

**BUILDING EMPLOYEE RESILIENCE THROUGH SITUATIONAL AWARENESS
AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE**

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BACKGROUND

“Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically. The cataclysm has happened, we are among the ruins, we start to build up new little habitats, to have new little hopes. It is rather hard work: there is now no smooth road into the future: but we go round, or scramble over the obstacles. We’ve got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen.”

D.H. Lawrence
Lady Chatterley’s Lover
1928

When tragedy strikes, people feel a need to do something. Whether that includes raising money, awareness, or morale, the desire to do something meaningful is often overwhelming following a traumatic event. I sought to understand the psychological impact of a crisis and how it can be changed. I, along with a majority of the Stillwater, Oklahoma community, was deeply affected by the Homecoming parade tragedy that occurred in the Fall of 2015, the semester prior to writing my thesis and graduating from Oklahoma State University. Being very near to where the accident occurred just minutes before the impact, was traumatizing and my personal aftermath spiraled into a full blown existential crisis, but it also led me to ask myself some very important questions about, not only my own recovery process, but also the recovery process of those much more directly affected than myself. Returning to work at the campus police department after the incident was difficult. Trying to distance myself from the source of the trauma while being surrounded by reports, videos, and phone calls directly related to the incident was impossible. Although painful, this experience and my background in studying human resources led me to start thinking about how difficult it can be to emotionally recover from a crisis when that crisis occurs in or near the work environment. Further, I wanted to know how first responders, such as my very

own co-workers, were seemingly able to bounce back quicker than myself following emotional trauma, and if there was a way to translate the answer to employees in any organization.

INTRODUCTION

October 24th, 2015 is not a day soon to be forgotten by members of the Stillwater, Oklahoma community. It was a day that some will remember as a Homecoming celebration and others will remember as a tragedy. When a speeding car drove into a crowd of parade spectators, many lives were significantly disrupted. Some were killed, some injured, others emotionally traumatized, and some were not affected at all. Everybody knew somebody that was affected by the tragedy, but some were able to mentally recover more quickly than others. Of those affected were individuals of varying ages, backgrounds, genders, ethnicities, and social status; however, it is likely that some individuals bounced back quicker than others. Some were able to return to their day-to-day lives with no disruption. Others sought counseling to help them process the experience. Some were unable to restore normalcy to their lives for weeks or even months. And some may still be emotionally affected by the tragedy today. But why are some individuals able to bounce back quicker than others? Is it always related to the level of trauma? Or are there ways to “build” resilience?

The majority of the population is exposed to at least one traumatic situation during their lifetime (Bonanno, 2004). Most research in adults coping with loss or trauma has been centered around people who have endured significant psychological issues or have already received treatment. Because of this, most prior research has somewhat underestimated the construct of resilience.

In recent years, society has seen an increase in unexpected traumatic events - 9/11, Sandy Hook, the San Bernardino shooting, and the terrorist attacks on Brussels just to name a few. A common theme among these examples is the incident location - not geographic location, but the fact that most of the people severely affected by these events were at work. Employees don't typically question their safety in the workplace or even think about an unexpected tragedy occurring while they are at work; however, the previous examples listed suggest it could be worth exploring. While these may be extreme and relatively improbable examples, they present the opportunity for research that can be translated to other organizations looking for a more proactive approach to building resilience.

