GOOD DAY AT WORK

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Building morale and resilience – the key to surviving difficult times

Section one

Building morale and resilience – the key to surviving difficult times

– we'll cover:

- ☑ Morale: what is it and why does resilience matter?
- ☑ How pressure affects morale
- ☑ Morale and resilience essentials – advice for all organisational contexts

What is morale?

Morale is a word that's been around for some time but which reflects a very contemporary idea – it's a quality that enables people to pull together, to stay well and positive, even when times are tough. Furthermore, it's something that's pretty important right now – for all organisations, their leaders and their employees; in short, for all of us.

> the capacity of a group of people to pull together persistently and consistently in pursuit of a common purpose
>
> Alexander Leighton

> a state of individual psychological wellbeing based upon a sense of confidence, usefulness and purpose
>
> AudioEnglish.net

So, what is it and where does resilience fit in? Taking morale first, as implied by the definitions above it has two main aspects – one relates to staying focused and committed; what is now usually referred to as employee engagement. As a great deal of work has demonstrated, engaged employees are very beneficial for the organisations that they work in.

However, on its own engagement is seldom enough and that's where the second element comes in. High levels of engagement lead to positive business outcomes, but this is only sustainable if the engagement is supported by high levels of employee wellbeing (Robertson, Birch and Cooper, 2011).

So, to perform well in the current difficult times organisations need to focus on both engagement and wellbeing to ensure that their people can stay focused, productive and well.

In summary, the evidence shows that a wide range of business and customer-related benefits are enhanced and sustained when people are fully engaged, with high levels of psychological wellbeing, as demonstrated in *figure 1* overleaf.

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Organisational benefits of employee engagement and wellbeing

