

FEDERAL EXECUTIVE INSTITUTE CORNER



Doug Silsbee

Developing Your Resilience: A Key to Executive Efficacy

By Doug Silsbee, FEI Adjunct Faculty*

Executives in Federal service generally signed on with a genuine commitment to contribute to our country. Specifically, graduates of FEI's Leadership for a Democratic Society course return to their home agencies with clear ideas about the contribution that they wish to make and a commitment to being authentic leaders of change in their home agencies. Yet worthwhile intentions are often frustrated by processes, personalities, and constraints beyond their control.

Research consistently shows that resilience, or the ability to learn and be effective in the face of setbacks and challenges, is a critical factor in leader success, whether in government, industry, or the nonprofit sector. Victor Frank famously wrote,

after arduous time in a Nazi concentration camp, "The last of the human freedoms is to choose one's attitudes." Frank understood that this cannot be taken away, even in the grimmest of circumstances.

As leaders, we often cannot control what is thrown at us. The workings of government are sometimes inefficient and frustrating. However, we recognize colleagues who consistently rise to the challenges of leading in sometimes overwhelming circumstances, and others who seem to become paralyzed by the same circumstances. The difference is resilience.

This fundamental internal capacity to choose our attitude and our responses to whatever happens around us is the essence of resilience. We've all heard this before. But, we challenge you to ask yourself how much you consciously exercise this capacity.

The good news is that resilience can be developed. There are specific actions that you can take to further your own resilience. These actions fall into two general areas. First, there are external *actions* that you can take in relation to the people and the system around you. Second, there are internal actions, the *practices* that develop your capacity to stay true to yourself and effective in the face of seemingly overwhelming change. Together, these actions lie at the core of resilience.

Here are some external actions you can take:

- Assess the people in your network for how they support you, and cultivate partnerships around shared commitments. Invest yourself in relationships that are sustaining. Similarly, limit your investment in relationships that drain you to what is necessary and appropriate.
- Step back and be intentional in identifying the leverage points that you have. In the midst of crisis, our reactivity often keeps us involved in activities that make little contribution. Invest the time to organize yourself

around the actions that have the most leverage.

Here are a few tips for the inner work to build enduring capacity:

- Remind yourself frequently of what's most deeply important to you, and "for the sake of what" you are doing this work. An unshakeable commitment to a purpose can be the North Star that guides you when other elements are shifting and changing.
- Take time for yourself. Exercise, contemplation, prayer, and community are hardest to prioritize, and simultaneously most vital, in times of stress and challenge. Engaging in regular practices that restore and sustain you is essential to maintaining your energy and resilience.
- Choose your perspective. It is easy to get wrapped up in the complexity of your role, and to see constraints looming on all sides. However, a different perspective is always available, and nobody else can take away your ability to choose a perspective that is empowering and helpful. Think of exercising this choice as a concrete skill that can be learned and practiced, and you'll be on your way.

Thomas Jefferson famously said, "Nothing can stop the man with the right mental attitude from achieving his goal; nothing on earth can help the man with the wrong mental attitude." Another chief executive, Jimmy Carter, said, "I have one life and one chance to make it count for something. I'm free to choose what that something is."

Cultivating your resilience is both essential to effectiveness in your role as a senior leader in government and a key to finding enduring fulfillment in service. ■

* **Editor's Note:** Doug Silsbee is an author and leadership coach in Asheville, NC. Along with Bev Wann, Silsbee will teach a seminar at FEI entitled *A Leader's Guide to Developing Resilience: Sustaining Your Capacity to Lead in Challenging Times*. See the FEIAA Web site, www.feiaa.org, for details.

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