A subset of the population often expected to have higher resilience in traumatic situations is first responders such as police officers, EMTs, and firefighters. In the midst of chaos and despair, these individuals are expected to remain calm and collected both during the traumatic event and the aftermath. But what sets first responders apart from the general public in these situations? Are they trained to be more resilient? Can resilience even be trained? These occupations provide useful perspectives on resilience building in its purest form. The ability to bounce back from a psychologically tolling event is not something typically addressed in the workplace, but learning from the psychological techniques used by first responders provides the opportunity to develop training for employees who may encounter an emotionally traumatic event in the workplace.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research in resilience building as it relates to positive mindsets has been abounding in recent years. Most of this research has taken a more reactive perspective for resilience,

implementing tools after the traumatic event has occurred such as debriefings, Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), and social support systems. Shin, Taylor, and Seo (2012) applied The Conservation of Resources Theory (COR) to change-management within the organization, and argued that “resilience is an individual resource that can be enhanced” and that “resilience can be used both to reduce the strains and stresses associated with organizational change, and to support employees’ commitment to a change” (Bardoel, Pettit, De Cieri, McMillan, 2014, p. 282). Viewing resilience as a resource suggests that it can be conserved and maintained regardless of organizational change, allowing for a more preventative perspective in which resilience can be developed before a traumatic event takes place.

There are two major problems with taking a reactive rather than proactive approach to building resilience. The first is that an organization may be forced to make a suboptimal decision. For example, an organization could be forced to build a new building after a disaster when the existing building could have been built to better withstand such a disruption. The second problem is cost. It is always more expensive to take action after a crisis has occurred when little planning has been done regarding the relief and recovery process.

Resilience in the workplace has typically been thought of in terms of employees’ responses to relatively low level stressors in the work environment, and while it is important to maintain resiliency in everyday work life, it is also important to ensure employees will be resilient in higher stress situations that can cause lasting emotional trauma. Psychologically preparing employees for potential disasters or attacks can be of benefit, not only to the employees, but also to the organization as whole.

Resilient employees allow organizations to successfully manage changing conditions and uncertainty (Leon, Halbesleben, 2014). For example, individuals with higher levels of resilience

can more successfully bounce back from stressful situations and maintain positive mindsets, which can lead to lower costs resulting from workplace stress. Additionally, the behaviors typically associated with resilience such as active coping, higher stress tolerance, and increased job performance can result in decreased burnout and lower absenteeism (Leon, Halbesleben, 2014).

Carrie Cohill sheds a more optimistic light on workplace trauma. Her dissertation on why adversity can add value for corporate executive managers describes how managers can learn from hardships and better their company as a result. She emphasizes that a prerequisite to learning from hardships is being resilient. Her research was conducted through interviews of 24 senior executive managers in various industries with varying numbers of employees: “Thirty-one percent of the executive’s developmental experiences were associated with learning thrust #2, coping with events/situations beyond your control.” The primary themes associated with this learning thrust were (1) the need to control reactions when the situation is out of control, (2) the desire for perseverance, (3) the need for communication and information gathering, and (4) the need for survival. Participants that learned from hardship possessed several traits, including integrity, positive interpersonal relationships, a combination of being humble and willful, and a solid grasp on the difference between faith and reality (Cohill, 2007).

“Resilience” is the title of the 2015 documentary recounting the events surrounding the Oklahoma City bombing 20 years after the attack. Kelly Dyer Fry, editor of *The Oklahoman*, describes the documentary as an account of the “courage and resilience of Oklahoma City’s residents.” She goes on to say “when a community falls victim to unspeakable acts of terror it can be shaken to its core.” Master Sgt. Gary Knight of the Oklahoma City Police Department was very near the Murrah Building when the explosion took place, and says it is still difficult for

first responders to discuss the event, primarily because of the high death toll and what they witnessed that day. In the “Resilience” documentary, he says, “you’re stuck with the images of that day. Regardless of what they were, you’re stuck with them. You choose how you live your life with those images in your head, they’re always going to be there” (Cosgrove, 2015). Most stories, like this one, present the construct of resilience on a large scale, citing cities or even countries that fostered resilience in the face of adversity. One thing that is often overlooked, however, is the individual resilience of those directly or most affected by the event. Work is a part of nearly every person’s day-to-day life, but returning to something that is typically the most stable and routine aspect of daily functions after a major disruption is difficult. Majority of the time, individuals see returning to work as a part of getting back to normal after the loss of a loved one, an extended illness, or other personal trauma. But how can employees begin to cope with loss when the loss occurred in the most “normal” and routine part of their lives?

