Resilient Thinking

Idea In Short

Disruption is no longer an occasional visitor. Pandemics, supply breaks, cyber incidents, and sudden market shifts test organizations again and again, and some come through stronger while others never recover. Resilient thinking is the habit of preparing for adversity, responding with flexibility when it arrives, and learning from it afterwards. Management research describes organizational resilience as the ability to anticipate, respond to, recover from, and learn from adversity, and treats it as a matter of degree. This article explains the main ideas from that research, how resilience differs from simple bouncing back, and how managers and consultants can build it into daily decisions.

A food distributor loses its main cold storage site to a flood. One competitor in the same region is back to normal within days. Another takes weeks and loses customers. The difference is not luck. The faster firm had mapped which products could move to other sites, agreed terms with a backup supplier, and trained staff to switch routes. It also reviewed the flood afterwards and changed its plan.

What resilient thinking means

Resilient thinking applies a simple sequence to everyday decisions: expect that something will go wrong, prepare so that failure does less harm, respond flexibly when it comes, and learn before the next shock.

Hepfer and Lawrence, in a review of management research, describe organizational resilience as the differential ability of organizations to anticipate, respond to, recover from, and learn from adversity. They add that resilience is a matter of degree: more resilient organizations anticipate adversity earlier and more fully, respond more quickly and comprehensively, recover more fully, and learn more deeply.1

That framing is useful because it turns resilience from a slogan into a set of capabilities that

can be improved. It also gives managers four concrete questions to ask about any critical process, one for each capability.

From bouncing back to adapting

The word resilience comes from Latin terms meaning to bounce or jump back. A Kenan Institute article notes that resilience has been defined and studied as the ability to recover or bounce back and to absorb surprises. The article also describes a shift in thinking from recovery toward adaptability.2

Returning to the old state is sometimes the wrong goal. If the shock has changed the environment, such as a lasting shift in customer habits, the better outcome is a new arrangement that fits the new conditions.

A resilient thinker therefore asks two questions after a disruption. How do we restore what matters most, and what should we change so that we are better placed next time?

Three stages: anticipation, coping, adaptation

A paper in Business Research proposes a process view of resilience with three successive stages: anticipation, coping, and adaptation. It assigns important organizational capabilities to each stage and suggests the framework can support measurement and future research.3

Anticipation includes scanning for threats, running scenarios, and mapping dependencies. Coping covers the response while the disruption is under way, such as decision rights, communication, and backup options. Adaptation is the longer phase in which the organization learns and changes its structures, routines, or strategy.

Treat the stages as a checklist. For any critical process, ask what you do in each stage and where the gaps are.

What McKinsey found in the pandemic

McKinsey reports that companies that cultivate organizational resilience, driven by opportunity as well as crisis, can gain an important and lasting advantage over competitors. It cites early research on organizational health and financial performance during the

COVID-19 pandemic, which showed that businesses with healthy, resilient behaviors were better able to withstand major disruption in 2020 and 2021.4

The article also says that cultivating resilience and ensuring adaptability will require companies to think differently about how teams are structured and managed, and how they are connected across the organization.

For managers, the message is that resilience is as much about people and structure as about spare equipment. Clear roles, trust, and quick communication matter when plans break.

Trade-offs with efficiency

MIT Sloan's article on a risk management playbook quotes an operations professor who describes resilience as the moment when a company is hit hard, and as a question of how prepared it is and how well it can recover. The playbook stresses evaluating the trade-offs between what it takes to succeed in a steady state and what it takes to keep operating through disruption.5

The trade-off is real. Lean operations remove slack, and slack is often what absorbs a shock. A single low-cost supplier is efficient until it fails.

Decide where to hold buffers on purpose. Protect the few processes whose failure would be most costly, and accept lower efficiency there.

