

# Fact or fiction: building resilient teams?

Whatever your interest in human resources, no doubt your inbox is flooded with companies offering resilience training right now. To help you sort the wheat from the chaff, we asked Dr Lucy Hone from the New Zealand Institute of Wellbeing and Resilience to share her insights on how to build resilience.

**B**ack in 2008, during the Global Financial Crisis, I became fixated by the concept of resilience. I recall being told the economy needed to be more resilient, leading me to--- -- ponder, what did 'being resilient' mean and was this something we could build? Three years later, in the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquakes, it became the zeitgeist word for the region, as organisations realised (often too late) they needed to review their risk registers and boost the resilience of their infrastructure and systems. If forced to shut up shop tomorrow, could their businesses cope? Fast forward to the current day, and resilience is the hot topic again. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, businesses around the globe are now wondering how best

to ensure teams are resilient, asking what steps they can take to help employees adapt and cope.

I've been investigating the answers to these exact questions since 2008, studying what scientific research can tell us about resilience.

- Who's got resilience?
- What builds it?
- What detracts?
- Can it be learned?
- Can we train people to be more resilient?

My research encourages human resources to think beyond employee engagement and EAP schemes towards developing organisational cultures that foster sustainable high performance, which new research shows has an ROI of 8:1 compared with 3:1 of EAP schemes (**NZ Institute of Economic Research (2021), Wellbeing and Productivity at Work report**).

## Nature, nurture and culture

For clarity's sake, let's start with the basics. You cannot hope to nurture resilient teams without a fundamental understanding of what resilience is and how it is built. Because I'm a social scientist, let's stick to the facts here, these are the aspects of

resilience that science shows to be true for most people, in most places, most of the time.

The basic definition is easy to get. Resilience enables us to cope with, or steer through, adversity. It's not about toughing it out and not about avoiding negative emotions or negative experiences. Instead, it's about coping in the moment and learning from the challenges that face us. It's not a fixed trait (that some people have and others don't) but a capacity that can be built. What is more complex to grasp is that this capacity comes from a highly individualised combination of what we refer to as 'nature, nurture and culture'. Yes, nature does play its part: psychology has identified key personality traits influencing our ability to adapt and cope with challenges (google the Big Five Personality Traits). For instance, being extroverted and open to experience makes you more likely to grow from trauma. Conversely, being a die-hard pessimist – always expecting the worst to happen, viewing setbacks as permanent and taking them overly personally – is strongly associated with hopelessness, depression and adverse physical health outcomes, including reduced immunity.



But our genes are not our destiny. In addition to the 'nature' element, we can do a lot to boost our resilience day in day out. The way we choose to think and act has a significant influence on how we feel and function moment by moment; the fact it is possible to train people to think and act more resiliently comes under the 'nurture' umbrella. For example, several studies show that people can be trained to spot their reflexive pessimistic thinking patterns, question their accuracy and conjure alternative or more realistic explanations.

My co-director at the Institute, Dr Denise Quinlan (part of the team that rolled out the Penn Resilience Program to schools internationally), has not only seen this done but also readily acknowledges that teaching others to dispute their overly pessimistic thinking styles helped her to override her own natural pessimism. As people leaders, it is absolutely possible to coach employees not to personalise problems, to communicate better, nurture high-quality connections, and promote hope, confidence, trust and other leadership skills. All of these fall under the 'nurture' component of resilience.

Too many resilience programmes, however, focus exclusively on those

aspects that can be nurtured at the individual level. They don't focus enough on building resilience-enhancing cultures that boost equity, diversity and inclusion, belonging and psychological safety, all the while ensuring systems prevent, not promote, burnout. Burnout is, after all, an individual response to unsustainable pressures and insufficient support and resources at the systems and organisational level.

So, what can you do to nurture resilience in yourself and your teams? What does research show is effective? Here we share lesser-known practical insights from psychological research you can implement – immediately, at no extra cost – to build the type of cultures that prevent burnout and cultivate sustainable high performance.

### **Mental agility – teach the CAN method**

Mental agility – being able to think flexibly and accurately – is foundational for resilience. Given more work is continually being added to our plates (and everything feels urgent and important!), training teams in the art of ruthless prioritisation is a core mental agility skill.

