

Focus, Resilience, and Realistic Optimism: A Triangulation of Skills Key to Managers' Effective Performance

Dr. David E. Bartz, Professor Emeritus

Department of Educational Leadership
Eastern Illinois University

Dallas T. Bartz, Juris Doctor

Dickson, Francissen, & Bartz LLP
Aurora, IL

Abstract

Managers need to integrate focus, resilience, and realistic optimism skills in order to perform at their best, achieve maximum job satisfaction, and establish a competitive edge for their work unit and organization. Focus means that a manager is concentrating on eliminating distractions by creating a *single-mindedness* attention and devotion to the task at hand. Resilience represents a manager overcoming adversity and failure through causal-analysis of a situation, bouncing back stronger, and being more resourceful because of the experience. Realistic optimism is exemplified by a manager having a positive attitude and outlook, and confidence that events will turn out well. It also means objectively paying close attention to relevant negative information, but not allowing such information to cloud clear decision-making.

Key words: managers, focus, resilience, and realistic optimism

Context

Focus, resilience, and realistic optimism are skill sets for managers that have an interconnectedness that complements and enhances each other's effectiveness. The result is a manager performing more effectively and enhancing job satisfaction. Astute managers consistently hone their focus, resilience, and realistic optimism skills to "be their best," feel good about their performance, and enjoy a confident mindset toward work and self-competency.

Focus

Focus means managers can maintain their concentration to the point of eliminating distractions by creating a *single-mindedness* and devotion to the task at hand. As Warren (2017) explains, "Many managers lose focus for bringing work to completion or get distracted and mispend energy on nonessential activity" (p. 150). He describes this phenomenon as "unproductive busyness" or "active inaction" (Warren, p. 150).

Focus is extremely important to managers in the context of over stimulation from the attempted multitasking that modern life fosters. As Garber (2018) observes:

We are constantly bombarded by intrusions from the environment. Images, sounds and information come at us so fast and furious in the age of the smartphone that it seems surprising that we can get anything done at all. We live in a society in which stimulation is a constant intrusion. (p. 58)

The enemies of focus for managers are factors such as the barrage of stimuli and the attempts to multitask. Research consistently demonstrates that managers cannot, in reality, multitask (Grenny, 2017). At best, managers can quickly go from one task to another. The efficient use of time and accuracy is reduced by this quickly paced “back and forth” of attention for what many label as multitasking.

Focus creates attention to factors that are important to managers in achieving the results for which they are accountable. As Goleman (2013) notes, “Leadership itself hinges on effectively capturing and directing collective attention which first requires managers focusing their own attention” (p. 210). Goleman also indicates the crucial role that managers’ *inner focus* plays in attuning them to effectively engage intuition and guide their values to make better decisions (p. 4). This inner focus of managers works best when they tune out emotional distractions to sharpen attention to the task or issue at hand (Goleman, p. 16).

Zahariades (2017) observes that, “Few people are born with the ability to focus. That’s great news because it means we can train ourselves to have single-minded focus when we need it” (p. 2). Examples offered by Zahariades (2017) for managers to enhance focus are:

1. Understand the purpose and reasoning for undertaking a task and clearly identify the desired results (p. 67).
2. Know your *distraction triggers*—those things that interfere with the single-minded focus needed to be productive at a task. Structure your approach to work to minimize or eliminate these distraction triggers (p. 73).
3. Work in *time chunks*. The Pomodoro Technique is based on concentrated focus for 25 minutes followed by a 5-minute break. The 52 + 17 Strategy advocates 52 minutes of engaged focus followed by a 17-minute break (p. 83).
4. Identify your most productive time of day for concentrated focus and protect this time from interruptions (p. 113). For most people this is early to mid-morning (Pink, 2018).

A key to effective focus is managers creating a *flow state* by tuning out and ignoring distractions so attention is completely absorbed by the task at hand (Zahariades, 2017, p. 27). This means managers identifying personal distractors—such as food cravings, procrastination, restlessness, frustration, and moodiness—while structuring their work environment and habits to counteract the distractors (Zahariades, 2017, p. 73). Hanson (2018) notes the importance of a manager having a *refuge*, a place of solitude to work that one perceives as nurturing, secure, and uplifting to aid concentrated focus through mindfulness (pp. 29-30).

Resilience

Sutcliffe and Vogus (2010) observe that resilience includes the ability to positively adapt to hardships, bounce back from challenging situations, and feel strengthened and more resourceful as a result of experiencing these situations. Resilient managers have the “ability to recover quickly from setbacks and continue to pursue a vision of the future” (Kouzes & Posner, 2012, p. 207). Managers that are resilient understand that failure is not an end point, but the beginning of a challenge to apply objectivity in order to accurately identify what prompted the situation. If a manager cannot identify the true causes of the adversity, it is difficult—if not impossible—to effectively deal with the situation.

