

ORDINARY RESILIENCE

Rethinking How Effective Leaders

Adapt and Thrive



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INTRODUCTION

“Why is the TV so loud?” my wife asked as she walked into the room.

“What do you mean?” I said. “It’s not loud.”

“My God, it’s *so* loud!”

For months, Sara had been complaining that I was going deaf or that I was ignoring her. In reality, I wasn’t exploring “selective auditory attention.” I truly didn’t hear what she was saying. The day with the TV was the last straw.

“Well, we need to do something,” Sara continued. “We need to go see an ENT to check out your hearing. There is something wrong.”

She made some calls, and a few days later, we visited an ear, nose, and throat doctor. He asked many questions and performed a few routine tests, including an auditory assessment that confirmed my hearing had been severely compromised, but he didn’t know why. He asked us to go home and come back in a few months so he could check my hearing again and monitor the progress.

Thankfully, my wife didn’t give in so easily. It was so clear

to us that something was wrong that we had already done research on the possibilities. What might cause someone to lose their hearing so quickly—especially someone in their mid-thirties? Before visiting the doctor, we had gone through that list and scratched off the ones we knew didn't apply: exposure to sudden loud noises or a chronically noisy environment, a genetic condition, and an ear infection. The only possible cause left was a brain tumor. When the doctor told us to come back in a few months, my wife asked if it could be a tumor.

"It's possible," the doctor said, "but I don't think that's it. Brain tumors are rare. Let's just keep monitoring it."

"Can you order an MRI of his head?" she asked.

"I really don't think that's necessary," the doctor said. "Just come back in three months and we'll go from there."

My wife and I looked at each other uneasily, but stood up and started walking out anyway. As we reached the door, my wife hesitated. She looked back to the doctor and said, "No. You know what? We want an MRI. If you don't order it, we'll find someone who will."

Three days later, I was lying on the narrow table heading into the coffin-like environment of the MRI machine.

That evening, the phone rang just as I was heading out the door to go for a quick run. Oblivious to what was coming, I walked back to the half wall between the dining room and living room and answered it.

"Hi, Luis. Do you have a moment?" It was the doctor I had seen Tuesday morning. As quickly as I thought, *Why would he be calling me on a Friday at five?* I had the answer: "The MRI from this morning showed an unusual mass in your brain."

I have a perpetual smile on my face, but it immediately disappeared. My wife saw my reaction and rushed over to take the phone. She hit the speaker button and demanded to know what

was going on. The doctor repeated the news and added that he had already booked an appointment with a neurosurgeon for the following week.

When we hung up, my wife collapsed by my side and started crying. Seeing her reaction was almost as hard as hearing the news itself. I felt numb, paralyzed with fear. Not only did I have a brain tumor, but it was clearly bad enough that the doctor had already scheduled a visit with a neurosurgeon. My thoughts were racing: *What am I going to tell my mom? How am I going to survive? Do I have the money to do this? Am I going to be buried here or in Guatemala? Will I die a horrible death?*

Sara and I talked until her tears slowed and then I decided to go for my run anyway. I needed to stop talking about it. I needed to clear my head and think.

As I ran, I thought. I thought about the lab where I worked. We dealt with a lot of radioactive material. I remembered the postdoc in my lab who was diagnosed with cancer and later passed away. He came to visit a few months before he died, and he was a shadow of the man I knew. I wondered if that was going to be my fate. I pictured myself looking sick, wasting away, and waiting for my death, and I was overcome with a deep sense of fear and helplessness. I also thought about my family in Guatemala—my mother, my dad, and my siblings—and how painful this news would be. As I ran, tears fell.

At that point in my life, I participated in 5Ks but I wouldn't call myself a runner. Five miles was the farthest I had ever gone. When I finally stopped running and crying that day, however, I had covered nine miles. My wife was so worried she was ready to call the police.

Something inside of me changed during those miles. I left the house full of fear and questions that I couldn't answer, but I returned filled with resolve. The situation hadn't changed. I

still had a brain tumor, and I still had no idea what the future held. But I had accepted the worst possible outcome—that I might die from the tumor—and decided that in typical Luis fashion, I would go down fighting. I also asked myself one question: what am I going to do about this? Doing so allowed me to reframe the situation, see the possibilities, and start moving forward one step at a time.

That is the essence of resilience.

OUR PROBLEMS TO SOLVE

A brain tumor is an extreme example, but we all live through changes and challenges—a sick child, a car accident, a job loss. As a leader, you likely encounter difficulties related to missed promotions, toxic bosses, dysfunctional cultures, others' perceptions of how you show up, and more. If you are alive, you will encounter hard, distressing, and sometimes traumatic situations. Some will pass quickly, and some linger for what seems like an eternity.

No matter what the crisis, we tend to respond as I did during my run that day, focusing on the ifs and the perceived problems rather than on what is ours to solve.

We cannot control every variable, so focusing on the uncertainty only adds unnecessary anxiety and stress. We ruminate, overthink, try to find complex solutions, and wish we were in a different position to deal with what we face—but we're not even looking at the right problem to begin with. As a result, we struggle to move forward on the things that are actually within our control.

Think about my tumor: What could I do to change the fact that I had a mass in my brain? Nothing. What could I do to change the fact that I might die from that tumor? Nothing.

That tumor was my perceived problem—my *gravity* problem, as I call it. Gravity exists no matter what we do. We have absolutely no control over its presence. Likewise, many circumstances in life, like being diagnosed with a brain tumor, are outside of our control. In that sense, they are not our problems to solve.

What problems were for me to solve? The ones over which I could exert some control. I could take the next steps—see the neurosurgeon, have surgery, and make plans to rest during recovery. I could also control my reaction to the situation. On my run, I eventually decided that, whether I died of a brain tumor or old age, I was going down fighting. As long as I was alive, I was going to truly *live*.

In a sense, the outcome of any hurdle or ordeal isn't important. It's how you live through it that makes the difference. Resilience goes beyond merely coping or surviving or even bouncing back. It involves moving forward and thriving *because of* challenges, not in spite of them.

