

Coaching for Resilience

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Freddie has long been a champion of mentoring programs and an effective coach to a diversity of people. She loves working with people in transition using the tools of renewal and resilience.

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Abstract

This new framework for coaching combines the work of Frederic Hudson and Pamela McLean (*Life Launch: A Passionate Guide to the Rest of Your Life*) and Daryl Connor (*Managing at the Speed of Change: How Resilient Managers Succeed and Prosper Where Others Fail; Leading at the Edge of Chaos: How to Create the Nimble Organization*). As the speed of change has rapidly accelerated and the profession of coaching has emerged, people are bombarded with a range of solutions to deal with the situation. Here is a framework that promises to inform a professional coach about various coaching strategies and their effectiveness for a specific client.



For thirty years I have worked in corporate America in various sales and management positions. In 1970 at the beginning of my career, I was the first woman hired by the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco into its Management Trainee program. Over the years, I experienced phenomenal success, especially in my sales efforts. For sixteen years I significantly exceeded my sales quota. Four of my last five years as an Account Executive at Digital Equipment Corporation, I was recognized at Digital's Decathlon as being in the top 5 % of sales people worldwide.

Over the course of my career I have often been asked, "What is your secret for success?" I used to feel uncomfortable answering the question because I wasn't clear what had made the difference. Then in 1999 while I was immersed in a master's program at the Leadership Institute of Seattle (LIOS), I read Daryl Conner's book, *Managing at the Speed of Change*. As I read about the nature of resilience, I knew I had found my answer. Becoming conscious of my own resilience has enabled me to reach new levels of achievement and coach others in finding resilience. While becoming a Certified Hudson Institute Coach, I developed a framework for coaching for resilience. This framework has at its base Hudson Institute's cycle of renewal. In the following pages, I will discuss how the phases of change and five characteristics of resilience have informed my coaching strategies.

Cycle of Renewal

The cycle of renewal depicts a pattern of four predictable phases of change. Depending on which of the four phases your client is charting, the effectiveness of resilience coaching may vary. People in Phase 1, “going for it,” are mostly optimistic, goal oriented, and determined. In Phase 2, “stuck in the doldrums,” people resist change because they may not know what to do to make things better. By definition, these people would rather feel the pain of their declining chapter than take a chance on some unfamiliar course of action” (Hudson & McLean, p. 56). They are the least likely to respond to resilience coaching, while people in Phase 3 (“cocooning”) or Phase 4 (“getting ready”) respond positively to resilience coaching.

The Nature of Resilience

Resilience is not a specific characteristic but rather a combination of traits that exist to different degrees in different people. To understand the different degrees of resilience, it is helpful to view people as having a preference toward one of two orientations to change. The basis of this view can be found in the Chinese language in which the concept of crisis is expressed with two separate symbols. One symbol represents potential danger, while the other represents crisis as hidden opportunity. A salient characteristic of opportunity-oriented people is their acceptance of change as a natural part of life. I define resilience as *the ability to demonstrate both strength and flexibility in the face of frightening disorder*. Resilience can be looked at in terms of five characteristics: *positive, focused, organized, proactive, and flexible*. Although in reality these five characteristics overlap, when coaching for resilience, I address each of them separately.

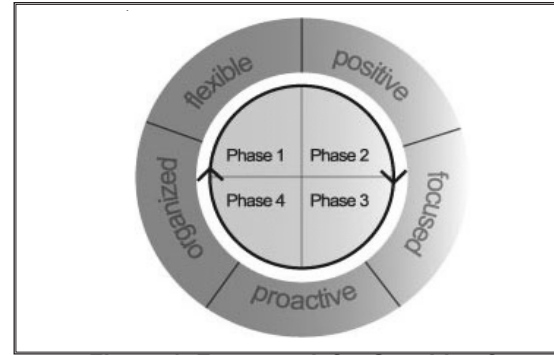


Figure 1. Framework for Coaching for Resilience

Positive

When coaching for the “positive” characteristic, I ask the individual to describe the possible opportunities that are presented by the change. When appropriate, I remind my clients that there are no “failures,” only opportunities for learning.

