Organizations must be resilient if they are to survive and thrive in turbulent times. Learning from experience, investments in leadership and culture, networks, and change readiness can help them move from denial and paralysis to acceptance and practical solutions.

Darwin Semper Vivens

Vulnerability has few friends. Naturally, the ability to cope with and recover readily from adversity is the preferred attribute of living organisms and their environments: in the face of shocks that threaten existence or viability, it enables them to bounce back to a previous state of normal functioning, or simply not show deleterious effects. Indeed, the ability of an entity or system to maintain and renew itself—or not—in the presence of stressors is of paramount significance to life on earth.

As you would have thought, resilience has a long history in ecology and, when persons are the subject, psychology. Additionally, of late, it has been used in the context of communities, hence, organizations, where it is more and more defined in active, not passive, terms to connote deliberate efforts to deal with—perhaps even thrive on—hardship. For communities and organizations, resilience must surely stand for more than mere survival.

As a matter of fact, with an initial focus on tragedies in the wake of 9/11, the notion of organizational resilience has burgeoned because of the need to manage uncertainty and ambiguity in modern societies and their economies, all of them complex and increasingly interconnected. Where once-isolative system boundaries rupture or wear away, applying the concept of resilience to organizations—the fundamental building blocks of collective human endeavor—is vital to ensure enduring social well-being and economic prosperity in the 21st century. Because of its intimate, assimilative, relationship with such fields as enterprise risk management and business continuity management, organizational resilience is now considered an outcome—and a fundamental concern—of corporate governance.

Life is like a game of cards. The hand you are dealt is determinism; the way you play it is free will.
—Jawaharlal Nehru
The Case for Organizational Resilience

Certainly, in the private sector, success has never been so fragile: large organizations fail more often than in the past. Every day, the sustainability of organizations is tested in a world that constantly changes and offers new challenges: in deference to the Red Queen hypothesis, depending of course on the environment they operate in, it is as if they must get better just to keep in the same place. Therefore, with respect to organizational resilience, beyond unrewarding portrayals of maladaptive processes and on a par with concepts of the learning organization, emerging ideas evolve ways to accommodate environmental turbulence and effectively manage disruptive change and its pace to engage, adjust, adapt, and recover; capture or realize opportunity; and in some cases actually morph to become stronger on account of the experience.

Every organization faces a unique risk landscape and resilience thinking must embrace learning. Achieving desirable outcomes amid strain requires creativity and innovation, aka, competencies borne of practiced skill at harnessing internal and external resources and authority productively to address issues at the edge of chaos. Importantly, given the developmental properties of resilience, the capacity to constantly adapt, improvise, and even shape change can only spring from latent potential at individual, group, and organizational levels, nurtured over a history of prior experience. As organizations build on the past to expand their behavioral repertoires across new competencies the range of possible actions they can take to meet hazards grows in breadth and depth. They are not error-free, yet errors do not disable them: they become high-reliability organizations that continuously focus on performance.

Responding without delay, thoroughly, and constructively with minimal stress to unexpected events and circumstances is now an organizational imperative, alongside client-service, made available to a system so that it can function.

> Do I contradict myself?
> Very well then I contradict myself,
> (I am large, I contain multitudes).
> —Walt Whitman

> When, in an epoch of change, tomorrow is necessarily different from yesterday, and so new things need to be done, what are the questions to be asked before the solutions are sought? Action learning differs from normal training (education, development) in that its primary objective is to learn how to ask questions in conditions of risk, rather than to find the answers to questions that have already been precisely defined by others—and that do not allow ambiguous responses because the examiners have all the approved answers.
> —Reginald Revans

> There exist some evils so terrible and some misfortunes so horrible that we dare not think of them, whilst their very aspect makes us shudder; but if they happen to fall on us, we find ourselves stronger than we imagined; we grapple with our ill luck, and behave better than we expected we should.
> —Jean de La Bruyère