Resilience at several levels

Resilience does not sit in one place. An arXiv paper on building resilient organizations notes that research often treats resilience at the individual, team, and organization levels in isolation, which makes integrated understanding difficult. It cites work arguing that organizational assets may enable organizational resilience, and that resilience at the leader level may increase employee resilience.6

In practice, that means looking at the whole chain. Individuals need skills and support, teams need clear coordination and trust, and the organization needs structures that let it reorganize.

A leader who stays calm and communicates clearly helps people act well under stress. A weak structure can undo the best individual effort.

Know the limits of the research

The research field is still developing. A technical note from the National Institute of Standards and Technology describes organizational resilience research as fragmented, with varied definitions and limited consensus on core measures.7

That should make managers modest about any single formula. Use frameworks as prompts for discussion, and test them against your own record of disruptions.

It also means your own data matters. Review your past incidents, delays, and near misses, and look for patterns that general models may not capture.

Building resilience step by step

List your critical processes, the ones whose failure would stop delivery or harm customers. Rank them by impact.

For each, map dependencies on suppliers, systems, people, and sites. Mark single points of failure.

Imagine failures and write short response plans. Name who decides, who communicates, and what the first three actions are.

Build options in advance. This might mean a second supplier, cross-trained staff, spare capacity, or agreements with partners.

Practice. Run short exercises and simulations, and note what breaks.

After every real disruption, hold a review that looks for lessons, not blame, and change the plan.

Learning after the shock

The last capability in the definition is learning, and it is the one most often skipped. Once the crisis passes, people want to return to normal work, and the lessons fade.

Hold a review within a few weeks while memories are fresh. Ask what happened, what worked, what failed, and what surprised the team.

Keep the tone blameless. People share more when they believe the goal is improvement, and the facts then reach the people who can fix the problem.

Turn lessons into changes. Update the plan, the contact lists, the supplier terms, and the training, and name an owner and a date for each change.

Share the story widely. A short account of what happened and what changed helps other teams prepare, and it shows staff that their effort led to improvement.

A hypothetical example

Imagine a hypothetical regional online retailer that depends on one carrier for nine tenths of its deliveries. A team maps dependencies and ranks carrier failure as the most damaging risk. They sign a standby agreement with a second carrier, cross-train warehouse staff on two packing methods, and write a plan that names who tells customers what within two hours.

Months later, the main carrier suffers a strike. The retailer shifts half its volume to the standby carrier within a day, updates customers promptly, and later reviews the episode. It decides to keep both carriers permanently and to add a third for peak season. The retailer and events are invented, but the example shows anticipation, coping, and adaptation in a small business.

Cautions

Do not equate resilience with toughness. Asking people to absorb endless strain without support is a way to burn them out, not to build resilience.

Avoid planning only for the last crisis. The next shock will probably differ, so build general capabilities such as fast communication, flexible roles, and spare capacity.

Beware of cost. Buffers and backups are expensive, so match them to risk.

Finally, resilience is not guaranteed by any plan. It comes from practice, learning, and honest review.

- 1Organizational resilience: exploring functional, operational and strategic resilience, SAGE Journals
- 2Resilience: adversity's antidote, Kenan Institute
- 3Organizational resilience: a process view, Business Research
- 4Raising the resilience of your organization, McKinsey
- 5A risk management playbook for improving organizational resilience, MIT Sloan
- 6Building resilient organizations: top-down versus bottom-up organizing, arXiv
- 7Organizational resilience studies, NIST Technical Note 2390

Summary

Resilient thinking means preparing for disruption and recovering through adaptability. Researchers describe resilience as the ability to anticipate, respond to, recover from, and learn from adversity, and as a matter of degree. Recent work stresses that it runs from recovery to adaptability, and McKinsey links healthy, resilient behaviors to better performance during major disruption. Resilience has costs, since steady-state efficiency can conflict with readiness, and the research field is still fragmented. Pick one critical process this week, name how it could fail, and write the first three actions you would take, then test the plan with the people who would carry it out.