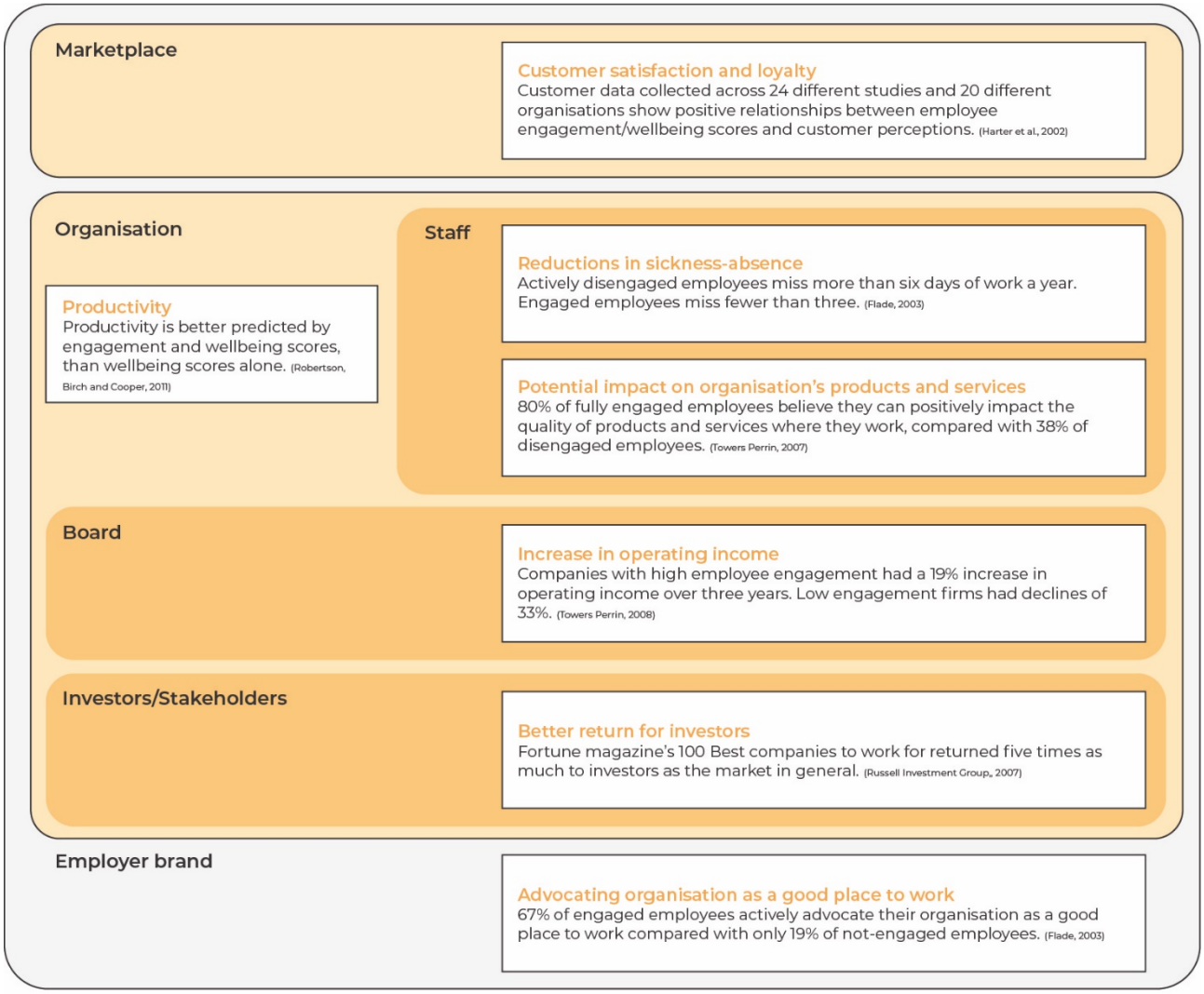


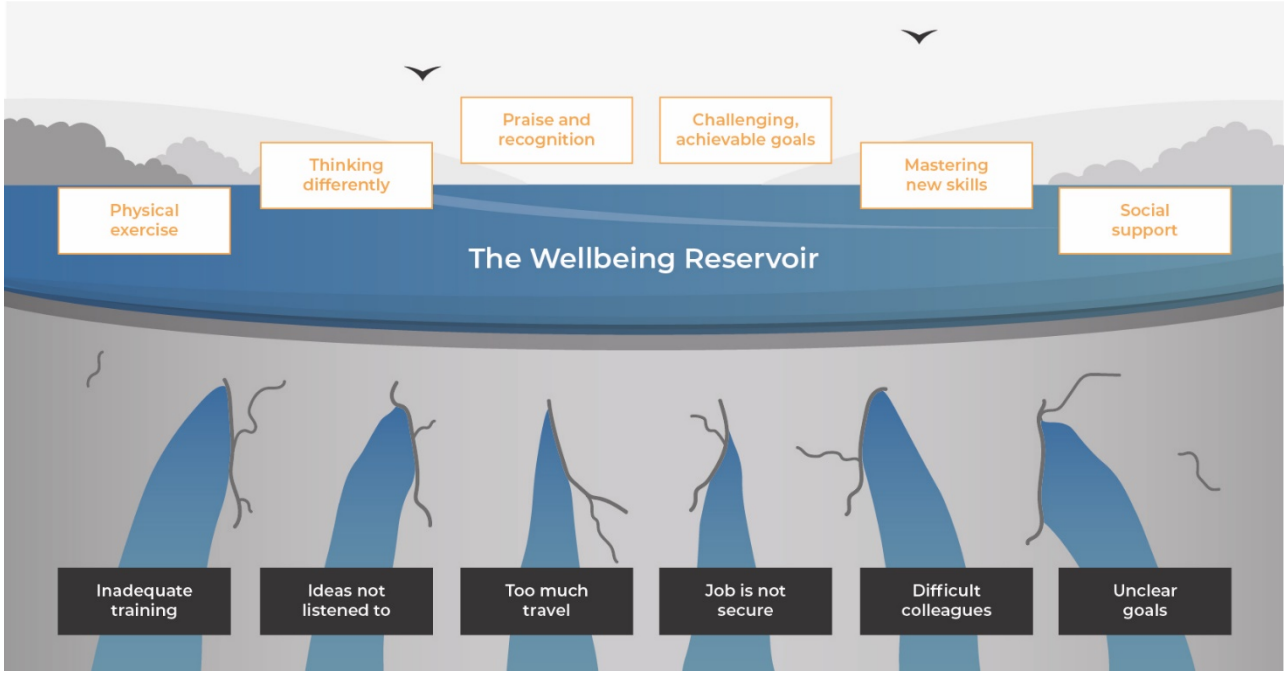
Figure 1: Benefits of engagement and wellbeing

Resilience relates to people's ability to stay positive even when the going gets tough and there are clear links to morale, wellbeing and engagement. When levels of resilience are high across a workforce it is much more likely that morale will stay high when times are hard.