Resilience

Resilience is defined as “the ability to positively adapt to and/or rebound from significant adversity and the distress it often creates” (Everly, Jacobson, Welzant, 2008, p. 262). It has also been suggested that resilience is associated with an individual’s ability to “cognitively appraise a situation” (Everly, Jacobson, Welzant, 2008, p. 262). While resilience has been studied for years, the majority of the research has been focused on recovery following a traumatic event. A new preventative perspective, however, suggests that resilience can be improved prior to a traumatic experience. Bonnano (2004, p. 20) argues that “...theorists working in this area have often underestimated or misunderstood resilience, viewing it either as a pathological state or as something seen only in rare and exceptionally healthy individuals.”

Fortner and Nagiar (2015) propose the tools or “shields” necessary to develop four types of resilience: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. They suggest that there are only three methods of coping with stress. Elimination of the stress, ineffectively dealing with the stress, and changing the perception of the stress (cognitive re-training) make up these three components. Cognitive re-training is the primary method for coping with stress and building mission-based resilience. Fortner and Nagiar (2015) describe cognitive re-training as a shield for building mental resilience. This form of resilience helps to reduce mistakes and maintain focus and is developed with a variety of techniques. These include: positive self-talk, training and experience, exploring one’s sense of humor, taking time to increase awareness of surroundings, reverting to an internal locus of control, practicing breathing exercises, reducing external sources of stress, and maintaining control of oneself.

Situational Awareness (SA)

Although there is prior research on situational awareness as it relates to training in high stress occupations, there is little information in the literature on the use of situational awareness training in contexts outside of this realm.

“Situational awareness refers to cognitive processes involved in perceiving and comprehending the meaning of a given environment” (Saus et al., 2006). SA is commonly used in decision-making techniques taught in police, air traffic control, and military training, particularly in critical situations. Saus et al. (2006) suggest that SA is a “conscious dynamic reflection of the situation, and it reflects the past, present, and future.”

The concept of SA was first noted in World War I by Oswald Boelke who emphasized “the importance of gaining an awareness of the enemy before the enemy gained a similar

awareness, and devised methods for accomplishing this.” According to Woods (1988) individuals must mentally follow the unfolding of events as they occur in order to remain adequately aware of “system status” (Stanton, Chambers, & Piggott, 2001).

On an individual level, training may include “higher order cognitive skills training, intensive briefings, use of structured feedback, and SA-oriented training programs, such as information seeking and decision making” (Saus et al., 2006, p. S5). Factors in team training should focus more on “complex communication behaviors, team planning, and task-specific competencies, such as roles and position in the team” (Saus et al., 2006, p. S5). On a more theoretical level, SA “involves basic cognitive processes like attention, perception, and decision making” (Saus et al., 2006, p. S6).

Another source defines situational awareness as “a skilled behavior that encompasses the processes by which task-relevant information is extracted, integrated, assessed, and acted upon.” A study of situational awareness training through pattern recognition in a battlefield environment revealed that pattern recognition and acquisition associated with skill-based behavior enhanced situational awareness and led to higher performance (Kass, Herschler, Companion, 1991, p. 105).

Simulation is one way in which SA training can be established. It presents a safe environment and is considered a cost-effective method for training. Scientifically, simulation allows for more control in terms of the setting and ease with which to manipulate training variables. An example of simulations can be seen in police training where officers are taught to make quick decisions involving lethal force in violent confrontations (Saus et al., 2006).