The good news is that resilience is not an extraordinary trait possessed by a special few; rather, it is quite ordinary and shared by everyone. Given that you already have what you need to adapt and thrive, the question is how much and how well you put it to use. This book will show you one way to unlock, develop, and exercise the resilience muscle you already possess.

A FRAMEWORK FOR RESILIENCE

As you've probably guessed, this book won't give you tips on changing your situation. In many cases, if not most, the situation won't change at all. I couldn't alter the fact that a brain tumor had formed, and I now live with the reality that it may

return. Your boss may never change his abrasive style. You may not reach the C-suite in the next five years. Your coworkers may always see you as unapproachable and aloof.

However, you can change your reaction. You can learn to identify and solve for the problems that are truly yours to solve. You can move past the uncertainty and take the first step to adapt and eventually thrive. You already have what it takes.

The framework for resilience offered here is just that: a framework. It is not a blueprint. It is certainly not the only way to build the muscle that will help you deal with present and future obstacles. It has worked for me and the leaders I have coached, so I offer it to you.

In Part I, we discuss the first two aspects of the framework: *why* we should develop resilience and *how* we go about doing so through three key drivers—commitment, persistence, and optimism. We also discuss the concept of *amor fati*, “love of fate,” and the importance of self-compassion in building your resilience muscle in four areas: mental, physical, spiritual, and social.

In Part II, we discuss the third aspect of the framework, the *what* of resilience development. Each chapter discusses one pillar of resilience, with suggestions for applying it in your leadership challenges. Each pillar has three key components and a motto to help you remember the essential truth:

1. *Embrace the Suck*: You can’t control the rain, but you can choose whether or not you get wet.
 - *Accept* things as they are.
 - *Envision* the possibilities.
 - *Execute* the steps to realize your goal.
2. *Face Your Fears*: Don’t aim to be fearless. Aim to fear less.
 - *Welcome* fear.

- *Challenge* your relationship with fear.
 - *Act* because of fear.
3. *Build Relationships*: We cannot do life alone.
- *Identify* the relationships you need to cultivate in your life.
 - *Evaluate* the perceptions others have of you and challenge your own perceptions.
 - *Engage* people with humility, assertiveness, and empathy.
4. *Find Your Inner Strength*: You are more capable than you think.
- *Raise your standards* to set higher goals and expand your comfort zone.
 - *Understand your choices* between risk and safety.
 - *Take action* by using empowering rituals, habits, grit, and focus.
5. *Solve for Fulfillment*: Consider your contribution to the world.
- *Find* your purpose.
 - *Live intentionally* according to your values.
 - *Recharge* to avoid burnout.

These pillars share one common denominator: practicing them requires you to take the first step. Execute, act, engage—all of these words imply movement or progress. Building resilience is a process; it requires action and it doesn't happen overnight.

To help you take the first step in these areas, each chapter includes specific action items, as well as examples from my coaching practice.

UNLOCK THE RESILIENCE WITHIN

Not every person flourishes in the face of change or challenge. Some people survive and merely function. Others recover or return to baseline. Then there are those who adapt and thrive as a result of a traumatic experience or undergoing change. The key to such post-traumatic growth is resilience.

My journey to writing this book started because I wanted to understand what resilience is. It has since shifted to understand not only what resilience is, but also what it takes to have it. In other words, what behaviors, attitudes, mindsets, and rituals help strengthen that muscle? This book answers that question and provides access to tools you can use to build your own resilience muscle.

In the context of leadership development, resilience is crucial to maximizing performance, reducing stress, and building collaboration and innovation. Resilience isn't a skill that can be coded into a person. You can't take a pill to become resilient. However, resilience can be coached and learned. It is a combination of attitudes, values, and behaviors that can be adopted, adapted, and cultivated over time. In truth, it's not a matter of learning to be resilient as much as it is learning to unlock the resilience within. Every leader has the ability to adapt and thrive.

To that end, we begin with a discussion of what resilience is—and isn't.

Part I



THE FOUNDATIONS OF RESILIENCE

Chapter 1

THE RESILIENT YOU

“The human capacity for burden is like bamboo—far more flexible than you’d ever believe at first glance.”

—JODI PICOULT

- The essence of resilience
- The drivers of resilience
- What resilient leaders do
- What resilient leaders don't do

I come from a family of hard-working merchants. My great-grandfather emigrated from Italy to Guatemala and started a successful trading business. Like many wealthy immigrants of the day, he fathered a child out of wedlock—my grandfather—and left him to be raised in poverty by his mother. As a result, my grandfather didn't go to school or learn to read and write, but he had an affinity for numbers. He eventually started a business selling corn that slowly grew into one of the largest businesses in my hometown.

My father, the oldest child, began working for my grandfather when he was young. He didn't finish high school, as the demands of the family business—driving a truck all over the country to pick up goods to sell in my grandfather's store—took priority. Though my grandfather was a successful businessman, that didn't translate into providing more for his children, especially the older ones. When my parents met, my father was making the equivalent of twenty-five dollars a month. They soon married and moved into a small white adobe house with dirt floors, which is where they were living when I was born.

We were poor. When I was in elementary school, there were times when my mother, my siblings, and I shared one small meal. My mom sometimes fried corn tortillas, cut them up, and scrambled them with our eggs, and we would pretend we were eating meat since the mixture tasted like chicken. To have enough money to buy food, my mom occasionally pawned or sold wedding gifts she had received, and she also sewed dresses for people and charged two dollars apiece. I remember asking Dona Elena, a neighbor, for a small loan to buy our meal for the day. My mom always found a way to pay her back.

Though we didn't have material wealth, we had an abundance of laughter, learning, and love, which made for a very happy childhood. Our family grew to include two girls, in addition to my two brothers and me. My dad continued to work as a truck driver in my grandfather's business. He would be gone for days at a time, driving to different places in the country to pick up corn or sugar or whatever they needed to sell at the family store.

When I was fourteen, I won a scholarship to attend a boarding school in a town about six hours away. One night during my first year, I had a dream about blood. Oddly, I had dried blood in my nose the next morning. I forgot about it until four days

later, when two of my aunts and their husbands came to see me. I was so happy because I never got visitors.

Soon, however, I realized something was terribly wrong.

