happening all around me, with people running yoga sessions via Zoom, having therapy sessions via FaceTime, and using video to connect with physicians for the first time. What else can you think of?
- My **Flexible: Social** muscle helps me reach out to others and to stay connected, to give and ask for support. If this is one of your strong muscles, I’m sure you are doing this. Bear in mind that for people with a weaker Flexible: Social muscle, it is more difficult to check in and ask for support. Don’t wait for others to reach out – be proactive yourself! Social distancing means that we can’t be physically close right now, but we can absolutely utilize other means to stay connected.

I’d like to close with a quotation from one of Harvard Business Review’s most popular articles, from 2002. In the article, “How Resilience Works”, Diane Coutu writes that, “*More than education, more than experience, more than training, it’s resilience that determines who succeeds and who fails*”. My experience, from over 30 years working with leaders in top global corporations, supports this claim completely. Remember the saying, “what doesn’t kill us, makes us stronger”? I believe that if we take the challenge of the coronavirus crisis as an opportunity to work on strengthening our resilience muscles, this is a real possibility.

Be safe; Be well... and remember to work those muscles!





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## Recommended reading

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4. Hoopes, L. (2017). *Prosilience*. Dara Press, Atlanta, GA.
5. Hoopes, L. (2015) Resilience Alliance Blog at <http://resiliencealliance.com/strengths-weaknesses-and-balance-2/>
6. Dweck, C. (2006). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Random House