Emotional Intelligence (EI)

Emotional intelligence is a subset of social intelligence and can be defined as one's ability to recognize emotion, reason with emotion-related information, and process that information to perform general problem-solving (Mayer & Geher, 1996). High emotional intelligence has been found in prior research to co-vary with high internal openness and empathy and low defensiveness (Mayer & Salovey, 1995). Two arguments for emotional intelligence exist in the literature: the first, that emotional intelligence is an ability, similar to cognitive intelligence (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004), and the second, that it is a trait (Neubauer & Freudenthaler, 2005). Some research indicates that emotional intelligence is both an ability and trait and that each aspect corresponds with the other, with the ability side facilitating the trait side (Schutte & Malouff, 2008). Some studies have suggested that EI as a trait can prevent the development of psychological symptoms after a traumatic event" (Hunt & Evans, 2004; Kwako, Szanton, Saligan, & Gill, 2011). One study found that higher trait EI was a predictor for lower anxiety and depression following an adverse life event (Armstrong, Galligan, & Critchley, 2011). Additionally, Hunt & Evans (2004) found that individuals exhibiting higher trait EI had fewer symptoms associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) following a traumatic experience. Trait EI is a significant aspect of regulating emotions such that increased levels of trait EI have been linked to better management of emotions in high stress situations and that people with greater trait EI may be better at recognizing their emotional response both during and after the event (Hunt & Evans, 2004).

THEORY

How Crisis Becomes Disaster

Judith Rodin argues that disasters are nearly always man-made (Rodin, 2014). A disruption becomes a disaster when the disruption coincides with a vulnerability, and is worsened by negative human reactions to the crisis. Disasters ensue when there is a lack of awareness and an inability to adapt to new circumstances as they arise. A leader in disaster research, Samuel Henry Prince, described how social influences can affect the outcomes of disruptions when they turn into disasters. His first-hand account of the 1917 Halifax explosion in which two ships collided in the harbor causing mass destruction and loss of life allowed him to see how one disruption can snowball into a full blown disaster. He saw how vulnerabilities can quickly be exposed but also how people and organizations can respond with resilience. Until the atomic bomb was deployed in 1945, the Halifax explosion was considered “the greatest single explosion in the history of the world” (Rodin, 2014, p. 92). Two thousand people were killed and another six thousand injured. Structural damage was around \$35 million with the majority of the town’s infrastructure burned to the ground. The lesson learned from this disruption-turned-disaster is that preparedness is key. Not only were safety standards ignored, but the community was in no way aware that such a threat could be realized (Rodin, 2014).

Reflecting on the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake that caused massive damage near San Francisco, Patrick Otellini, the city’s director of earthquake safety and chief resilience officer, says “people like to stick their head in the sand and forget about this stuff. Because it brings into question what you do in your normal, day-to-day life. And that means change, and a lot of times people don’t want to change” (Rodin, 2014, p. 107).

Ann Patton, a former Tulsa World reporter and witness to the severe 1974 Tulsa flood, gave a very simple definition for awareness: “you have to know what’s wrong before you can fix it” (Rodin, 2014, p. 108).

While it is important to determine the most probable and damaging disruptions that can occur, the most successful resilience plans also work to build on the capacity to bounce back from unpredictable circumstances. In 2001, FEMA listed three potential disasters that were the most likely to impact the United States. These included a terrorist attack on New York City, a major earthquake in San Francisco, and a destructive hurricane in New Orleans. Two out of the three predicted catastrophes were realized, and debate has ensued over why, if we were made aware of these threats, we were not more prepared. One reason, according to Barry Scanlon, a former leader for Project Impact, is that “Mitigation isn’t sexy”, meaning it is difficult to get people focused on preparedness plans (Rodin, 2014, p. 110). This example, along with countless others, suggests that no matter how prepared we think we may be for a disaster, things can still go wrong.

Another example of the importance of human response to crises is the Boston bombing. According to Judith Rodin, “people generally behave in a crisis as they have always behaved” (Rodin, 2014, p. 173). In the midst of chaos during the Boston bombings, some bystanders were reportedly seen rushing toward the injured, while others were seen fleeing the scene. In fight-or-flight moments such as this, fear overrides everything, allowing us to protect ourselves by moving away from the threat as quickly as possible. This reaction occurs in the “basement” of the brain; however, this is “a terrible place to make decisions.” (Rodin, 2014, p. 173) This means that in the “boom” moment, resilience and its various aspects, such as awareness, information gathering, consideration of options, and response, are overridden.

