

# How to Build a Resilient, Stress-Resistant Culture

With David Lee

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The more resilient your culture, the greater your ability to:

1. Adapt nimbly to marketplace changes.
2. Provide friendly, alert, loyalty-generating customer service.
3. Implement change rapidly, with minimal resistance.
4. Get maximum productivity from your employees without burning them out.
5. Enjoy organizational effectiveness because teams and departments work well together, rather than have an "us" versus "them" mentality that festers in a stressed out environment.
6. Foster a "can do" spirit or what Southwest Airlines calls a "Warrior Spirit."

## So How Do You Do Create A Stress-Resistant, Resilient Culture?

1. **Remove Sources of Unnecessary Stress** – Smart employers ask employees "What do we do that drives you crazy?" "What do we do that gets in the way of your doing your job?" Employee energy squandered on overcoming bureaucratic hassles and other obstacles is not available for innovation and productivity.

It's also energy that could make the difference between employees facing

challenge with a "Bring it on!" attitude rather than an "I can't handle another thing on my plate!" attitude.

To remove unnecessary sources of stress, ask employees about which rules, processes, and red tape interfere with their ability to do their jobs. Ferret out and remove any and all unnecessary obstacles. Doing so will recover a massive amount of employee energy that can be channeled to productive use.

2. **Communicate, Communicate, Communicate** – While everyone knows it is important to keep employees in the loop, few employers do a good job at this. If you're serious about keeping employee morale high and building organizational resilience, you need to shift this idea from "know it" to "act on it." The more employees know what's going on, the less time and energy they spend wondering—and worrying—about what they don't know.

To find out what you need to be communicating more of, and how best to do so, ask employees where they feel left in the dark and how best to keep them in the know.

3. **Keep the Dream Alive** – Having employees who are inspired and engaged is even more important—and difficult to accomplish—during challenging times. When employees are animated by a

compelling vision of a better future or how they can make a difference in the world, they bring their Higher Selves to work, rather than their Lower, It's-All-About-Me Selves.

Robert Cooper, leadership consultant and author of *Get Out of Your Own Way* describes the powerful effect that having a compelling vision has on the brain and reducing one's focus on immediate difficulties and challenges:

*"A.R. Luria, the famous Russian neurosurgeon, studied the forebrain and how our perception of time affects health and performance. When we look further ahead each day, beyond our immediate to do list—reaching ahead at least five years, envisioning the life and work we wish to achieve—the forebrain's key areas are activated.*

*"Let areas of the forebrain atrophy because you fail to stimulate them to envision the future, and you automatically, invisibly, deep in your brain's structure, become more rigid and rule-anchored, unable to change. You get mired in old habits and limitations, less able to survive change, let alone dream big and make those dreams into realities."*

*"It's very easy when you're living in a rushing, reactive mode to have the frontal lobes all but drowned out by the doom-and-gloom brain regions that clamor for attention and can flood your body with stress chemicals at the slightest bit of pressure or foreshadowing of change. (pg. 25)"*

Keep the dream alive by sharing stories of the great things you're doing, stories of employees making a difference, and customer letters of appreciation. Make

this a regular part of meetings, company newsletters, and any communication.

- 4. Make Sure You Set Your People Up For the Thrill of Victory and Not the Agony of Defeat** – If employees' daily experience is one of frustration and failure, they will bring that mindset and emotional state to everything they do—including their response to major changes you ask them to make.

At the most fundamental, biological level, repeated failure creates the biochemistry of helplessness and hopelessness—a biochemistry dominated by the stress chemical cortisol. In contrast, repeatedly making progress towards goals and feeling a sense of mastery triggers the biochemical of happiness and success—including the "motivation and reward" chemical dopamine.

By making sure employees have the tools, training, and resources to excel at their jobs, you not only get greater productivity and work quality, you also get employees who feel like—and act like—"Can do" winners.

- 5. Celebrate Wins** – Celebrating both company and individual victories doesn't just create a positive "vibe". It also helps workers see themselves as part of a winning team. It helps them see themselves as effective. This mindset obviously fosters a more "Can do" attitude and courageous response to challenges than if employees see themselves as "losers" and part of a hapless, beleaguered team.

Furthermore, when difficult times bring a steady stream of negative news, it's easy to see oneself as a victim of circumstances. By consciously calling attention to accomplishments and successes, you offset the doom and gloom with genuine positivity. By sharing stories of employees doing great things, you also strengthen the belief that you

are a team of winners who can accomplish great things.

Because emotions affect perception, shifting the ambient emotional state of your workforce to a more upbeat, hopeful state, means employees are more apt to look at challenges as something they can overcome, rather than insurmountable obstacles.

- 6. Balance “I feel your pain” with “We need to move on”** – When people don’t feel their distress is heard or respected, they stay stuck in “broadcast mode.” They can’t hear—nor do they care about—what you have to say. Make sure you verbally acknowledge your employees’ distress over major changes and difficulties. Don’t just launch into an “It is what it is. Get over it” speech and expect that to work.

Great leaders acknowledge the emotions

and perceptions of their followers during difficult times, and then shift into their vision of the future and how each person has a role in making that vision a reality. Doing so not only inspires your employees—because they know what they can do to make a difference—it also builds stronger relationships between employees and management.

## Summary

By doing the above, you will help build a more resilient, stress-resistant workforce, where employees face change, challenge and uncertainty with optimism and a “Can do” spirit.

To get started, share this article with your management team and map out a strategy for addressing each of these six recommendations.

**About the Author:** David Lee is the founder and principal of [HumanNature@work](https://www.humannatureatwork.com) and the creator of [Stories That Change](https://www.storiesthatchange.com). He's an internationally recognized authority on organizational and managerial practices that optimize employee performance, morale, and engagement. He is also the author of "Managing Employee Stress and Safety," as well nearly 100 articles and book chapters. You can download more of his articles at [HumanNature@work](https://www.humannatureatwork.com), contact him at [david@humannatureatwork.com](mailto:david@humannatureatwork.com) or 207-571-9898, or follow him on Twitter at [http://twitter.com/humannaturework](https://twitter.com/humannaturework).