High levels of resilience have two important implications for morale. First, high resilience means that people's behaviour is more resistant to pressure – in other words they can continue to perform well even under significant strain; secondly, high levels of resilience mean that people can cope with the pressure - staying focused and positive personally.

So, one key aspect of sustaining morale when times are hard involves helping people to deal effectively with pressure.

How pressure affects morale



Levels of engagement and wellbeing act like a reservoir. Over time they will fall unless they are topped up – when they drop, so too does morale. During particularly difficult times it is even more important to keep the reservoir topped up.

At this current time of radical change, uncertainty and blurred lines, pressures on the reservoir are widespread, multifaceted and probably affect everyone in one way or another. These pressures range from things such as smaller budgets, reduced resources and recruitment freezes through to restructuring and downsizing.

Inevitably pressures lead to worry and uncertainty amongst staff so unchecked they can easily damage morale. Reduced morale (i.e. engagement and wellbeing) can begin a vicious downward spiral where performance, productivity and important business outcomes all suffer together.

Of course, just the opposite happens if managers and employees can stay positive. The relevant research and case studies reveal that positive emotions and a positive outlook can produce an upward, positive spiral.

Whatever the impact of the overarching changes to the workplace are for your organisation, there is something you can do to maintain and boost morale, wellbeing and resilience. You just have to know where to start.

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Essentials: regardless of what is actually happening

At Robertson Cooper we have spent two decades looking at the key factors that influence people's morale, mental health & wellbeing, engagement and resilience at work. Broadly, these factors can be divided into two categories: personal and situational.

Personal factors relate to the characteristics of the individual employee – and include things like personality, work attitudes and competencies. Of course, our levels of personal resilience are strongly linked to factors such as underlying personality and job/work attitudes. However, while such characteristics are important for resilience this does not mean that it is a fixed quality that we can't develop or change. In fact, resilience levels can be boosted through training and development that involves giving people insights into their own personality and providing them with simple techniques and ideas that they can use to build resilience. One practical starting point for individual employees is using a personalised resilience report to find out their own starting point – i.e. where their own resilience comes from and what situations particularly threaten it. Robertson Cooper offers a free tool of this sort called iResilience and it is available at robertsoncooper.com/iResilience.

Situational factors relate to all of the aspects of working and non-working life that impact us as employees. These include things like co-workers, management and supervision, resources and rewards, job security, personal circumstances and our home life context. Employer organisations can have relatively little influence on personal circumstances and home life – and for some people these are the critical determinants of morale. But for most people engagement and wellbeing at work are affected mostly by work-related factors over which the employer has a major influence. A summary of the key workplace factors that influence morale is shown in *figure 2*. When all of these factors are positive, it is very likely that morale and wellbeing will be good. Our reservoir is threatened when we are troubled by one or more of these critical factors.

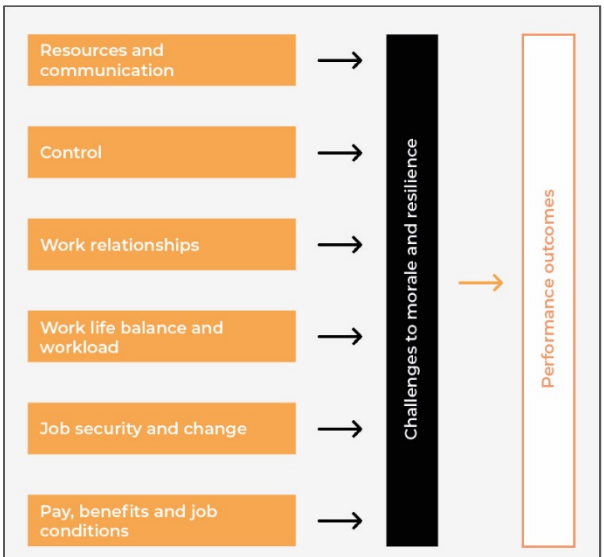

Figure 2: Workplace factors that influence morale and resilience

It's worth expanding on why these areas are important to employees:

Resources and communication. Are people troubled about the resources and equipment they need to perform effectively – and do they feel properly informed about work-related developments?

