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Development paper title

More than ‘bouncing back’:
The importance of resilience in leadership success and derailment

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Paper summary

In an uncertain and turbulent climate, resilience in organisational leaders is increasingly important. However, resilience in the context of organisational leaders appears under-researched and scholarly literature is lacking. This development paper is the precursor to a final paper which will seek to position resilience in organisational leaders within the wider resilience literature. Drawing on doctoral research, it will evidence the importance of resilience to organisational leadership success and the contribution of lack of resilience to leadership derailment. Leadership development often emphasises resilience as the ability to ‘bounce back’. This is a misrepresentation of how resilience manifests and is detrimental to the development of resilience in leaders.

The paper will be enhanced to incorporate doctoral research on the role of resilience in leadership success and derailment, to position resilience in organisational leaders within the resilience literature and provide recommendations to practitioners on how better to develop the resilience of their leaders.

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In an increasingly uncertain and volatile political, economic, financial and technological climate, the resilience required of leaders in being able to navigate such a climate, is an area of increasing interest to academics and practitioners (Ross 2018). However, resilience in organisations has until recent years, been largely overlooked (King *et al.* 2015) and resilience in organisational leaders is under-researched.

Early conceptualisation of resilience originated from developmental psychology (Windle 2011) and early clinical research on mental dysfunction in schizophrenic mothers and their children (King *et al.* 2016; Luthans *et al.* 2006). Research focused on adversity in childhood (Fletcher and Sarkar 2013; Windle 2011) and identifying the factors that enabled some children to thrive in adversity. Further approaches to conceptualising resilience have emerged from alternate disciplines, in particular psychiatry, ecology and biology (Windle 2011). Resilience is alternatively considered to be (Ross 2018; Fletcher and Sarkar 2013; Windle 2011; Luthans 2002):

- Personal characteristics or traits for example, hardiness and confidence (Bonanno 2014)
- A response to adversity
- A process of positive adaptation and coping
- The utilisation of protective factors

Whilst the early conceptualisation of resilience has its origins in developmental psychology and childhood trauma, the benefits of developing resilience have become of interest in for example, the nursing profession (Jackson *et al.* 2007), the Armed Services in understanding the occurrence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Reivich *et al.* 2011) and in improving sports performance (Sakar and Fletcher 2014). Practitioner interest is now growing with regard to resilience in organisational leaders (Sudbrink 2016; Manson 2014; Sherlock-Storey *et al.* 2013; Lanz 2012; Allen 2012) however, scholarly research is lacking.

A resource based view of organisations led to consideration of human capital as a differentiator in organisational performance (Luthans *et al.* 2010). This in turn, Luthans *et al.* (2010) argue, led to a call for the positive psychology movement to go beyond human capital to psychological capital (PsyCap). PsyCap has been conceptualised as comprising self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resilience (Luthans *et al.* 2010; Avey *et al.* 2009; Peterson *et al.* 2008; Lazarus 2003) and has been demonstrated to be related to improved employee performance (Peterson *et al.* 2011).

Although resilience has been conceptualised as characteristics, an outcome, coping strategies or a process (Ross 2018; King *et al.* 2016; Manson 2014; Fletcher and Sarkar 2013; Windle 2011; Ahern *et al.* 2006), some authors have simplified resilience to ‘bouncing back’ (Luthans *et al.* 2006; Tugade and Frederickson 2004; Jacelon 1997) in an attempt to capture the actions of those who recover from setbacks. This oversimplification of resilience misrepresents the nature of resilience yet it is a definition which appears to be most commonly used within organisations when seeking to develop resilient leaders. It is this definition which also comprises the definition of resilience in PsyCap characterised as “when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond...to attain success” (Luthans *et al.* 2007. p.542).

In 2018, Ross conducted doctoral research on leadership talent, success and derailment. The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory, inductive research was to identify how leadership

talent enacts success and why some leaders derail. Qualitative interviews were conducted with twenty six Executives who were categorised to create a typology of talent types. The three leadership talent types comprised firstly talented and successful leaders. These were executives in FTSE 100 or equivalent organisations who demonstrated a track record of success at increasingly senior leadership roles across multiple organisations. Roles included Chairman, CEO and Board Director. The second talent type were identified as talented and derailed leaders. A derailed leader was perceived to be "...one that whilst previously successful in their career, has failed to live up to their full potential. This has resulted in failure in role, often with the consequent exit from this role" (Ross 2018, p.60). The final talent type was identified as those leaders who had voluntarily opted out of senior leadership roles to explore alternative careers.

During thematic analysis nine key themes were identified as differentiating successful leaders from those that had derailed, one of which was resilience. Whilst successful leaders made reference to resilience explicitly they also made reference to characteristics considered in literature to be aspects of resilience for example, confidence, optimism during difficulty, working well under pressure and adapting to prior trauma (Ross 2018). Derailed leaders did not reference resilience to the same extent. Furthermore, derailed leaders often highlighted instances where a lack of resilience had impacted their leadership career. When triangulating the findings successful leaders suggested that derailed leaders, at the point of failure, demonstrated an inability to 'bounce back'. From the research resilience emerged as a differentiator of successful leaders from those that derailed.

Through the research it was found that when discussing their own perceived resilience, a significant number of successful leaders identified the origins of their resilience as being the result of early year's trauma or difficulties. This is more aligned to the conceptualisation of resilience as coping strategies, protective factors and positive adaptation, rather than simply 'bouncing back' from difficulty. Given those successful leaders who had experienced childhood trauma or difficulty did go on to be successful this suggests that good outcomes can be a result of overcoming difficulty (Garmezy 1991), rather than simply bouncing back. Furthermore Bonanno (2005), suggests resilient individuals demonstrate healthy functioning and generative experiences which again goes beyond 'bouncing back'. That the development of resilience for many of the successful leaders interviewed had origins in childhood trauma also challenges the positive psychology approach to resilience of PsyCap.

When finalised, the purpose of this paper will be to use the research of Ross (2018) to position the resilience of organisational leaders in the context of resilience literature and to provide insight into how resilience helps leaders to sustain success and prevents derailment. Whilst practitioner interest in resilience in organisations has increased, there is a lack of scholarly literature beyond PsyCap. Resilience simply as 'bouncing back' negates the evidence of resilience as coping strategies, positive adaptation and positive outcomes. Research by Ross (2018) suggests that initially resilience was developed by successful leaders through positive adaptation to early year's trauma and difficulty, yielding longer term positive outcomes, furthermore this resilience in successful leaders contributed in particular, to their ability to lead change and to their effective career decision making. This had a cumulative effect on their career success. Luthans *et al.* (2014) suggested challenges resulting in greater resilience could be positive or negative. Successful and resilient leaders were more likely than derailing leaders to actively engage in challenging work based experiences for

example, projects, change assignments, secondments. This appeared to enable a process of continuous development of their resilience.

A better understanding of how resilience originates in leaders and the effect of resilience on leadership success and derailment will benefit individual leaders seeking to develop their resilience and organisations developing resilience in their leaders. Rather than emphasising the classroom development of resilience as bouncing back, given resilience is developed over time and can be developed through overcoming both positive and negative challenges, this raises the issue of whether experiential development opportunities could help leaders to proactively develop resilience.

This paper aims to contribute to academia and practice by using the research of Ross (2018) to position how resilience contributes to the success of organisational leaders and how a lack of resilience contributes to leadership derailment, thereby helping practitioners to understand how, in turbulent, uncertain times, they can develop leaders with the resilience needed to navigate their organisations through such a climate.

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