A manager’s thinking style plays a major role in being resilient. The *explanatory style* of thinking represents how managers explain the “good and bad things” that happen to them. The three dimensions of the explanatory style of thinking are:

1. **Personal (“me or not me”)** – I caused the problem (me) or I did not cause the problem (not me).
 - Do you view an adverse situation or failure as your fault or caused by other people or circumstances beyond your control?
 - If the likely cause of an adverse situation or failure is ambiguous, do you assume you are to blame or that it was due to circumstances beyond your control?
2. **Permanent (“always or not always”)** – The problem situation is unchangeable (always) or can be changed (not always).
 - Do you perceive the causes of the adverse situation or failure to have a significant long-lasting or relatively temporary effect on you?
 - Do you view an adverse outcome or failure as the cause of a one time misjudgment on your part or that your judgement is misguided in general and likely to negatively impact other tasks you undertake?
3. **Pervasive (“everything or not everything”)** – The problem situation undermines almost all areas of your life (everything) or just a few.
 - When encountering an adverse situation or failure, do you assume that the result will impact all aspects of your life (even possibly your personal life) or be limited only to your work?
 - Does the impact of adversity or failure at work permeate all aspects of your job or is it limited to the particular situation and circumstances in which it occurred? (Seligman, 2002a, pp. 153-156; Luthans, Yourssef-Morgan, & Avolio, 2015, p. 118)

The *me, always, everything* thinking person believes that: (1) she/he caused the problem [me], (2) the problem is long lasting and unchangeable [always], and (3) the situation will undermine all aspects of his/her life [everything]. A *not me, not always, not everything* person thinks that other people or circumstances caused the problem (not-me), that the problem is fleeting and changeable (not always), and that it will not impact all aspects of one’s life (not everything) (Seligman, 2002a, p. 42).

A manager must be open-minded, objective, and use the causal-analysis approach in studying the factors prompting the adversity or failure. Learning from failures is crucial to a manager's future success. To reduce the chance of future failures, managers must analyze how their beliefs or skill sets have been the cause of failures and learn from them. While not internalizing the failures, managers must identify what, if anything, they can change to avert future problems from becoming failures.

The attuned manager understands that there can be a fine line between a challenge and an impossible situation. On occasion, a manager may mistakenly pursue an impossible situation that results in failure. This does not mean that the manager, *per se*, was a failure. It does mean that the manager must bounce back—be resilient—without curtailing her/his motivation to move on to other challenges and be negatively unaffected by the failure. As the old adage goes, “this too will pass.”

A manager's professional life, and a particular position in his/her career at a point in time, is a work in progress. Developing a “can do” perspective enables a manager to seek challenging opportunities, knowing that if adversity—or even failure—strikes, she/he will deal with it effectively (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). At times, managers may need to “rein in their egos” in order to refrain from lashing out at others as a defense mechanism when a failure occurs.

Countu's (2010) advice to managers regarding adversity or failure is to “coolly accept the harsh realities facing them” (p. 49). Next, they need to find meaning in the situation by examining how this can be a learning experience while gaining insights for performing better in the future. Further, managers need to improvise by “putting resources to unfamiliar uses and imagining possibilities others don't see” in order to salvage the situation to the extent possible (2010, pp. 49-51). Essentially, this means making the best of a bad situation. As Countu (2017) observes, “Resilience is something you realize you have *after* the fact, and a manager's level of resilience is an excellent determinate of who succeeds and who fails” (pp. 6 & 8). Managers' application of *mental agility* to counteract stress by consciously taking pauses to view what is happening from a neutral perspective is also important to their mental well-being and maintaining a positive outlook (Bartz, D. E. & Bartz, 2017a).

Durable inner strength is crucial to providing managers with mental resources such as determination and self-worth that aid in being resilient (Hanson, 2018, pp. 1-2). Hanson emphasizes managers learning from failures by knowing how to minimize trauma and maintain a positive *mental well-being* through difficult work experiences. Hanson's emphasis is supported by the positive psychology movement that stresses managers nurturing their well-being which is defined as positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments (Seligman, 2018a).