Every people leader, team and employee needs to have an agreed rank order of work priorities. We train people to start each week with two lists: on the right-hand side of the page, put down everything that's on your plate and cluttering up your mind – get it out and don't worry about the order; then, identify five to ten things that are your priorities and add them to the left-hand side of the page. When you look at the left-hand column, you should gain comfort from knowing that, if you achieve those things by the end of the week, you'll feel satisfied and know you've prioritised important work. If someone asks you to deviate, adding more to your plate, ask, "Which of these existing priorities do you want me to delay or not do?". In other words you're asking, "Where does this fit in the order of priorities?".

Another way to teach mental agility is by training teams to use the CAN three-step approach to challenging situations and adversity: What can you Control? What do you have to Accept? Now, what purposeful action can you take? (See <https://nziwr.co.nz/hr-can/> for a step-by-step guide.)



## CONTROL

Write a list of the things you can Control – where you have some leverage or wiggle room. This is where your focus should be. Make this list as long as you can.

## ACCEPT

Then write a list of the things you can (or have to!) Accept – these are the things that are fixed, that you have no influence over, you can't change, and just have to accept.

## NOW ACT

Next, consider what purposeful action can you take? Write down what you can do Now.

### Build your teams' social capital

One of the most effective ways to build resilience is by nurturing broad, strong supportive relationships. The more connected we are, the more we can cope with tough times. Studies show the COVID-19 crisis shrunk people's social networks during 2020, meaning we are losing vital social capital, those broad (often casual) connections we draw on to help us be more creative, resourceful problem solvers.

Build social capital by allocating five minutes to identify who are you missing bumping into at the water-cooler, who did you used to catch up with after work who you wouldn't get the same support or information from via a virtual meeting? With the ANZAC bubble opened up, we encourage clients to rapidly rekindle any neglected casual connections – both internally and externally – by making a hotlist, picking up the

phone or orchestrating 'bumping' into them to catch up on lost information and opportunities.

### Be a 'good news' amplifier

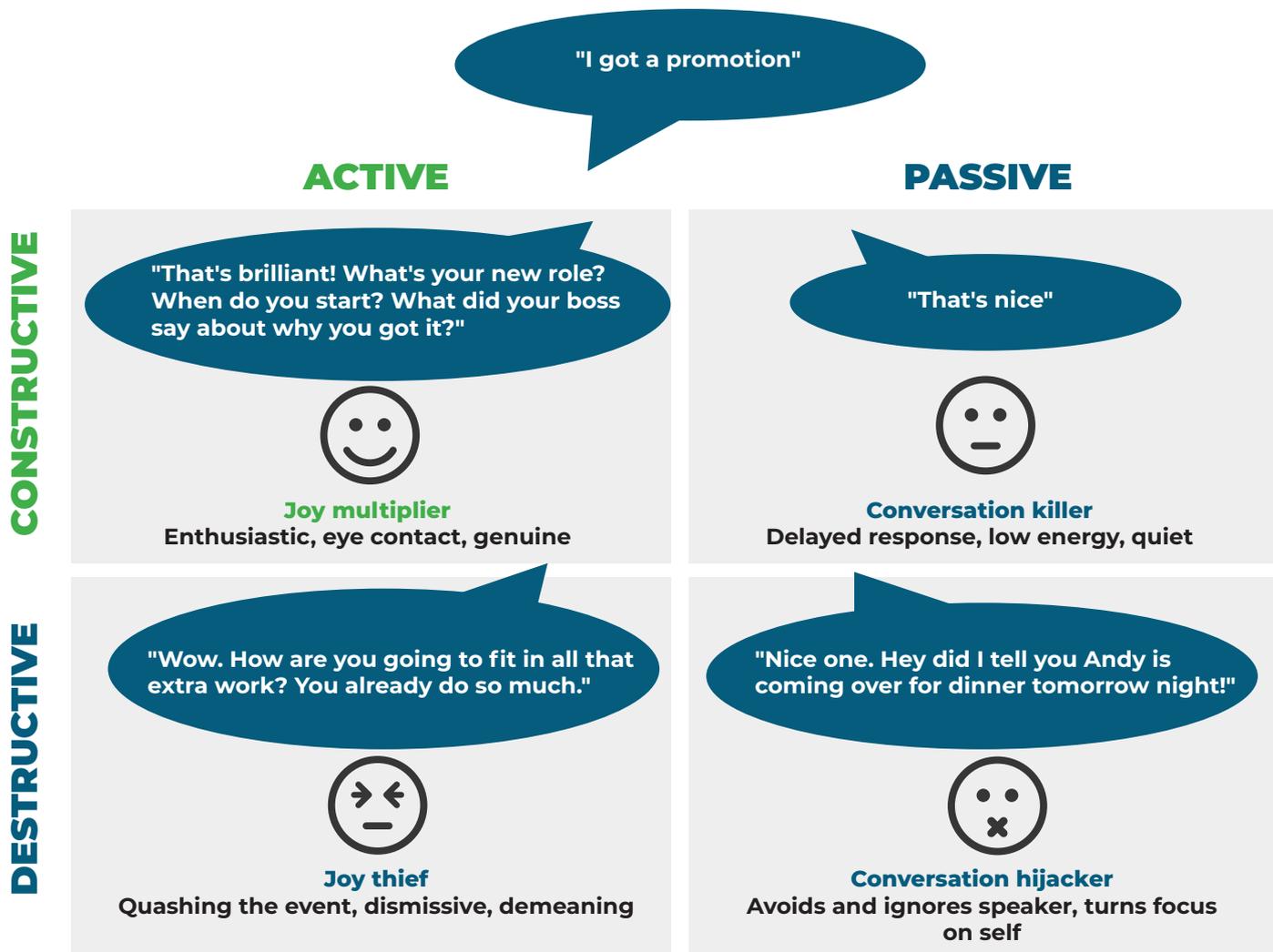
Research shows that how we respond to other people's good news predicts the quality of our relationships and fewer conflicts (see diagram on p17). Only when we respond actively and constructively to shared good news does a relationship flourish. Work through the insert box, asking yourself, who at work would benefit from some active constructive conversation (ACC) practice? Who in your team do you need to have an ACC with?