My aunts told me that on Monday, the same day I had dreamed of blood and woken up with a bloody nose, my dad had been in a serious accident while driving his truck. Though my family had driven several hours to take me to see him in a hospital about five hours from my school, I still didn't grasp the seriousness of the situation.

When I arrived, I couldn't believe my eyes. My father's stomach was wrapped with bandages and both legs were suspended about twelve inches above the bed. He had ripped open his stomach, intestines, and bladder, and he had shattered both legs, one of which might need to be amputated. At that point, the doctors weren't sure whether he would survive. If he did, he wouldn't be the same person.

My hometown was about an hour from the hospital, and my mom made the gut-wrenching decision to send my brothers and sisters to live with different family members so she could care for my dad. Plus, with my dad not working, she couldn't afford to feed us. Mom often wondered aloud how we would survive this situation.

After the initial danger had passed, my dad was transferred to a hospital in the capital city. Six months later, he moved in with one of his sisters so he could be close enough to the hospital to receive the proper physical therapy. Little by little, he graduated to a wheelchair, and once he was more comfortable getting around, he moved back home.

From that moment on, my father became focused on one goal: starting his own business. He still couldn't stand, let alone walk, but he was already planning how to move forward. He wasn't merely looking for a way to survive or even to go

back to work as a truck driver. He was determined to push beyond and thrive.

My mom and I were both skeptical, but he didn't let our doubts discourage him. "You'll see," he told us. "I'm going to buy a car and a house, and I'm going to send you to university, Luis." My mom entertained his dreams, but in secret she wondered, *If he didn't start a business when he was healthy, how could he do it in this condition?*

One day, my dad asked my grandfather if he could set up a table in his store, and my grandfather agreed. At first, my dad's business consisted of nothing more than a table, a scale, and a couple of knives. He would buy chicken meat and then cut, package, and sell it by the pound—all from his wheelchair.

As soon as my dad was able to, he dumped the wheelchair and started hobbling around on crutches—and he sold more and more chicken. He moved his table outside the front of the store, where he gained more visibility. Then my grandfather gave him a small room in his house with a door to the street, and my father opened his first shop.

When the volume increased to more than he and my mother could handle, my dad hired someone to help him with sales. Then a couple of restaurants asked him to provide chicken, and over time, my father became a very successful businessman. As a result, he was able to provide for our family in a way that we never thought possible. When I was eight years old, I had asked my dad for a bicycle, but he couldn't afford it. However, many years later when my little sister moved to the capital to go to the university, he had the resources to buy her a brand-new car.

Watching my dad adapt and thrive inspired a lot of people, my siblings and me most of all. All five of us have done very well as adults, in large part because of the example of resilience we saw in my dad. We have each encountered struggles

and adversity, but among us we have a CFO and Senior VP for Citibank, an agricultural engineer, a dermatologist, a successful businessman, and an executive coach for leaders in Silicon Valley. Like my father, we all have what it takes to be resilient, and to inspire others to do the same.

As leaders, you are always creating impact. The question is, what type of impact do you want to create? In learning how to build your own resilience muscles, you will also positively influence others to do the same.

In this chapter, we'll look at what resilience is, the drivers required to develop it, and what it looks like in leaders.

THE ESSENCE OF RESILIENCE

The American Psychological Association defines resilience as the process of adapting in the face of adversity, tragedy, and significant sources of stress.¹ The key word is *adapting*, or making adjustments and modifications in behavior and thinking in order to effectively manage the challenge at hand.

Resilience is a well-researched subject, and there are a number of definitions and frameworks out there—some fancier than others, some much more academic and backed by research. With my clients, I use the following framework to discuss resilience development:

- *Why* work on resilience? To adapt and thrive
- *How* do we work on resilience? Through resilience drivers
- *What* tools can we use? Five resilience pillars

1 American Psychological Association online dictionary, s.v. "Resilience," updated April 19, 2018, <https://dictionary.apa.org/resilience>.

We'll start by exploring the *why* and look at different aspects of adapting and thriving; then we'll discuss the *how*. The *what* is covered in Part II.

MORE THAN JUST SURVIVING

When people face adversity, they ideally go through three stages. First, they survive the incident, which often feels like an accomplishment in itself. Second, they adapt to the incident so it no longer affects them every day. Finally, they thrive as a result of what they've gone through.

The problem is that many people get stuck in survival mode and never move on to thriving.

Resilience is more than just continuing to exist despite a bad situation. People who remain in abusive relationships or cope with toxic bosses are sometimes seen as resilient because they endure the situation day after day. That's not resilience. That's surviving. Resilience involves adapting and then growing and developing to the point of prospering and flourishing.

When we are merely surviving, there is little room to dream, to envision a different future, to think beyond the current hardship. Whether the situation is traumatic or a more mundane work struggle, when we are in survival mode, we can't see the possibilities that lie beyond what's right in front of us. We're only able to figure out the next thing, and then the next thing. Survival mode is a natural defense mechanism to keep ourselves going, but it doesn't leave room for truly adapting and moving in a different direction.

If you find yourself in survival mode, stop for five minutes and picture what the future could hold. Taking time to dream allows you to have a destiny beyond your current challenge. It also allows you to start thinking about how you can use what

you presently have to get there, which is a key part of the next stage: adapting.

Someone who has moved beyond survival mode is able to look at the difficult situation and take actions, however small, to make it not just livable, but better.

Marcus Aurelius once said, “The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way.”² The challenge you experience may not be something you can change. I couldn’t alter the fact that I had a brain tumor. You may not be able to stop the company reorg that will effectively block your promotion. However, you can turn that negative situation into something positive that gives you meaning and purpose. Once you grasp this perspective, you’ve moved into the last stage of resilience: thriving.

The person in survival mode sees the problem as something to put up with. The person who is in adapting mode sees the problem as something to be fixed. The person in thriving mode sees the problem as an opportunity to make a change and contribute meaningfully to the lives of others in the process.

NOT A QUICK FIX

Humans have been adapting for thousands of years. In fact, we are the most adaptive species on planet Earth. Whereas animals have survival superpowers such as sharp claws, incredible speed, and big, venomous fangs, humans have an incredible adaptive capacity. In a physical sense, we are the weakest species, yet we are dominant because we have been able to adjust to stressors—animal, human, and environmental alike.