Control. Are people troubled about the control they have over how they do their work – and are they concerned that their voice is not being heard, especially with the increase in home working?

Work relationships. Do people have positive and helpful relationships with their boss and co-workers – or are there concerns? Has remote working impacted relationships?

Work life balance and workload. Are people troubled by the balance between their work and home life or the level of their workload?

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Job security and change. Are people troubled about the security of their position or concerned about how change is being managed?

Of course, the individual employee can exert a certain amount of control over some of these sources of pressure (unless they are completely disempowered!), but in many cases it is the manager that determines the employee's actual experience. If we accept that these areas underlie employee wellbeing, engagement and morale it follows that the role managers play is critical.

Figure 3 uses the same six situational factors to unpack the high-level actions that managers can undertake to ensure that employee experience is maximised. When the pressure builds it is easy for one or more of these factors to become a significant source of concern for people. When that happens, employees often become preoccupied with their problems, rather than staying positive and focused on their work contribution – in this context their manager's behaviour can either alleviate or exacerbate the effect. It's down to employers to support managers in a way that achieves the former and avoids the latter.

You will be able to think of detailed, contextualised examples of how managers in your business can achieve these outcomes in each of the areas, but those in *figure 3* act as examples and prompts.

Figure 3: Managers actions in key situational areas

As I'm sure you recognise, difficulties can arise in these priority areas for managers during good times too, but in the current climate it is more important than ever to pay attention to them. They provide a model or checklist for achieving and maintaining a workplace characterised by high morale. However, if left unattended problems can build up in any of these areas.

Even if you are starting from a base of low morale, the approach can be used by business leaders and HR departments to take an organisational view, but also by managers at a local level to 'audit' their own team or department by either using this simple model informally or by doing this formally using a wellbeing measurement tool, such as the one provided by Robertson Cooper. However you use the model, it provides the language for structured conversations with teams, direct reports or more senior managers.

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Section two

Section one of this paper looked at the nature of both morale and resilience – what they are and why they matter. It covered the essentials that everyone needs to know about these areas during challenging times when demands are high– regardless of what's happening in your organisation.

Section two outlines the keys to success when you are dealing specifically with a major change situation, including, but not limited to, the experience of the Coronavirus pandemic. All of the advice from section one still applies, but here you will find specific advice and guidance on how to maintain and build morale when you're attempting to deal with enforced organisational change.

In particular, we look at the role of leaders and managers, the evergreen issue of communication and how to ensure that the change is seen as 'just'. In addition, we explore the options for providing the appropriate training and support to those who will be affected.

– we'll cover:

- ☑ Dealing with significant change
- ☑ Leadership and management
- ☑ Communication
- ☑ Organisational justice
- ☑ Training and support

Dealing with significant change

As noted in section one, not every organisation is going through significant change – but there is no doubt that many organisations are dealing with insecurity and ambiguity right now. In turn, this is affecting their future plans and current employee experience.

When significant change is taking place, the actions and principles that will help to maintain morale become more focused and practical. There are several important issues to consider and, although the specifics are likely to be different in each case, the general principles are the same regardless of what kind of change is taking place.

The following guidance has been developed after reviewing the available research and case study material, and provides a succinct summary of the key factors to help organisations to get through difficult times.

It goes without saying, there is no magic bullet for turning hard times into good times, but in our experience it is possible to provide some clear and relevant pointers about how to maintain morale when the going gets tough.

The findings that emerge from the research and case study evidence can be organised under the following key themes:

- **Leadership and management**
- **Communication**
- **Organisational justice**
- **Training and support**
- **Resilience building for all the workforce**

We'll now look at each in turn in terms of the contribution they can make to managing major change.

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The role of leadership and management

During difficult times, people's uncertainty and worries about the future multiply. A critical role for the senior leaders of any organisation is to provide stability and, above all, to present a clear vision of the future.

As everyday pressures bear down on people it can be difficult to imagine a time when things will be more settled and the current problems are in the past. Of course, this does not mean that all leaders need to do is say that everything will be alright. This is especially true if, in reality, that is not the case – for example, when the organisation is likely to have to close down altogether!

Steve Radcliffe's beautifully simple FED model of leadership (steveradcliffe.com) involves three key components: Future; Engage; Deliver. Of course, all three parts are important but when radical change is successfully negotiated, a clear vision for the future from senior leadership usually plays a particularly important part. This vision enables people to see past their current concerns and imagine a stable future. For this reason, the message needs to be honest, authentic and communicated frequently and clearly - otherwise the imagined future will not match reality and trust will be damaged.

