

## Dialogue, Debate, and Discussion

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### Resilient Leadership as Paradox Work: Notes from COVID-19

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Crises and tragedies befalling individuals, teams, organizations, or communities call for leadership that builds resilience in the face of danger. The COVID-19 pandemic, full of both known and unknown unknowns, is no exception and variable national responses to it epitomize the importance of resilient leadership. In such situations there is always the expectation that ‘something has to be said’ in response to commentators and authorities calling for a clear unambiguous direction (in politics, in business, and in communities) and that it is best said by ‘the leader’. Saying something and dealing with a reality unravelling in the midst of uncertainty and ambiguity can lead to paradoxical situations. In the words of Deloitte Global CEO Punit Renjen (2020), COVID-19 has challenged leaders with ‘fixing the plane while it flies’. For passengers to remain calm while doing so requires the tension-laden goal of ‘building recovery on a foundation of trust’. The balance between saying something reassuring and responding to something threatening in process is difficult to weigh. While to lead means to guide, to resile means to respond or be guided by circumstances through a process of adaptation and growth within a risky environment. In this commentary, we discuss resilient leadership as paradox work, i.e., guiding while being guided by contingencies.

#### RESILIENT LEADERSHIP: BUILDING WALLS AND WINDMILLS

As highlighted in Lewin, Li, and Välikangas’s (2020: 225) call for commentaries, the COVID-19 pandemic ‘will be a test of resilience and responsible leadership at the global, country, industrial, firm, family and individual level’. We interpret that challenge in light of an interesting proverb: ‘When the winds of change blow, some people build walls and others build windmills’. Resilient leadership

might be conceived as simultaneously providing protection from wind *while* finding a process with which to exploit its force. Protection is a *sine qua non* condition for avoiding harm. While effective protection supports survival and prevents collapse, processes exploiting a crisis can nourish thriving that builds further protection. Leadership that is instrumental to these goals must formulate actions paving the way for change, while also pacing its tempo, being continuously aware of and responsive to the ongoing unpredictability that any change of state and affairs ensues.

*Resilient leadership* is the enactment of the two components that have recently attracted increasing scholarly attention and acquired centrality in managerial debate: resilience *and* leadership (e.g., Zheng, Kark, & Meister, 2018). Resilience is intrinsically paradoxical, integrating strength *and* vulnerability (Cameron, 2008), agency *and* communion (Zheng et al., 2018). Drawing upon the parable of the fox and the hedgehog by Greek poet Archilochus' where 'The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing', Gaddis (2018) has analyzed historical accounts of leaders embracing strategic approaches characterized by hedgehog like idealism or fox like pragmatism. The most effective (and resilient) leaders, however, were characterized as neither of these but as a combination of idealistic and pragmatic (March & Weil, 2009), pursuing one grandly ambitious strategy thoroughly within a consistent framework over the long-term (hedgehog, idealism) *and* cautiously exploring many alternatives, remaining attentive to details, even accepting losses in the short-term (fox, pragmatism) – i.e., pragmatic idealism. Resilient leadership accordingly implies vigorous combinations of contrary elements such as preparedness *and* improvisation, clear direction-setting *and* flexibility in the face of specific circumstances. It is this integration of opposites, more than a focus on a single dimension, that defines 'resilient leadership' in responses to the COVID-19 pandemic as 'paradox work'.

## RESILIENCE AND LEADERSHIP

*Resilience* etymologically derives from the Latin *resilire*, which means to jump back or recoil. This sense of resilience has been adopted by many disciplines including psychiatry, psychology, engineering, biology, and ecology. Managerial resilience connotes the aptitude to absorb and learn from external shocks, while at the same time preparing to respond to whatever will come (Välíkangas, 2010). Resilient leadership therefore has two facets which seem to be its antipodes (Giustiniano, Clegg, Cunha, & Rego, 2018): reactive and adaptive.

Contradictory tensions (such as anticipation/adaptation; solidity/flexibility; efficiency/redundancy; boldness/prudence; compassion/hardiness; profit/purpose; updating information/being aware that information may not mean knowing; courage to make unpopular decisions/humility to listen the crowd, etc.) must be synthesized into an overarching whole to characterize resilient leadership. Pursuing resilience means balancing and handling contradictions, rather than

confuting one or other term, positioning leaders, be they managers or policy makers, for more effective decision-making. As the COVID-19 pandemic attests, emergencies imply both preparation and reaction. We see this illustrated in the motto ‘go hard, go early’ that New Zealand authorities – led by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern – adopted in an ongoing process of both preparedness and adaptation as the COVID-19 crisis evolved (Wilson, 2020). New Zealand, among the best responses to COVID-19 globally, derived its success from a *preparedness* to *react* in ways that enhanced *preparedness* for effective responding in future (un)predictable situations. Being *prepared* to *react* to be *prepared* requires that leaders do everything possible to create enabling conditions that cultivate trust and a sense of purpose in teams and organizations (Joly, 2020).