2 Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 5.20, from *The Thoughts of the Emperor M. Aurelius Antoninus*, trans. George Long (1862), https://lexundria.com/m_aur_med/5.20/lg.

The problem is that we humans forget we have this adaptive capacity. As a result, when faced with challenges or trauma, our first response is often to look outside ourselves for a quick fix. Resilience, however, is not a quick fix.

If a person has high blood pressure, for example, the Band-Aid solution is to take medication to lower their blood pressure. An adaptive response, however, would be to alter their lifestyle: start eating healthy, begin an exercise program, lower stress, and so on. Both responses resolve the issue, but only the latter brings long-lasting, transformative change.

Let's say John is a neurosurgeon doing fantastic work in a certain hospital. He moves to a different hospital with expectations of performing at the same level but finds that is not the case. He knows he's a good surgeon and can't figure out what's going on.

To quickly rectify the situation, John tries a strategy that brought excellent results at his old job. He tries that strategy over and over, but like trying to fix high blood pressure with medication, only some progress is made. It doesn't get to the root issue or bring lasting change. He needs to dig deeper.

In John's case, his success at the former hospital may have partly resulted from his well-oiled team. If he doesn't have the same cohesive group in his new position, that will likely affect his performance. To get to a real solution, John has to look at what he's dealing with now. For example, if his performance issues are linked to a disjointed team, he might need to figure out how to show up differently to create more cohesiveness. An adaptive change is a change of mindset, not just behavior.

To navigate challenges at work and beyond with more than just a "one pill" approach, we need to tap into that innate adaptive capacity. We need to look beyond what has worked in the past and consider what the underlying issue might be right now. This takes time and intentionality.

REQUIRES DELIBERATE PRACTICE

One of my biggest passions is long-distance running. Prior to 2003 when I was diagnosed with a brain tumor, the farthest I had ever run was five miles. Compare that with 2008, when I ran thirty-six marathons—in one year!

That endurance level didn't happen overnight. It took a lot of practice, and it involved a lot of injuries. For a very long time, I trained somewhat mindlessly. Like our fictional neurosurgeon John, I kept following the same plan and technique, without bothering to find out if I was actually running correctly. My goal was simply to log miles, as if the more I ran, the better runner I was going to become. Instead, I kept getting injured. Around 2009, when I was recovering from one of these injuries, I finally researched the best way to run, and I took deliberate steps to fix my running form. And guess what? After that, I stopped experiencing running injuries.

No matter what the challenge, we develop resilience when we are intentional about learning what works and what doesn't. It involves being more objective about our situation, and not so emotionally attached to the old ways and mindset. Even if what we're doing is not working, we often stick with the plan because it's known and comfortable. Resilience requires deliberate choices to develop new skills, practice new techniques, and become comfortable with being uncomfortable.

REQUIRES GRIT

In her book *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, Angela Duckworth uses West Point cadets as an example of individuals who display grit—the ability to suffer, be uncomfortable, and withstand pain because they are focused on a long-term aspirational goal.

No matter what the situation, the ability to withstand suffering is driven by the light at the end of the tunnel. For my dad, the light was owning his own business. For you, it might be becoming an entrepreneur, revolutionizing your industry, or becoming CEO. Having an aspirational goal makes it possible to endure the struggle because you have hope that your effort will pay off someday.

To help my clients step out of their comfort zone and develop grit, I guide them toward focusing on the light at the end of the tunnel *and* the steps they can take right now to get there. I often ask, “What can you do today so that in three years, you can say that this crisis is the best thing that could have happened to your career, your life, your business...?” Envisioning a different future strengthens the resolve to get through the discomfort now.

For some of us, moving outside our comfort zone feels very risky. But if you think of it as a means of growth, the risks feel more palatable. Moving your boundary will still feel uncomfortable and may even cause suffering, but that’s how you adapt and grow.

IS A DISH BETTER SERVED COLD

Resilience requires grit, but developing it doesn’t require a life full of traumatic experiences. You can increase your tolerance to discomfort by intentionally putting yourself in uncomfortable positions to learn to persevere amid pain. Just know that the time to put yourself in these mini resilience-building experiences is *not* when you’re in the midst of a crisis. Like revenge, resilience is a dish better served cold.

At one point in my life, I had trouble accepting rejection. My inability to do so compromised my livelihood. As a solo-

preneur, I have to constantly put myself out there in pursuit of business, but the fear of rejection paralyzed me to the point of inaction. After reading Jia Jiang's blog post "100 Days of Rejection Therapy," I was inspired to proactively build resilience by putting myself in situations where I knew I would be rejected.³ For example, I went to a McDonald's drive-thru and asked for a refill on a hamburger. With each small rejection, I became a little more comfortable with all rejection.

One of the resilience pillars we'll discuss in Part II is building relationships. I regularly engage in one-minute acts of kindness such as writing a short recommendation on a LinkedIn profile for someone who hasn't asked for it. That small act strengthens my relationships and builds my social resilience muscles, which will help when the need arises.

To develop grit, I create physical challenges for myself. For example, before I step out of a hot shower, I turn the water all the way to cold and let the water shock me. I'll also do two hundred push-ups a day for a month or one thousand sit-ups over the course of a weekend. This is not only good for my body, but it gives me small opportunities to endure pain and build physical resilience and build my adaptive capacity. These resilience-building practices will come in handy to build your adaptive capacity.

While COVID-19 was still going strong, companies were already discussing ways to prepare for the next time they have to endure large-scale changes and adaptations. Although this is wise, organizations and individuals don't need a pandemic to prepare for the next challenge. In fact, a crisis is not the time to prepare at all; that's when you should be able to exercise the

3 Jia Jiang, "100 Days of Rejection Therapy," *Rejection Therapy with Jia Jiang* (blog), <https://www.rejectiontherapy.com/100-days-of-rejection-therapy>.

muscles you've already built. Instead, we can be intentional about building mental and physical strength, learning to suffer, and learning to adapt and thrive when the struggle is “cold” so we're ready the next time s*** hits the fan.