Getting communication right

It is not enough for management and leadership to simply make information available. They need to 'over-communicate', repeatedly addressing issues and, whenever possible, anticipating information needs.

As stressed above, all of this needs to be done in the context of a clear and realistic vision of the future. Flooding the workplace with accurate information is one of the main tools that management can use to help make the process as positive as possible.

All the evidence shows that providing information is the central thread that runs through successful programmes involving radical change. This is the case even when a degree of uncertainty about the future still remains; honesty and authenticity matter.

It might seem obvious, but so many organisations underestimate the level of communication required to make change really stick. If you have any doubts at all about whether you have got the communications right - go round the loop again!

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Ensuring fairness and 'organisational justice'

When people are under pressure they do not think completely rationally. Rather, their frame of reference becomes more limited and they become much more sensitive to anything that relates to their current challenges – especially anything that seems unfair. This means that when people feel pressure because they are struggling with (real or perceived) adversity, issues of fairness and justice become particularly important to them. And it should be important to you in this context – you must consider the perceived 'justice' of what is happening or being planned. One way to do this is to use the following framework to look at the three components of organisational justice.

Distributive justice is about the actual outcomes – how people are expected to work and how people are rewarded – and whether it is perceived as being fair.

The changes to the way we work as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic have thrown up many challenges to distributive justice. For example, in some organisations there may be a perceived injustice between furloughed staff and those who have been working throughout the pandemic for the same pay. Addressing any perceived distributive injustice is fundamental to levels of morale within your organisation.

Procedural justice concerns the processes that are used to make decisions - they should always be both transparent and fair. Those affected (and those who aren't) by any changes must be able to understand and accept how outcomes will be determined. It's perfectly possible not to like the outcome, but to accept it and the processes used to create it. If this happens it can positively affect your starting point for building morale in the wake of implementing any changes – it's much better than change not being accepted at all!

Interactive justice is about how information is presented and communicated to your employees. If your messages are clear and your modes of communication enable you to get them to the right people at the right time, you stand a much better chance of creating perceptions of fairness. This includes providing information about the processes and criteria that are being used to inform decisions.

By using this framework to check the perceived fairness of what you are planning, you can take active steps to ensure that change is understood and accepted by the majority. Often there is no perfect solution and not everyone will be happy, but a lack of perceived fairness is a sure fire way to undermine the extent to which change will 'stick'.

We offer a few tips to help you manage perceptions of justice during times of managed change:

- **Avoid creating an unreasonable increase in workload and complexity as a result of the change – in fact, the aim should be to deliver simplification. This is an opportunity to drive efficiency gains from which the business and its employees will benefit.**

- **Don't forget that managers with responsibility for implementing the changes will be affected emotionally and will also need support.**

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Providing the right training and support: the importance

One of the most direct ways to facilitate change is to provide training and support to relevant groups within the organisation. The target and focus of the training required will obviously be specific to the context and the organisation in question, but in general could be offered to distinct groups: individuals, leaders, and the managers responsible for implementation.

There are well-developed and personalised resilience training programmes based on high quality research that can be adapted to meet the needs of all of these groups.

Resilience training for managers

The way that managers support (or don't support) major change can make the difference in terms of ultimate success or failure. For that reason, if you're planning and implementing change you should give explicit consideration to the roles and responsibility of managers to make it happen. By extension, you should also determine whether there are skill gaps that need to be filled in the management population before starting the implementation stage – ones that could potentially derail the whole process.

The training and support that you provide for the managers who are implementing the changes should be broad in scope. It should certainly include personal resilience training, but also incorporate a wider perspective. Often specific elements of stress management training (tuned particularly for managers) are also offered so that managers have a better understanding of the emotional and behavioural reactions to expect from the workforce and how best to respond. It's really important that the support offered to managers has sufficient breadth to include a focus on the manager him/herself, while also considering the impact of the change on those that he/she manages.