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4 The average lifespan of a company listed in Standard & Poor’s 500 index of leading companies in the United States has shrunk by more than 50 years over the last century, from 67 years in the 1920s to only 15 years of late.
5 Irrespective of an organization’s lifespan, dysfunctions in sectors such as business, disaster assistance, energy, environment, healthcare, humanitarian aid, international relations, or transport can beget terrible upshots.
6 Organizational evolution would have it thus: faced with competition, an organization is likely to look for ways to raise its performance; when successful, generative learning boosts its competitive strength, which in turn triggers adaptive learning in resistant rivals and makes them more robust, thereby inciting the first organization to continue to learn more.
7 Here, disruptive change is brought about by surprises that destabilize organizational performance and can even threaten viability.
8 The pace of change is driven by variations in the kind, number, and recurrence of conditions an organization experiences.
9 Here, the term “resource” is taken in its broadest sense, meaning, a financial, human, informational, and material resource, including a service, made available to a system so that it can function.
10 Complexity thinking helps analyze what has become a key descriptor of our world. Eschewing reductionism, which interprets data and information in simple terms, it offers pointers where organizations find it difficult to predict, control, and influence because of self-organization and co-evolution. When a system risks decline or collapse—stagnation is not an option in a competitive world, double-loop and triple-loop learning can remedy inadequacies and leapfrog the (inevitably declining) curve of organizational performance over time.
11 To overcome the innate cognitive, ideological, political, and strategic barriers to organizational sustainability that crises expose, three basic questions would need answering after each experience: (i) what have we learned? (ii) how—or in what conditions—did we learn? and (iii) how can we integrate what we learned in individual and collective capabilities to understand complex, interdependent issues; engage in reflective, generative conversations; and cultivate personal and shared aspirations?
on bridging organizational silos explain that large organizations rely on teams to develop and deliver products and services. However, the defining characteristics of specialized units often hamper collaboration among different parts of an organization. Promoting intra-organizational resilience demands that an enabling environment be built for effective cross-functional teamwork. See ADB. 2010. Bridging Organizational Silos. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/bridging-organizational-silos


17 Resilient Organizations also provides a resilience benchmark tool and associated questionnaire to gauge the resilience of an organization, monitor progress over time, and compare resilience strengths and weaknesses against other organizations in the sector of interest or of a similar size.
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## On Resilient Organizations

<table>
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<th>Indicator</th>
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<tr>
<td>Change Readiness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unity of Purpose</td>
<td>An organization-wide awareness of what the organization’s priorities would be following a crisis, clearly defined at the organization level, as well as an understanding of the organization’s minimum operating requirements.</td>
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<td>Proactive Posture</td>
<td>A strategic and behavioral readiness to respond to early warning signals of change in the organization’s internal and external environment before they escalate into crisis.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Planning Strategies</td>
<td>The development and evaluation of plans and strategies to manage vulnerabilities in relation to the business environment and its stakeholders.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stress Testing</td>
<td>The participation of staff in simulations or scenarios designed to practice response arrangements and validate plans.</td>
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### Further Reading


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For further information.

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Asian Development Bank

ADB’s vision is an Asia and Pacific region free of poverty. Its mission is to help its developing member countries reduce poverty and improve the quality of life of their people. Despite the region’s many successes, it remains home to two thirds of the world’s poor: 1.8 billion people who live on less than $2 a day, with 903 million struggling on less than $1.25 a day. ADB is committed to reducing poverty through inclusive economic growth, environmentally sustainable growth, and regional integration. Based in Manila, ADB is owned by 67 members, including 48 from the region. Its main instruments for helping its developing member countries are policy dialogue, loans, equity investments, guarantees, grants, and technical assistance.

Knowledge Solutions are handy, quick reference guides to tools, methods, and approaches that propel development forward and enhance its effects. They are offered as resources to ADB staff. They may also appeal to the development community and people having interest in knowledge and learning.

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