The concept of *Grit*—popularized by Duckworth (2016)—fits well with resilience because *perseverance* is one of its major components, along with passion and effort. In the context of Grit, perseverance means managers demonstrate self-discipline and “stick-to-it-ness” to remain focused and *stay the course* in the face of adversity. This concept is supported by Blaine (2017) who advocates that passion represents how badly managers want to realize a goal and what efforts they are willing to dedicate in overcoming challenges and difficulties to reach that goal.

Used in the Grit context, passion plays an important role in managers being resilient. Specifically, if managers possess a strong emotional desire and commitment to fight through difficulties and not give up, they can bounce back and overcome adversity. As depicted by Grit, effort means the resilient manager works diligently to find creative alternative solutions to

overcome adversity and has the positive mental energy and motivation to persistently keep going. Hanson (2018) includes “dogged, tough resourcefulness” as a key ingredient of Grit (p. 77).

Anchor and Gielan (2017) remind managers that resilience is not just about *enduring*, but also encompasses *recharging* (p. 109). Too often managers take the tough approach to resilience, meaning that they see no need to have a *recovery period* from time-to-time. As Anchor and Gielan (2017) observe, “The very lack of a recovery period dramatically holds back our collective ability to be resilient [over time] and successful” (p. 112).

Realistic Optimism¹

Optimism is future oriented and means managers have positive attitudes that events will turn out well, even to the extent of being confident that such will be the case (Southwick & Charney, 2018). It also includes managers accepting the past and not allowing previous unpleasant experiences to cloud expectations for the future. Appreciating living in the moment—being mindful—is also a part of the optimistic manager’s thought and behavior processes (Positive Psychology Program, 2017).

Optimism of managers is not a fixed quantity because it can increase or decrease, depending on how information is processed and the content in which it is placed. Seligman (2002b) makes it clear that *learned optimism* is within reach of managers who are unduly influenced by its enemy—pessimism (p. 83). “Disputing pessimistic thoughts is the central skill of learned optimism” (Seligman, 2018b, p. 211).

Realistic optimism is managers paying close attention to negative information relevant to the problem at hand, but not remaining focused on it. Managers apply problem-focused coping strategies and accept the realities of the situation they cannot control (Luthans et al., 2015, p. 112). Realistic optimism means managers possessing positive emotion and simultaneously applying realistic evaluation (Luthans, 2002). “Realistic optimism includes an evaluation of what one can and cannot accomplish in a particular situation and hence adds to one’s [manager’s] efficacy and hope” (Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007, p. 547). Managers possessing realistic optimism rapidly disengage from problems that are likely unsolvable, know when to cut their losses, and devote time and energy to solvable problems (Schneider, 2018).

Managers skilled at realistic optimism are acutely aware of avoiding *optimistic bias* that involves self-deception or convincing oneself of a desired belief without an objective *reality check* of all factors involved in a situation. Managers should feel confidently in control so that when they do take on a task or project their actions have a significant impact on the outcomes. They must be motivated and willing to fight for whatever it takes to realize the desired outcomes (Luthans et al., 2015, p. 118).

Dweck’s (2016) analysis of mindset is important to managers in the context of effectively practicing realistic optimism. Managers can allow pessimism to prevail by believing that events will usually go against them and this condition is unlikely to change (*fixed mindset*). Such pessimism prompts a manager to distance oneself from the reality of the problem through denial, escape, fatalism, and cognitive avoidance (Luthans et al., 2015, p. 117). Or, managers can believe that through close analysis for planning—and proper adjustments during implementation—events will turn out successfully (*growth mindset*). A manager’s mindset going into a project significantly impacts its likelihood of success.

Gordon (2017) indicates that pessimistic managers give up because of the struggle,

negativity, frustration, fear, rejection, naysayers, and circumstances. Such managers also give up because they do not have the optimism, positivity, and confidence to keep moving forward. The philosophy of *Blue Ocean Shift* counters pessimism by advocating that managers should “see opportunities where before only constraints were visible” (Kim & Mauborgne, 2017, p. 54). Shores’ (2017) ideology in *Conscious Communications* is apropos to managers combating pessimism. Shores states that “*Conscious Communications* is a simple process that consists of eliminating negative language, using words that work, and focusing on what you want” (p. 4).

Managers that are realistic optimists have a sense of self-control that leads to enhanced confidence and the motivation to create solutions for overcoming difficult situations. They create solutions by expanding their field of vision where opportunities exist to overcome adversity, inspire and support others, and work hard to implement the solutions (Kim & Mauborgne, 2017). These managers seek out what is needed to flourish and achieve goals (Charan, Willigan, & Giffen, 2017). Some realistic optimistic managers adhere to the adage “Hope for the best, but prepare for the worst” (Collingwood, 2016, p. 3).