Working in a safe environment where my clients can be comfortable closing their eyes during reflection, I engage them in the following activity:

1. I ask my client to close his or her eyes and think back to the problematic situation. I ask questions like, “What was your first reaction to this situation?” “What thoughts did you have?” “Did you have any clues that warned you beforehand?” “Remember the feelings.” “Let yourself re-experience the event and remember as much as you can about the moment of surprise.”
2. When the client is ready, I ask, “If you now look at this situation as a gift, what thoughts come to mind?” “How has this event been an opportunity for something new?” “What lessons have you learned about yourself from this experience?” “What did you learn about the other person that has been useful?”

3. At the end of the closed-eye process, I ask the client to explain briefly the situation out loud, highlighting his or her first reaction and revealing the gifts and lessons.
4. I ask the client to write, before our next coaching session, a description of the situation as a gift, focusing on what new opportunities were presented and what lessons have been learned about both self and others.

Focused

Resilient individuals have a clear vision of what they want to achieve, and they use this as a lodestar to guide them when they become disoriented. Resilient individuals bring clarity of purpose to their actions. I agree with the Hudson Institute’s philosophy that “it is essential, if adults are to be alive in the world of flux and complexity, that they have within themselves a clear sense of purpose—to measure the flow of external change by abiding values of internal meaning” (Hudson & McLean, p. 73). Helping the client to develop a sense of purpose and vision is essential. Carole Adrienne’s book *The Purpose of Your Life* (pp. 45–48) suggests an activity that is useful in helping clients create a purpose statement. There is not space in this article to describe the activity I use with clients in full, but I like to start this process by using Hudson Institute’s purpose cards.

Organized

Although I believe that individuals are either naturally organized or not, coaching for the “organized” characteristic can be extremely helpful. A key to success is the ability to swiftly convert data to information and then organize this information into effective plans for moving forward. Help your client learn to break problems into logical pieces. Facilitate his or her ability to take the first step. Create actions that move him or her in the chosen

direction. Remind your client that there are no mistakes, only opportunities to learn.

Proactive

Resilient individuals act in the face of uncertainty, taking calibrated risks. As circumstances change, windows of possibility open and close swiftly, and the person who awaits complete certainty before deploying a strategy loses the chance to take advantage of a situation. An important element of resilience is the willingness to pursue action experimentally. Resilient individuals will test their ideas, learn from the experience, revise their plans, and test again.

A coach can be especially useful in assisting with the “proactive” characteristic. Assist your client in imagining taking action in the face of risk. Ask, “What is the worst thing that could happen?” Then assist in playing out the worst-case scenario so the client can have the experience of handling it. Assist with revising plans and learning from the experience. Practice empathetic listening, trust your hunches, and be willing to give tough feedback.

Flexible

Resilient individuals draw effectively on a wide range of internal and external resources to develop creative, pliable strategies for responding to change. A critical element of resilience is the ability to construct diverse solutions and to alter them if necessary. High levels of creativity, tolerance for ambiguity, and fluency of ideas are all components of this skill. Additionally, resilient people tend to draw effectively on the resources of others. Without depending exclusively on others for solutions, they are actively open to input and they build effective networks to ensure that information and other resources are freely exchanged.

When coaching for the “flexible” characteristic, the skill of scenario development is useful. *The Art of the Long View* (Schwartz, 1996) is an excellent resource for applying this in a complex business scenario. I have my client report out as many competing scenarios as he or she can without evaluating the possibilities. Then we explore each scenario separately, focusing on the information needed to make a decision. I remind my client that it is all right to try something out and take small steps in a direction. A guideline I use is “if what you are doing isn’t working, try something new.”

Developing the five characteristics of resilience in myself has helped me to continue to find untapped creativity, energy and peace. Certainly I have my ups and down just like anyone else, but I snap back quickly and continue to learn, trusting beyond myself to live joyfully in service.

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