The fear reaction cannot be prevented, but there are some ways to work through the fear more quickly. In order to get out of the “basement”, there must be some kind of process that engages the “repository” where you store “all your ways of doing things.” (Rodin, 2014, p. 174) In other words, where you retain your knowledge of how to react in specific circumstances. For example, pilots have a saying: “aviate, navigate, communicate.” This allows them to keep fear at a minimum when faced with an in-flight crisis. Rodin (2014, p. 174) says, “You should have something you can go to as a trigger script to reset your brain. Something that can get your brain out of survival mode and into thinking mode.” Once you are able to reset your brain, your brain is much more capable of rising to the “laboratory” level. This represents the most evolved portion of the brain, responsible for cognition and problem solving, and where resilience is more readily accessed. Drawing on the capacity to enhance awareness, gather information, consider various options and actions, adapt, self-regulate, develop a response, and take action are all important aspects of resilience that can be realized on this “laboratory” level of cognition. In disaster situations, it is important to realize the difficulty in getting out of the “basement” and how crucial it is to have the necessary psychological reserves to get your brain into “laboratory” mode.

Realizing the Resilience Dividend

It can be difficult to get employees to focus on enhancing preparedness because there tends to be less urgency about potential threats during moments of stability when stress is low. Recognizing that something *might* happen is not always enough to encourage people to act; however, if organizations do not accurately assess situations during stable times and work to reduce vulnerabilities, they will continue to be in “reactive mode” when crises occur (Rodin,

2014). Michael Berkowitz, head of the Rockefeller Foundation's 100 Resilient Cities initiative, suggest that one of the primary problems in building resilience is that there is a major disparity between the size of the potential threat and the level of feelings people have toward the threat.

Cognitive biases also play a significant role in decision-making involved with disasters. For example, the availability heuristic – “the ease with which instances or associations could be brought to mind” – has a significant impact on human estimations and can create “systematic biases.” Additionally, “in evaluating the probability of complex events only the simplest and most available scenarios are likely to be considered. In particular, people will tend to produce scenarios in which many factors do not vary at all, only the most obvious variations take place” (Rodin, 2004, p. 284). In terms of resilience, therefore, it can be incredibly difficult to anticipate how a disaster will play out.

According to Rodin (2014), to build resilience proactively, we must live in the “foreloop.” That is, in the adaptive cycle, we must spend more time on growth and less time on reorganization after a crisis. This also means that we must take control of the way we react to a disruption.

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

The hypotheses tested in this study involved how situational awareness affects resilience, psychological capital, and emotional intelligence. The first hypothesis was that situational awareness would positively correlate with resilience, meaning those individuals with situational awareness training would exhibit more resilience. Second, I hypothesized that situational awareness training would also have a positive correlation with psychological capital and emotional intelligence. That is, individuals with situational awareness training would have

greater psychological capital and greater emotional intelligence. Psychological capital was used because resilience is a primary component of the construct along with hope, efficacy, and optimism, which have indicated potential positive outcomes in the workplace as opposed to each sub-construct measured individually (Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007). Additionally, there was a potential for each sub-construct of psychological capital to be influenced by situational awareness and emotional intelligence.

METHOD

Participants and Procedures

In determining whether situational awareness and emotional intelligence could be related to resilience, 25 first responders, comprised of employees from the Stillwater Police Department, Payne County Sheriff's Department, and Lifenet, participated in a self-report survey measuring emotional intelligence, psychological capital, need for cognition, perspective taking, trait gratitude, job satisfaction/engagement, and exit behavior. The survey first asked participants for consent, and if the participants complied, they were asked if they had any direct involvement with the 2015 Homecoming tragedy in Stillwater, Oklahoma. If so, they were asked to take some time to reflect on the experience. If they were not directly involved with the event, they were asked to reflect on another personal traumatic experience. Next, participants were asked whether they had received any form of situational awareness training, and if so, to describe it. From there, participants self-reported their responses to each measure listed above.

