

## Understanding, experiencing & promoting resilience: a research project

Phil Jackman and Judith Miller October 2017

One of the ethical challenges around courses aimed at personal growth is to resist riding roughshod over individual integrity. The deeper you go, the more intrusive you will be, and this requires a high level of trust in the trainer and ownership by all the stakeholders. There are a growing number of interventions on offer aimed at building resilience, but due to cost and client confidentiality, practitioners do not generally publish impact studies<sup>1</sup>. Building upon multiple threads from the seminar series on Ethical Leadership<sup>2</sup>, therefore, we designed, delivered and evaluated a course aimed at helping individuals understand, experience and promote resilience within their respective environments, with some means of assessing the extent to which we had achieved those three objectives.

### Our assumptions

Despite the existence of measurement tools, we took the view that “resilience” is not an objective quality that can be reliably measured. Rather a complex set of factors comes into play when an evaluation is made “xxx is resilient”, affected by context and culture as well as individual characteristics, whether from nature or nurture. We therefore took a dialogic approach, adopting a subjectivist ontology and a feedback loop which generates new questions from new insights. We considered that the combined wisdom of the group would offer richer insights than the reflections of the two of us or any external researcher. Our key data would be the group discourse and the numerical snapshot provided by a resilience “health check”. From April to July 2017, the two of us together with the entire group became a team of insider teachers and researchers.

### Our method

Eight participants were fully engaged from start to finish: five men and three women; two from education, two from business, two from the third sector and the two of us facilitators. We used a structured employer interview at the beginning and end to explore why specific employees had been selected (where referred), what indicators of change the employers were hoping for, and what had actually been observed. We then ran our course over four full days, each spaced by three to four weeks, with five hours of coaching spliced in between. From the participants we collected initial expectations, numerical responses to a “resilience health check” at the start and end, a journal in which they had recorded their reflections and emotions, and resilience-related stories.

### Our journey together

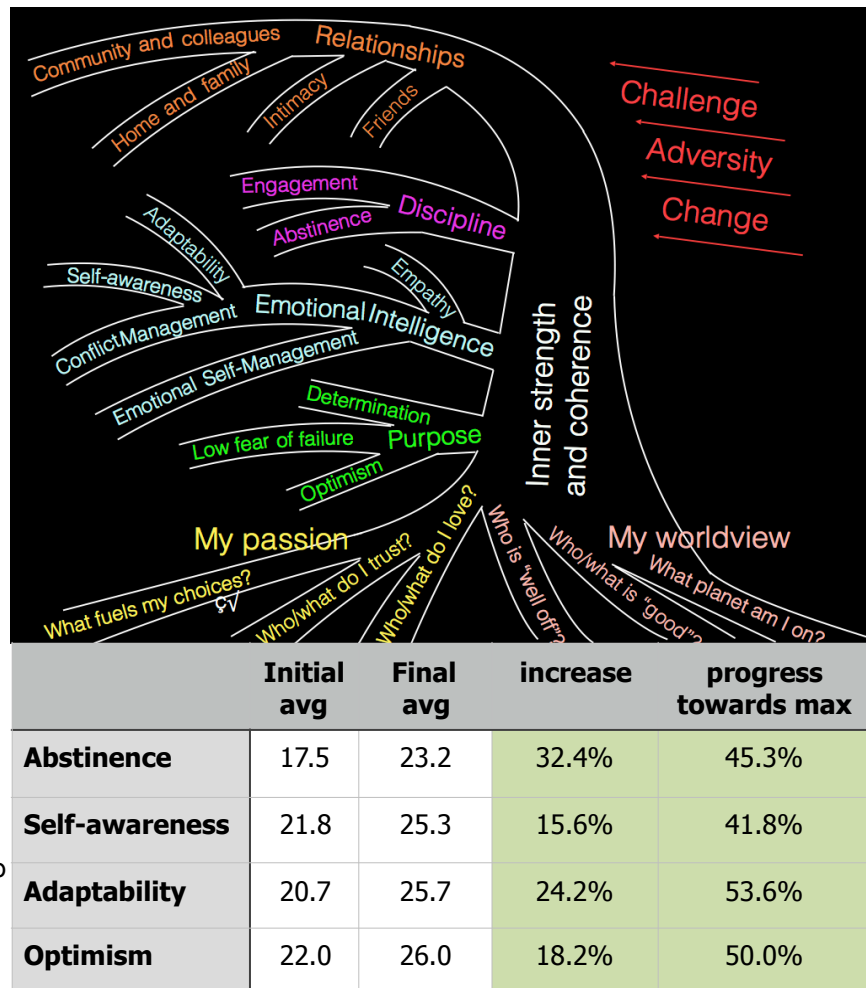
Through dialogue and engagement with a variety of resilience models, we together defined resilience as **the ability to adapt and grow through challenge or adversity** and developed our own theoretical model (See below). Framing the entire journey was our resilience health check, designed to a) increase self-awareness in the participants; and b) to apply a quantitative correlation to the participants’ discourse in terms of increased experience of resilience during our journey together. The health check took the form of 45 questions, organized around five categories and fifteen subcategories. We asked participants to indicate how happy they were in each area on a scale of one to ten. The overall increase in scores by an average of 14.8% suggests that participants were feeling significantly more resilient than when they started. Among the most significant improvements reported were abstinence [connected to clear boundaries and inner peace] and self-awareness (all six participants), adaptability (five participants) and optimism (three participants). Two participants scored very high on resilience at the outset, and their final scores remained the same. Their

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson S, Rickard C, Tamkin P, *Understanding Resilience*, Institute for Employment Studies, Jan 2014 <http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/understanding-resilience>

<sup>2</sup> See [www.ethicalleadership.org.uk](http://www.ethicalleadership.org.uk).

expectation, however, was to better understand and promote resilience, and the deputy head has already begun rolling out a resilience strategy in school based heavily on the course material. Three more participants reported a higher level of resilience at the end of the course, including one who had already scored high at the beginning. These three also reported the highest increases on their health checks, and in the same order. Of these three, two told stories of dramatic transformation, attributed in part to the impact of the course. The remaining participant registered a drop in his resilience score, which he made clear was due to “education”, ie increase in awareness.



Some of his health check scores went down for the same reason. In general, participants found that sharing and listening to one another’s stories was very powerful, with one participant describing this as “engaging” (session one), “cathartic” (session two) and “fantastic” (session four).

**Conclusion and recommendations**

The research team together built a model of resilience which engaged with the research literature and resonated with their own experience. Powerful storytelling proved to be a more significant factor in the learning process than we had anticipated. The improvement in resilience they felt at the end of the course then correlated quite closely with the improvement they felt in the various components of that model, suggesting a) that the model does indeed describe resilience, and b) that it is possible to build resilience, or at least a feeling of greater resilience through deep exploration of that model over the course of four months. Furthermore, the one participant who made it clear that his purpose in attending was to enable him to fulfil a pre-existing brief to promote resilience in school, considered that his expectation had been met. The participants considered that the dialogic approach, the spacing of group sessions and the one-one coaching were all critical in the success of the course, and would not change anything. The course appears to have the capacity to help people understand, experience and promote resilience, in alignment with the expectations and goals of the individuals attending, and should now be offered more widely.

***I think we all benefitted from the experience. It was raw and real, often poignant, full of truth and reality.***

*Participant from the construction industry.*