Resilience training for all staff

It is self-evident that in better times people will not have to draw on their resilience so much. During difficult times, however, personal resilience becomes particularly important. Everyone's level of resilience is partly dependent on their underlying personality and partly on their life, development and learning experiences. There is no doubt that resilience can be improved but it doesn't happen automatically – you can't just ask or tell someone to be more resilient. Training is one very effective way of improving someone's resilience – and short courses with personalised insights, plus some follow-up, can make a big difference.

Formal training can have a big impact, but it is not the only way that resilience can be boosted – it can happen on the job too. In fact, difficult times provide a golden opportunity for improving personal resilience – one that businesses shouldn't miss out on. There is good research evidence to show that surviving difficult times can have a positive impact on resilience levels.

People who have been through tough experiences can come out of them with higher levels of personal resilience – so in broad terms the old saying 'what doesn't kill you makes you stronger' holds true. But remember, several important conditions must be in place to turn difficult times into improved resilience – otherwise the tough experiences can be damaging, rather than helpful. In this sense it's really important to ensure that the following key conditions are in place as early as possible if you think employees are likely to experience strain.

Work goals need to be tough but achievable and supported: struggling with impossible goals that cannot be achieved will not build resilience. If goals are tough,

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that is a good thing – only when goals are really challenging can people experience the intense feeling of achievement and mastery that comes from reaching them. Goals that are too difficult – or perhaps simply too numerous or conflicting – do not allow people to achieve them. This lack of achievement denies employees the pay-off of success in return for the strain involved and therefore will damage, rather than build resilience.

There needs to be a clear and valued sense of purpose: as well as being difficult and achievable, goals must feel worthwhile. Research is very clear that when people feel that what they are doing is worthwhile and valuable they can cope with much higher levels of adversity and stay focused. If sense of purpose is compromised or missing altogether then motivation, effort and sense of wellbeing will all suffer.

Periods of respite need to be available... and taken: people can cope with a great deal but wading through the mire of tough times always takes a toll. Resilience is supported by a person's sense of wellbeing.

If you picture the sum total of your wellbeing as a reservoir it's clear that excessive strain can deplete it – at some point it will need topping up. More positive things, even though they are challenging - like reaching tough goals - can replenish it. But tough challenges will build resilience only if they do not go on for too long.

One critically important way to re-fill the reservoir is to take a break – in other words give yourself a period of respite. This simply needs to be something different. Sitting with your feet up is fine – if that takes your mind of current frustrations and difficulties, so is rock-climbing, a leisurely dinner, stamp collecting or anything else that you enjoy and is not work related.

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Summary

So, in brief, when your workforce is resilient employees are able to cope with the pressures associated with working life – whether they are change-related, because of the economy or even something very specific like poor working relationships. When employees have the ability to bounce back and keep going in the face of adversity, morale gets an extra layer of protection – regardless of what is happening inside and outside the organisation.

Of course, these insights are not only relevant during tough times – if your business takes these points into account in terms of how work is structured and organised, you will inevitably foster a more resilient workforce. By extension you will **be** a more resilient organisation.

To summarise, tough experiences themselves can be valuable, but you can't control the nature of those experiences. What you can do is ensure that your employees have: (i) tough but achievable goals; (ii) a clear sense of purpose and (iii) sufficient opportunity for respite – and that they take that respite. When you do this, you can have confidence that you've created the conditions whereby the tough experiences that your employees have to go through really could make them stronger!

The best way of checking to see that these conditions are in place will vary. In some cases, simply talking to key people might be enough. In other circumstances something more systematic might be required, this could involve using existing communication process such as regular team meetings, or something specifically designed to collect accurate information. One way of achieving this is to call in external specialists, such as Robertson Cooper, to carry out a data collection exercise to gauge how people are feeling about the key factors above and aid evidence-based decision making. And remember, this applies to the senior managers implementing changes just as much as everyone else.

Whichever approach you choose it is possible to harness the experiences that tough times create for your workforce and use them to essentially develop people and the organisation as a whole. It may seem counter-intuitive to be using difficult times to contribute to personal and organisational development, but it's a lot more constructive than ignoring it or focusing only on short-term coping strategies.

The good news is that all of the above advice can be integrated with day to day leadership and management processes – they are what the most successful organisations are doing anyway. And there's no reason why many more cannot join them during these difficult times.

To get an accurate measure of employee experience and start taking a data-driven approach to mental health and wellbeing, get in touch with Robertson Cooper today by calling 0161 232 4910 or email hi@robertsoncooper.com

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