Measures

Emotional Intelligence. Emotional intelligence was measured using a 16-item scale asking participants to rate themselves from a 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 5 ("Strongly Agree").

An example item for emotional intelligence is “I have a good sense of why I have certain feelings most of the time.” A mean score was calculated for each participant and then dichotomously divided into low and high emotional intelligence using a median split. Participants scoring less than or equal to 5.81 were coded as zero, with all others coded as one.

Psychological Capital. Psychological capital was measured using questions related to hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism with a 12-item PsyCap Questionnaire created by Luthans, Youssef, and Avolio (2006). Each component had two or three questions and asked participants to rate themselves from 1 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 5 (“Strongly Agree”). An example question for hope is “If I should find myself in a jam, I could think of many ways to get out of it.” For efficacy, an example is “I feel confident analyzing a long-term problem to find a solution.” And an optimism example is “I always look on the bright side of things regarding my job.”

Resilience. Two scales were used to measure resilience. One asked questions geared more toward resilience in the workplace, and the other had questions related more to personal resilience following a stressful event. Both scales asked participants to rate themselves from 1 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 5 (“Strongly Agree”). For the first resilience scale, an example question is “When I have a setback at work, I easily recover from it.” and for the second scale, “I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times.”

RESULTS

The results of the data collected from first responders indicated that those high in emotional intelligence ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.36$) exhibited greater psychological capital than those low in emotional intelligence ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.34$), $t(23) = -2.94$, $p = .007$. The data also

indicated that those individuals who had received situational awareness training were higher in psychological capital ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.35$), $t(23) = 2.91$, $p = 0.008$. Additionally, efficacy, a component of psychological capital, was positively correlated to employee engagement, $t(23) = 0.57$, $p = 0.003$, and resilience, another component of psychological capital, was negatively correlated to employee burnout, $t(23) = -0.62$, $p = 0.001$. There was also a significant positive correlation between situational awareness and efficacy, $t(23) = 0.43$, $p = 0.03$ as well as emotional intelligence and resilience, $t(23) = 0.45$, $p = 0.023$. To summarize, the data supports the notion that individuals trained in situational awareness tend to be more efficacious and therefore more engaged in their work. Additionally, the data suggests a significant relationship among emotional intelligence, resilience, and burnout, meaning those individuals high in emotional intelligence tend to be more resilient and thus, less likely to experience burnout.

CONCLUSION

Although there was no statistically significant difference in resilience between those trained in situational awareness and those not, $t(23) = 0.25$, $p = 0.23$, there was still some interesting information gathered. For instance, the relationship among situational awareness, efficacy, and employee engagement could be a result of confidence. Situational awareness could increase confidence in dealing with a traumatic event, leading to higher efficacy, and therefore feeling more engaged in the work environment. Additionally, the relationship among emotional intelligence, resilience, and burnout could mean that those individuals high in emotional intelligence exhibit greater resilience and thus, less potential for burnout.

To conclude, resilience is an important construct for employees and employers to be aware of. The best method for building and/or maintaining resilience has yet to be determined;

however, future research into the use of situational awareness training in resilience building could prove to be insightful, especially with a larger and more diverse sample size. For now, there is little doubt that organizations should be prepared in the event of a crisis. Recent history and future projections suggest that organizations could even take a more proactive role in boosting employee resilience before a crisis occurs. For those in the Stillwater, Oklahoma community, resilience is what will drive the healing process. It is what will provide the strength to continue with the 2016 Homecoming celebration, and allow the community to see it as just that – a celebration, not a tragedy.

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