THE DRIVERS OF RESILIENCE

How do we go about developing this gritty capacity to adapt and thrive? Based on my experience, my dad's, and that of the leaders I coach, I believe there are three drivers that lead to resilience:

- *Commitment*: dedication, allegiance, or devotion to an idea, aspirational goal, value, or person
- *Persistence*: the ability to keep moving forward despite the pain and discomfort
- *Optimism*: hope and confidence in success for the future

Working together, these drivers provide a formula for adapting and thriving in the face of adversity, with optimism multiplying the positive effects of commitment and persistence:

$$(\text{commitment} + \text{persistence}) \times \text{optimism} = \text{resilience}$$

Commitment and persistence alone are not enough. With zero optimism, you have zero resilience.

For as long as I can remember, my dad has been *committed* to providing for his family. Though he often thought about starting his own business when I was growing up, for various reasons he kept his commitment by working for my grandfather rather than by following his dreams.

When my dad lost the use of his legs following the accident, however, he experienced a mental shift that propelled him to act. He knew it wouldn't be easy—physically painful recovery, being confined to a wheelchair and then learning to stand and walk, starting a business with very few resources—but by adding *persistence* to his commitment, he started moving in the right direction, one chicken sale at a time.

Though my mom and I were skeptical, my dad had no doubt he would achieve his goal. He had always been a dreamer, but optimism alone hadn't been enough for him to push through the challenges associated with starting a business. Paired with his commitment and persistence, however, my dad's optimism multiplied the effects of the first two drivers and provided the north star, the guiding light, that allowed him to push through the hardship of his accident and become a successful businessman.

Possessing one of these drivers is not enough to adapt and thrive in life's adversities; the three must work together. Some leaders are committed to receiving feedback and honing their skills. When they are passed over for a promotion or receive specific suggestions for improvement, however, they need more than commitment to keep going; they need the ability to persist through pain and discomfort. Some leaders are dreamers, but like my dad, they need more than optimism to overcome the obstacles that are sure to come along. It is the formula of (commitment + persistence) × optimism that allows us to build ordinary resilience.

At the same time, it's possible to be persistent in keeping a commitment that ultimately proves harmful. My client Kimberly was committed to doing her job excellently and thoroughly, no matter what was asked of her. She persisted through the stress and late hours that came with finishing

the numerous tasks dumped on her plate, but she was getting burned out. Because she was so good at her job, management decided they would need to hire three people to do what she was currently doing. At the same time, management was under the perception that Kimberly's potential had reached its limit, so she was stuck between being good at her job and not good enough to be promoted.

Through our coaching sessions, we determined that what Kimberly really wanted was to add value to her organization and to grow as a leader—not simply complete the work and do her job. Once she shifted her commitment to what she wanted, her persistence and her optimism about succeeding propelled her to take different actions that led to a more productive outcome. She started highlighting her potential and taking steps to delegate and elevate her direct reports so they could step up to the plate and Kimberly could spend her time in more strategic endeavors.

If we are like Kimberly, persistently doing work without a defined goal, we're living in survival mode, doing the same thing over and over but ultimately just existing in the same place. There's no room for considering a different outcome. As mentioned, resilience is more than just surviving; it's adapting, growing, and flourishing. In the context of resilience, having a strong commitment to the appropriate goal leads to greater persistence to see the outcome happen. Persistence in itself is an advantageous quality because it has positive unintended consequences. For example, my dad wanted to provide for his family by starting a business selling chicken, and through persistence in pursuing that dream, he not only succeeded in building a business, but he became an expert in his field. In addition, persistence over time shows ambition, a value for hard work, and consistency, all desirable characteristics in the workforce.

In producing these outcomes, intended and not, persistence is only as good as its connection with commitment and optimism. In survival mode, some people are incredibly persistent, but that's where it ends. There's no dreaming about the future, because there is no room to dream. There is no room to view the hardship as an opportunity to learn and grow. And there is no resilience.

While commitment is the mental devotion to achieving a goal and persistence is consistently doing the work necessary to get there, optimism is the hope and confidence that you will succeed, no matter the current situation. Optimism involves three key factors:

- A growth mindset that enables you to see setbacks as opportunities for learning
- A positive outlook about yourself, others, and the situation
- The ability to accept responsibility for mistakes without dwelling on them

Being optimistic doesn't mean you ignore the obstacle or deny the reality of the hardship. It means you look for the silver lining and recognize that the situation is temporary. It enables you to say, "Yes, we have a problem here, but I am committed to X and here's what I need to do to get there." Optimism multiplies the effectiveness of your commitment and persistence, making it even more likely that you will reach your goal.

WHAT RESILIENT LEADERS DO

As mentioned, we all have the capacity to develop and exhibit resilience, no matter what the challenge or change. This

book is for leaders, however, so let's look at how the ability to adapt and thrive shows up in various leadership actions and mindsets.

LEARN AND ADJUST

Quickly learning and adapting to an increasingly complex work environment is one of the skills organizations seek out most. The most successful individuals, in the long run, are not the ones who know the most, but the ones who learn the fastest. Therefore, learning how to learn is key. It involves experimenting, reflecting, and figuring out how to improve next time. Resilient leaders are open to being wrong.

In the book *Why CEOs Fail*, David Dotlich and Peter Cairo discuss the concept of “self-blinding brilliance.” Leaders who suffer from this condition see their way as the only way, and they are blind to any other possibilities. Because they've worked a certain way for years and for the most part their method has worked, they are inflexible and see no need to change. Such leaders are often perceived as defensive, aggressive, and dismissive bullies who feel the need to defend their position, rather than offer an option.

What happens when these leaders are faced with a different role, a company-wide restructuring, or new performance metrics where the old ways really don't work? They often run into an unyielding wall, trying the same things over and over while expecting different results.

In their willingness to experiment, reflect, seek feedback, and learn, resilient leaders are also resourceful. They don't feel the need to reinvent the wheel when solving a crisis. They are willing to learn from and build on the knowledge of others, adapting as necessary. Resilient leaders don't waste time on

trial and error when they could be emulating a solution that's right in front of them.