Concluding Thoughts

Interfacing the skills of focus, resilience, and realistic optimism result in a powerful source for managers to effectively meet the demands of their jobs. Effective integration of these three skill areas creates a synergy that is more than “the sum of its parts” and motivates managers to be their best, truly enjoy their jobs, and make significant contributions to the work unit and organization.

References

- Anchor, S., & Gielan, M. (2017). Resilience is about how you recharge, not how you endure. In *Resilience* (pp. 109-121). Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
- Bartz, D. E., & Bartz, C.E.A. (2017a). The resilient and focused manager. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 8(9), 1-7.
- Bartz, D., & Bartz, D.T. (2017b). Strengths management, realistic optimism, and impressions management for managers. *International Journal of Organizational Theory and Development*, 5(1), 1-9.
- Blaine, H. (2017). *7 Principles of transformational leadership*. Wayne, NJ: Career Press.
- Charan, R., Willigan, G., & Giffen, D. (2017). *The high-potential leader*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Collingwood, J. (2016). Realism and optimism: Do you need both? *Psych Central*. Retrieved from <https://psychcentral.com/lib/realism-and-optimism-do-you-need-both/>
- Countu, D. (2017). How resilience works: Three traits of those who bounce back. In *Resilience* (pp. 1-30). Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
- Countu, D.L. (2010). How resilience works. In *On managing yourself* (pp. 47-60). Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
- Dweck, C. (2016). *Mindset: The new psychology of success* (Updated ed.). New York, NY: Ballantine Books.
- Duckworth, A. (2016). *Grit: The power of passion and perseverance*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

- Garber, P. (2018). The focused mind. In *The science of personality* (pp. 56-61). New York, NY: Centennial Media.
- Goleman, D. (2013). *Focus: The hidden driver of excellence*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Gordon, J. (2017). *The power of positive leadership*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Grenny, T. (2017). Five ways to minimize office distractions. In *HBR guide to being more productive* (pp. 105-115). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation.
- Hanson, R. (2018). *Resilient*. New York, NY: Harmony.
- Kim, W. C., & Mauborgne, R. (2017). *Blue ocean shift*. New York, NY: Hachette Books.
- Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2012). *The leadership challenge*. San Francisco, CA: The Leadership Challenge.
- Luthans, F. (2002). The need for and meaning of positive organizational behavior. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 23(6), 695-706.
- Luthans, F., Avolio, B. J., Avey, J. B., & Norman, S. M. (2007). Positive psychological capital: Measurement and relationship with performance and satisfaction. *Personnel Psychology*, 60, 541-572.
- Luthans, F., Youssef-Morgan, C. M., & Avolio, B. J. (2015). *Psychological capital and beyond*. New York, NY: Oxford.
- Pink, D. H. (2018). *When: The scientific secrets of perfect timing*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books.
- Positive Psychology Program. (2017, June). *Psychological capital: HERO in leadership and coaching*. Retrieved from <https://positivepsychologyprogram.com/psychological-capital-psycap/>
- Reivich, K., & Shatte, A. (2002). *The resilience factor*. Mount Claire, NJ: Bright & Happy Books.
- Schneider, S. (2018). In S. Southwick & D. Charney (Eds.), *A pragmatist's guide to optimism* (pp. 36-41) and *The science of personality* (pp. 36-41). New York, NY: Centennial Media.
- Seligman, M. (2002a). In K. Reivich & A. Shatte, *The resilience factor* (pp. 41-42). Mount Claire, NJ: Bright & Happy Books.
- Seligman, M.E.P. (2002b). *Authentic happiness*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Seligman, M.E.P. (2018a). PERMA and the building blocks of well-being. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 13(4), 333-335.
- Seligman, M. E. P. (2018b). *The hope circuit*. New York, NY: Hachette Book Group.
- Shores, M. (2017). *Conscious communications*. Carlsbad, CA: Hay House.
- Southwick, S., & Charney, D. (2018). A pragmatist's guide to optimism. In *The science of personality* (pp. 36-41). New York, NY: Centennial Media.
- Sutcliffe, K. M., & Vogus, T. J. (2010). In P. G. Northouse (Ed.), *Leadership: Theory and practice* (5th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Warren, R. (2017). *Personality at work*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill.
- Zahariades, D. (2017). *Fast focus*. Retrieved from www.artofproductivity.com

Footnote

¹ Based in part on Bartz, D., & Bartz, D. T. (2017b). Strengths management, realistic optimism, and impressions management for managers. *International Journal of Organizational Theory and Development*, 5(1), 1-9.