Resilient leadership in the face of pandemic requires rethinking the way work activities are conducted and how roles as citizens, managers and decision-makers are enacted. Apparent contradictions, including rationality/empathy, stability/flexibility, present/future, local/global, autonomy/control, individual/collective, require directing. The guiding thread of resilient leadership is the talent for balancing responses to contradictory forces that present themselves as non-alternatives during periods of high ambiguity. The COVID-19 pandemic has tested the capacity of leaders to be both firm and flexible, gritty and empathic, tough and compassionate, directive and empowering, willing to set the pace and to be responsive to the emerging realities, steering and sharing leadership, leading while being led by experts (Wilson, 2020); in other words, conducting paradox work in the purposeful balancing of interdependent yet opposing forces (Smith & Lewis, 2011). The task is complex, requiring the navigation of unstable combinations of synergy and tradeoff (Li, 2014), yet the best examples of leadership through the pandemic have expressed this paradoxical quality (Wilson, 2020).

## PARADOX WORK IN FRONT OF COVID-19

Achieving resilient leadership and healing apparent contradictions between reaction and adaptation requires learning. A restaurant owner in Rome, known by the first author, turned her business into a food delivery service during the first lockdown. The food packs her team delivered included a note saying something like: ‘Dear customer... I’m scared, we’re scared... this is all new to me and my team; please help us improve, we’ll learn this new business together’. To survive and thrive, businesses and other organizations need to transform stressors, crises and shocks into new and sustainable solutions. The process necessitates playing with the unlearning-learning balance to integrate the reactive and adaptive components of resilience. Unlearning is not forgetting but rather the ability to switch to an alternative mental model. Such ‘learning to unlearn and learn’ is about embracing experimentation and overcoming the resistance acting as barriers and obstacles to doing new things. Fostering resilience requires leaders to react

and adapt while avoiding adopting partial solutions and eliminating dispositions of ingrained cognitive prejudice.

Resilient leadership emerges as the synthesis of two paradoxical forces: risk factors can destroy but where they do not, resilience can be energized. The role of leadership is crucial, as resilience is based not on individuals alone but also on collectives. A group of resilient individuals does not guarantee a resilient team (e.g., if the team lacks a collaborative and socially supportive culture) while entire communities can express resilience, even in the absence of resilient individuals. Resilient leadership can therefore be essential to achieving collective resilience. For example, collective resilience was cultivated in some companies that were victims of 9/11, by leaders who ‘turn[ed] the toxicity and damage from a crisis into substantial learning and improved, rather than damaged, performance’ (Clair & Dufresne, 2017: 63).

The COVID-19 lockdown is providing countless opportunities for employing ‘generative doubt’ and the ability to ‘learn to unlearn and learn’, as well as other expressions of paradox work: engaging the base while offering clear direction from the top; focusing on central processes while scrutinizing the more opaque periphery in order to stay alert to unexpected developments; making short-term improvised decisions while considering long-term implications; providing flexibility for adapting to changing circumstances while maintaining control; conducting deliberate search while being open to serendipitous emergence. Resilient leadership means ‘dropping the (usual) tools’ (Weick, 1993) that made sense up to January 2020 and developing new ones, via trial and error. To survive and prosper, policy makers, managers, and professionals should consider managerial resilience being built within an integrative framework premised on having cultivated both reactive and adaptive resilience.

Leading, as guiding and steering is crucial to the diffusion of resilience, as the latter cannot be designed or imposed from the top down. When acting as leaders, managers and policy makers can only facilitate its emergence by investing in organizational learning through constructive interactions. Planning *and* improvising are necessary. Following traditional patterns will not teach or design resilient leadership as it is best developed by cultivating strategic foresight with room for improvisation in anticipation of potential contingencies as unforeseeable events play out (Cunha, Kamoche, & Clegg, 2012). Building strategic foresight requires questioning existing answers and foreseeable problems to which they are envisaged as solutions. McNulty and Marcus (2020) ask of leaders in the era of COVID-19, ‘Are you leading through the crisis ... or [just] managing the response?’ Cultivating strategic foresight is the difference between just managing as compared to leading resiliently. Resilient leadership requires understanding what to eliminate and what to rationalize by questioning the usefulness of certain customary routines and mental patterns in the face of events. To build strategic foresight and cope with futures unknown, it is necessary to put aside everyday routines and embedded dispositions by cultivating preparedness that can be switched on effortlessly.

Foreseeable but temporally unpredictable events such as the COVID-19 pandemic offer evidence of the value of mastering paradox in resilient leadership. The mark of resilient leadership builds on this mastery so that, when the next unknown occurs (its occurrence, although not its content, is undoubtedly *predictable*), it can be handled through the foresight that makes of it an organizationally anticipated, if temporally unknown, event.

## NOTES

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