

MANAGING FORWARD:



Resilience as a Strategic Co

BY ANDREW GRAHAM

Looking ahead, the number of tectonic plates of public policy and the delivery of government services will continue their churn. Capitalizing on this churn, not just surviving it, is going to mean organizations have to take a look at how resilient they are. There are too many unknowns and sudden shifts in the rules to rely on good old planning tools. And, as so much of the current literature and research points out, resilience is not about systems, contingency and emergency response tools, but primarily about culture. As Erica Seville, a leading thinker on resilience from the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, says: “For example, emergent crisis lead-

ership, levels of trust, buy-in and engagement of staff, and the ability to overcome silo mentality can be just as influential on an organization’s performance under pressure as the robustness of its risk management processes, continuity planning arrangements, etc.”

The term resilience seems to be everywhere these days. Resilience is a good thing, right? Well, it is also a fad, so let’s try to focus on the useful side and jettison the bumf. Arising from the work of Karl Weick in books such as “Managing the Unexpected: Building Organizational Resilience in an Age Of Uncertainty”, this sensible notion has now become a policy and managerial cliché.

“To be resilient, organizations rely on strong leadership, an awareness and understanding of their operating environment, their ability to manage vulnerabilities, and their ability to adapt in response to rapid change.”

Key Questions to Assess Organizational Resilience Capacity

Let's see if we can produce a check-list of things to look for in the organization, its leaders, its culture and its people that might indicate that they are resilient:

1. Do organizational leaders understand the basic processes that keep things working in their organization?
2. Is the organization already adapting and learning? Are there early warning systems that capture both errors and anomalous law-noise events? Are they used?
3. Do the operations and strategic sides find ways of the organization to examine such events (sometimes called near misses), determine their importance, respond and adapt as a normal thing to do without seeking out a scapegoat?
4. Is there a high turnover of key staff, or does the organization have strategies to retain people and their organizational knowledge?
5. Does the organization build capacity in staff to respond to changing circumstances? To identify new means of making things work?
6. Is there a robust risk management culture, not just a paper system?
7. Is there a holistic approach to identifying weaknesses and responding to them that engages the whole organization, not just response planners or auditors?
8. Does the organization have a good idea of the vulnerabilities in its networks of stakeholders, suppliers and those it depends on to achieve its goals?
9. Is there redundancy of key capacities, supplies and systems?
10. Can one part of the organization's infrastructure shut down and another part take up the slack?
11. Are there supply and equipment reserves?
12. Is the organization maintaining its infrastructure, human capacity and systems so they are healthy?

13. Are systems being tested regularly? This is not just power or mechanics.
14. Are response scenarios being put to leaders to react to and see if the way they make decisions is the best one?
15. Is there requisite variety in how the organization gathers information to get varying opinions and listen to those it does not really enjoy listening to?
16. Is the organization engaged outside its boundaries to learn from others in its field, in companion fields, within the professions that make up its skill set?

This is not a definitive list of boxes to check, just a set of cultural indicators. For more insight on resilience and how to measure it, go to a great website of a social enterprise group called Resilient Organizations at www.resorgs.org.nz.

References:

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If resilience is a strategic competency for organizations, what does that competency look like exactly? Too often, resilience is witnessed in a rear-view mirror after the fact. However, that does not really help an organization to become resilient-capable.

Some recent research has started to look at this issue and come up with some practical observations about what makes an organization resilient. There is a very clear link of basic sound management to resilience. A 2013 study from New Zealand found that "To be resilient, organizations rely on strong leadership, an awareness and understanding of their operating environment, their ability to manage vulnerabilities, and their ability to adapt in response to rapid change."