FORM ROBUST ALLIANCES

As humans, our first instinct is and always has been self-preservation. As we evolved, we needed to defend ourselves against animals and people who wanted to do us harm. We adapted by forming mutually beneficial alliances both within and beyond our own species. One of our first alliances, for example, was with dogs: we took care of them and they protected us and helped us hunt. It was a symbiotic relationship.

We still need mutually beneficial alliances in the business world today. To advance in our fields and attain our goals, we must form networks and build relationships, which requires interpersonal skills. Defensiveness is innate; it was nature's gift to enable us to survive and persevere. The problem is that we sometimes apply defensiveness in the wrong situations—for example, when explaining the reason for our decision or answering an email request for a timeline update. We can unintentionally go into survival mode and, as a result, come across as distrustful or aggressive. This will not help us form mutually beneficial alliances. As you'll learn in Chapter 6, building relationships involves engaging people with openness and trust.

ACT WITH INTENTIONALITY

Adaptability by itself does not necessarily result in learning and resilience. Intentionality is a key component. Resilient leaders evaluate the situation, figure out what they need to do to adapt, and then execute a plan to get there.

My client Lewis epitomizes this intentionality quality. He came to me via the HR department because he had recently entered a high-level sales leadership role, and several people in the company had expressed concerns about his ability to do the work. Though Lewis had been with this multibillion-dollar organization for many years and had previously held high-level positions—he had managed the entire finance department before becoming the top executive in the marketing department—he had never been in sales. The stakes were much higher in this role since the company depends on his team's sales revenue. In addition, Lewis is somewhat of an introvert, which some felt was a bad fit in a role generally filled by more extroverted, cheerleader types. The naysayers' noise about Lewis's ability reached the board of directors and the CEO, who had appointed Lewis to the position but was now questioning his decision.

When I engage a new client, I usually use a 360-assessment to interview a range of coworkers who routinely interact with the individual and are familiar with their leadership style, skills, and behaviors. The feedback provides insight not only into how my client is perceived but also how others are impacted. When I interviewed people about Lewis, two attitudes became evident: skepticism and respect. No one questioned Lewis's integrity or talent, but they doubted whether he could handle his role—simply because he had never been in sales.

When I gave Lewis this feedback, he wasn't surprised. "When people get to know me, they realize I can do the work. But right now, this is a completely different organization with different people. I know what I need to do. I just don't know how to get it done faster."

Lewis needed to accelerate the process of gaining the trust of those at his new role. He needed to fill the relation-

ship gap—that is, form robust alliances—with the influencers. During the process of the interviews, I identified a small set of individuals who were the most vocal, the most skeptical, and also happened to be the most influential in Lewis’s sphere of operation—the ones making noise with the CEO and the board. We made a stakeholder list of six or seven people he needed to win over. Then we identified the level of support each person would provide him and the level of influence each person had in the company, and we mapped out steps to take to close the relationship gap with those who were making the noise.

The fact that Lewis had risen to the top in various roles and companies shows his adaptive capacity, but what made the difference here was his intentionality. He couldn’t change the fact that many people doubted him, but he could take calculated steps to win them over, gain their support, build trust, and move forward faster. Lewis took the time to understand their concerns, needs, and wants and was intentional about finding the right strategy to adapt. When I later touched base with stakeholders who had been skeptical, their view of Lewis had radically changed for the better.

Lewis’s intention was to build trust; yours might be to gain confidence or influence without authority. Whatever the case, resilient leaders learn to identify what they want to accomplish and let that intention drive their actions.

THINK OPTIMISTICALLY

When faced with crises, it is natural to become overwhelmed and even discouraged. However, resilient leaders don’t stay in that mindset for long. They are able to see the situation for what it is and envision a different future. Their optimism allows them to prioritize and plan (commitment) and then

take the necessary actions (persistence), no matter how difficult or challenging they might be, to make adapting and thriving a reality.

To remain optimistic, you sometimes have to ignore the naysayers, especially if one of them is yourself. During one Ironman race, I had to do just that. I was injured at the time and I wasn't in my best shape. My naysayer side thought, "You aren't ready. You didn't train hard enough. You will bunk." The optimistic me thought, "The race is long enough that if I feel sick, I can always take a break and continue, but I will finish." I listened to optimism and finished the race.

My client Ted was the CEO of a company he founded while in graduate school. As with most startups, Ted wore every hat in the beginning. As the company grew, he brought on people to share the load, but he didn't adapt to the changes and still wanted to be involved in every single decision. After he ran out of friends to hire, he finally started hiring senior people with more experience. The problem was that he treated these individuals like they were his college roommates, and that didn't go over well with more experienced, sometimes much older, employees. After interviewing some of these people, I learned that while they respected Ted as the founder of the company, they found him to be a strong micromanager, inexperienced, and naïve.

When I delivered this feedback to Ted, he was devastated, but he also took it as a call to action. He told me, "I want to be the best manager for these people. I want to be the leader everyone wants to have."

That vision and optimism turned into a commitment to an aspirational goal, which enabled him to take action in the present and start showing up differently at work. For example, he started asking for feedback and suggestions about how he

could support his direct reports. He also started to see that there is more than one way of accomplishing a task, without compromising the outcome. As a result, he started passing the responsibility to his direct reports, which in turn reduced the amount of pressure and stress felt. Though it wasn't easy, this CEO had changed his management style 180 degrees within six months.

In making his commitment a priority, Ted also served as a role model. He didn't simply give lip service to change; he did it. The unintended consequence is that his attitude and behavior were an inspiration for other leaders in the organization.

Here are a few more characteristics associated with optimistic leaders:

- They are solution-focused and future-oriented thinkers.
- They are usually less afraid to take risks because they know that failing is part of being human.
- They are innovators.
- They display an attitude that tends to be contagious.
- They are usually more engaged at work and are better collaborators.
- They are found to be more ethical and have a better fit in organizational cultures.
- They are more adaptable and open to new ideas, which can help them find creative solutions to challenges and be more successful in the long run.

One recent paper concluded that there is a strong correlation between optimism and resilience.⁴ In fact, optimism is

4 Aruna Maheshwari and Varda Jutta, "Study of Relationship between Optimism and Resilience in the Times of COVID-19 among University Students," *International Journal of Indian Psychology* 8, no. 3 (July–September 2020).

an essential component of resilience, the multiplier of commitment and persistence. With zero optimism, you have zero resilience. Optimistic leaders tend to demonstrate behaviors and attitudes that support other leadership competencies and are usually part of a great leader's toolbox.

