

The Successful Supervisor

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Tips from LifeSolutions

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With a changing economic picture challenging the workplace and workers alike it is important to recognize and support ways of managing the uncertainty. The November 2008 issue of the Successful Supervisor looked at how the supervisor provides an important anchor at work. This month the focus shifts to resilience. Periodically this newsletter will return to the issue of uncertainty and how to manage through it.

We are interested in your feedback. Email your questions and comments to LifeSolutions at ask@lifesolutionsforyou.com

“In these tough times I’m noticing how different people are in how they respond. Some of my staff is worried almost all the time now while others seem to be doing just fine. What makes the difference?”

You are referring to what behavioral scientists call “*Resilience*”. It encompasses a combination of factors such as family traits, life experience and the capacity to change through learning. Basically it refers to bouncing back from unforeseen, adverse events. Resilient people ‘thrive’, not just ‘survive’, through tough times.

A recent segment on National Public Radio described how Dungeness crab fishermen seem able to do well over the natural cycles of crab population and competition. As one 64 year old fisherman put it, “All these variables – they’re almost impossible to calculate, so you never know what’s going to happen. And that’s what makes it interesting.” The ups and downs and converging of uncontrollable factors are the circumstances these fishermen expect and enjoy. Not only that, while they compete, they also cooperate about advice and information, e.g. the weather. They are attached to the tradition of fishing, to their communities, to the way of life all this represents. With no guarantees, they thrive on optimism, hard work and appreciating the coping skills they have developed.

This story highlights key elements of resilience: (1) individual traits, (2) the degree to which one is able to scan the environment and pick out *real threats* from perceived threats, and (3) the degree of social isolation, this last element being the single most accurate predictor of prolonged stress according to stress researchers.

These fishermen also illustrate the findings from new research which says that none of us really operates alone. We are strongly influenced by those around us, even those we don’t really know.

“This is all well and good,” you might say, “but what does this really have to do with me and my staff? After all, we’re not fishermen.” While that’s true of the type of work you do, you are not so different from these fishermen in the way you do your work.

- (1) Every employee today is ‘riding the waves’ of change. The lesson to be learned or reinforced here is that those who are resilient ‘expect’ to ride them. Life isn’t ‘awful’, it’s a constant state of change; sometimes it’s easier and sometimes harder.
- (2) Minimizing risk is essential. The fishermen can’t control the risks. What they do is adopt a framework which minimizes the negative impact. They aren’t overcome in the bad times; they

are prepared. This doesn’t relate to “liking” or “being happy” about change. Rather, it is about adopting a more realistic approach which enables them to focus on “real risks” and not waste time on blaming others or giving up..

This skill is critical to being a successful supervisor and a successful employee. Being able to focus on real threats, i.e. , how to successfully do more with less, rather than who is saying what to whom enables you and your department to not only survive, but thrive.

- (3) Relying on social networks is recognized as important. Every supervisor knows this. You cannot do the job alone. Finding ways to engage your staff in ‘sharing’ rather than ‘competing’ with each other is an essential element to individual and team success. In addition, these networks provide an environment to minimize stress.
- (4) Hard work is expected and is its own reward. With that comes a belief that things will be ok--not easy, but ok. This isn’t an empty ‘feel good’ kind of situation. This view is based on history, separating fact from fiction, relying on others and believing in oneself. Isn’t this the work ethic we are all trying to create in some form or another?
- (5) Leaders are steady when things around them are unstable. That’s where the supervisor comes in. You are looked to as the anchor.
 - ◆ That means that you are focusing on facts and not getting sidetracked by all the other distractions.
 - ◆ You are calling forth the best in those who report to you, expecting hard work and rewarding the effort informally and in formal celebrations.
 - ◆ You understand leadership is a part of every person’s role and is evident in how each person conducts him or herself, and you use the best each person has to offer. You use tools like these to keep things going.
 - Review the department/company mission statement and ask employees to remember their personal mission. These are living documents.
 - Empathize before problem-solving. Listening and expressing support before looking for solutions will keep you both on the same team.
 - Ask your staff for ideas and then incorporate them into solutions. Everyone’s thinking is needed in these times.