Overall, optimistic leaders tend to be more effective because they are able to create a positive work environment, inspire and motivate their team, and stay resilient in the face of setbacks.

LOOK IN THE MIRROR

Perhaps the best way to increase leadership effectiveness is to increase emotional intelligence (EQ), and the first step in that direction is to become more aware—of yourself first, and then others.

My coaching client Daniel was successful, driven, and hungry to move up the ladder. He had been identified as a high potential and was being groomed to get promoted. However, he wasn't moving up. In fact, he had been on that "high potential" list longer than others who had already been promoted.

After interviewing Daniel, his manager, and his direct reports and team members, I could see that his issue wasn't technical; he was meeting and exceeding his numbers every quarter. The problem was that Daniel was oblivious to the needs and wants of others, including his direct reports. His team wasn't happy, and many people had quit, transferred, or wanted out. Daniel didn't see this personnel turnover as his problem, since he was consistently performing well.

While important, technical knowledge is not enough to thrive as a leader. Being known as brilliant is great, but being a "brilliant jerk" is not. You need the people skills to collaborate

and motivate. You need to be able to handle your own emotions under pressure, to show empathy toward others, and to be aware of the impact your leadership style can have. In other words, you need to develop EQ skills alongside technical skills.

According to *Fast Company*, EQ is the real secret to getting promoted faster⁵—which explained why promotion wasn't happening for Daniel. He seemed to lack empathy and an awareness of how his behavior affected his team. He needed to look in the mirror, become aware of his own style, and increase his EQ.

Unfortunately, I have met many individuals like Daniel, who lack awareness and as a result are reactive rather than proactive, taking actions based on habits that might or might not be appropriate for the specific situation. Such reactivity comes from a lack of awareness on several levels:

1. *Awareness of self*: What are my needs, wants, desires, strengths, weaknesses, aspirations, and so on? What triggers me? What upsets me? The more you know about yourself, the better you are at adapting.
2. *Awareness of social context*: What are the wants and needs of those with whom I work? How do people act in this organization? What are the customs? What are the written and unwritten rules? The more you understand about the environment and the wants and needs of those working in that environment, the better you'll be able to adapt and respond to those wants and needs and eventually gain trust.
3. *Awareness of perceptions*: If you ask your stakeholders what

5 Harvey Deutschendorf, "Emotional Intelligence Is the Real Secret to Getting Promoted Faster," *Fast Company*, May 24, 2017, <https://www.fastcompany.com/40423640/emotional-intelligence-is-the-real-secret-to-getting-promoted-faster>.

they think of you and they respond honestly, will you like what they say? Unfortunately, the higher you go in an organization, the less likely people are to provide candid feedback. Resilient leaders are relentless about asking for feedback. They want to know how others perceive them and how their actions impact others.

When we lack awareness of how we show up and the impact we have on others, we can develop blind spots. In his book *Leadership Blindspots*, Robert Bruce Shaw says these unrecognized weaknesses can hinder our success. Becoming a better leader requires courage, in particular the courage to find out how others see us. Leaders are in the business of moving people, and by understanding how others perceive them, they are more likely to connect with others, form stronger connections, gain influence, and ultimately move people to action.

The reality is, you cannot fix a problem if you don't know it exists. Blind spots are like that piece of food that you have stuck on your chin: you cannot see it unless you look in the mirror or unless someone has the courage to tell you that it is there. Resilient leaders invest their time in building social resilience, a community of trusted advisors who have the courage and the empathy to point out the piece of food stuck on the leader's chin.

PURSUE A LIFE PURPOSE

Why do we do the things that we do? Why do leaders seek promotions? Why do they try to grow leadership skills or gain more influence? It's easy to get caught up in our never-ending task list, in the expectations that we place on ourselves or that we think others have for us, and we miss out on opportunities

to prioritize and, more importantly, to become resilient by living a life purpose.

In his book *Start with Why*, Simon Sinek says if we start with why—our purpose or mission in life—it makes everyday tasks and decisions much easier. It allows us to find fulfillment in the most mundane chores.

I hired a *why* consultant, Lee Prosenjak, to help me figure out why I do the things I do. That self-review helped me to see that my why is *to reframe the moments that matter so that we can adapt and thrive*. Knowing that statement has considerably changed the way I see things, the way I coach, and how I approach day-to-day activities. It has allowed me to stay committed to the task of writing this book, despite the challenges involved in doing so.

My second wife, Rujeko (you'll read more about this wonderful human later), is a medical doctor who works long, exhausting hours filled with overwhelming pressure at times, yet she remains compassionate and dedicated to her job. One day I asked her, "How do you keep doing this day after day?"

"It is brutal," she replied, "but I am grateful that my job has a lot of meaning to me. I want to help people get healthier."

Research has shown that having a purpose predicts better emotional recovery following a negative experience, even a negative experience like working long hours under tremendous pressure. People who have a clear idea of what they're striving for and why are much more likely to stay strong when things get tough. In other words, they are more likely to stay committed to their goal and persist in achieving it, with the end result being higher levels of resilience.⁶

6 Stacey M. Schaefer et al., "Purpose in Life Predicts Better Emotional Recovery from Negative Stimuli," *PLoS ONE* 8, no. 11 (2013), <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0080329>.

WHAT RESILIENT LEADERS DON'T DO

Based on the preceding qualities, you might have a picture of what a resilient person looks like. But how does a lack of resilience show up in day-to-day life? The following describes a few behaviors that characterize people who haven't tapped into their innate adaptive capacity.

FEEL SORRY FOR THEMSELVES

We all experience highs and lows. It's okay to be sad, frustrated, and angry at a missed opportunity or traumatic event. But we can easily slip into victim mode and remain stuck in that mindset.

With a victim mentality, we tend to view our problems as being bigger than everyone else's. We also tend to put a lot of emphasis on luck. If something bad happens, we think ourselves unlucky and wonder, *Why do bad things always happen to me? What do I always find myself in this situation?* I have fallen into this thinking when someone else wins the lottery (*Why not me?*) and when I was first diagnosed with a brain tumor (*Why me?*).

The reality is that we all face hardship and adversity. We are not responsible for the things that happen to us, but we *are* responsible for how we respond.

When we feel sorry for ourselves in this way, we tend to complain. A lot. When we get stuck in seeing the negative, we can't see the other side of the coin: the opportunities that changes and challenges present to us.

FOCUS ON THINGS THEY CAN'T CONTROL

Just like gravity, there are problems that are not ours to solve. Whether it's a tumor, car accident, job loss, or micromanaging

boss, some things are outside of our control. People who lack resilience tend to focus on these gravity problems rather than problems they can solve, and as a result they remain stuck in anxiety, depression, and frustration. They also find it hard to see the steps they can take to adapt and thrive in the less-than-optimal situation.

After my client Stephanie was promoted, she struggled in her new position. Her main problem was the excessive workload, which she was trying to tackle on her own. I was brought in to help her manage her time and priorities.

When Stephanie took maternity leave, the company put someone in her role, but this person quickly found out he couldn't do that job alone and asked his manager for more resources, which he received—including a couple of new hires. Stephanie was livid, not because her replacement got help, but because she realized that it was in her control to ask for the same resources. She had been trying to solve her workload problem all on her own, when it really wasn't hers alone to solve. Instead of asking for help, she started assigning blame, mostly to herself for not being good enough to handle the workload. All along, she had simply needed to ask for help.

Some people bring suffering on themselves because they focus on problems they can't solve—at least not alone.

REPEAT THE SAME MISTAKES

Everyone makes mistakes; to err is human, surely. But why do so many people make the same error over and over again? The goal is to learn from those mistakes and avoid repeating them, but people who lack resilience don't. They make the same mistakes over and over while expecting different results, which is what Albert Einstein claimed to be the definition of insanity.

How many times have you made the same New Year's resolution—start going to the gym, pick up this hobby, get that promotion? Yet if we don't change our behavior, we keep missing the mark. It's a vicious cycle. We make the resolution, don't change our behavior, don't achieve the resolution, then get upset and start blaming ourselves. Then our confidence goes down and we start lowering our goals until eventually we decide it's time to simply give up.

What's missing here is persistence. If we can stick with resolution long enough by taking specific actions, we will see progress, which will give us momentum to keep going to the gym or engaging in that hobby.

Resilient people know how to experiment, reflect, learn from their mistakes, and commit to do better next time. The goal isn't to be perfect, but to continually improve, and that requires persistence.

EXPECT IMMEDIATE RESULTS

In general, we don't like to wait. We want immediate results. If we are diagnosed with high cholesterol, we take statins to lower it now. When we order something online, we want it in two days (thanks, Amazon Prime!).

Resilience is a process. It's an endurance race that involves deliberate practice, intentional action, and persistence. If we try something new and expect immediate results, we can become frustrated and demotivated when those results don't materialize. The truth is that progress isn't always obvious. We don't always get the instant gratification of visible measurable success or someone saying, "You're doing great!"

In 1972 Stanford professor Walter Mischel ran an experiment inspired by his five-year-old daughter and her friends. In

this study, a child was given a choice: receive one marshmallow now or wait fifteen minutes and receive two. Years later, in a follow-up to that experiment, the professor found that the children who waited to receive two marshmallows were doing better in nearly every area of life: they received higher grades, scored higher on the SAT, enjoyed stronger relationships, and had lower body mass index.⁷ Learning to wait seemed to produce better outcomes.

To help my six-year-old daughter build resilience, I've been trying a similar experiment. Alexis loves chocolate, so I'll offer her one square and tell her that she can eat it now or wait until after swimming and have two. At first, she cried, "Why are you doing this to me?" It was a real struggle. But now she waits. I recently asked Alexis what she learned from the chocolate experiment and she said, "If I wait, I can get double." That's exactly what I want her to learn: sometimes waiting brings bigger rewards.

YOU HAVE THE POWER

A few years ago when I started my coaching practice, I wasn't getting any traction, and I started to get anxious. I needed validation, I needed to feel productive, I needed to make money. So I decided to find a regular job where I could find these things.

Thankfully, a little voice inside my head spoke up and said, *Think of the possibilities in this business. Nobody told you it would be easy. Anything worthwhile requires a level of sacrifice, a level of effort and persistence.* In that moment, I decided to

7 Walter Mischel, Yuichi Shoda, and Monica L. Rodriguez, "Delay of Gratification in Children," *Science* 244, no. 4907 (1989): 933–38, <https://www.science.org/doi/abs/10.1126/science.2658056>.

keep working my business and wait for the rewards a little longer.

Today, I am glad I didn't let go of my dream. Like the kids who waited for two marshmallows and experienced better life outcomes, I have experienced rewards that go beyond money: satisfaction, fulfillment, happiness, balance, and more.

The biggest gift that life has given us is the power of choice. The second is our adaptive capacity. The problem is that we often forget to use this capacity in our modern-day struggles, or we don't know how. Building resilience does take time, but it's something you can start right now, with small daily decisions to commit, persist, and hope. Making those choices consistently and intentionally will make you a better leader and human.

No matter what life throws at you, adapting and thriving starts by understanding that you have a choice, accepting the difficult situation as it is, and committing to take action. Only then can you see possibilities for moving forward.

RECAP: THE RESILIENT YOU

Resilience is not a special skill that only some people are born with. You already have what you need to adapt and thrive as a leader.

The Essence of Resilience

Resilience is the natural ability we all have to reframe situations. When we see things differently, we think differently, and when we think differently, we act differently.

What current challenging situation can you reframe?

What Resilient Leaders Do

Among other things, resilient leaders are optimistic. They don't spend time thinking of what could go wrong, but rather of the future possibilities.

Which of the "resilient leader" traits do you see in yourself? Which one do you want to grow in?

What Resilient Leaders Don't Do

Resilient leaders don't feel sorry for themselves or assign blame. They adapt and thrive.

Which of the "don't do" traits do you see in yourself? What one step can you take to change that behavior?