### Tiny noticeable things that make work relationships better

When I was at the University of Pennsylvania, I enjoyed working with Paula Davis, author of *Beating Burnout at Work: Why Teams Hold the Secret to Well-Being and*

*Resilience*. Paula was part of the team that trained resilience skills to more than 40,000 soldiers and their families. Here are some of her TNTs (tiny noticeable things) that, when modelled consistently by leaders, foster resilient teams.

- Saying thank you more (probably much more) than you currently do builds trust and is a profound way of saying "I see you".
- Offer in-time feedback to peers and direct reports: make it specific and actionable so they can create winning streaks (positive feedback) or make the necessary adjustments (constructive feedback).
- Make assignments clear ("clear is kind" says Brené Brown) and keep people informed of changes: transparency drives a stronger sense of trust and inclusion within the team.
- Ensure senior leaders minimise conflicting requests and ambiguity (two known accelerants of burnout) so no one has to guess about assignment priorities and deadlines; adding a couple more sentences to an email can be a simple way to boost clarity.
- Keep track of and share small wins and successes regularly; checking items off of your to-do



list motivates us and prevents burnout by making us notice that we are making progress.

- Provide a rationale or explanation for projects, goals and big-picture vision; providing context helps teams get the bigger picture and creates buy in.
- Prioritise 'you matter' cues like calling people by name, making eye contact and giving colleagues your full attention; it might not seem like such a big deal, but your brain is constantly scanning your environment for signs of belonging.

I've got nothing against EAP schemes or resilience training – indeed, resilience training is a big part of what we do at the Institute – but these two alone will not create a culture of sustainable high performance. To do that, you have to look at how your workplace system is enabling or inhibiting wellbeing and resilience. Only when we examine all of our practices at the individual, team

and organisational level, through a ruthless lens assessing 'is this helping or harming' can we claim to really care about our human resources and their lasting resilience.

### Nurturing resilient teams with Active Constructive Conversations

How you commonly respond to good news is more indicative of the future outcome of relationship outcomes than how we respond to bad news.

Over the course of the next week, try to monitor which of these four response styles (see above) you commonly fall into. Don't beat yourself up, but start to notice which relationships and types of conversations prompt these four different responses in you. We all fall into these different quadrants with different people, over different content, and even at different times. What might you change?



Whether it's writing academic articles, books, columns or blogs, creating conferences and online courses, delivering training, or consulting for non-governmental organisations and government agencies,

Dr Lucy Hone has been on a long-term mission to bolster population health by busting myths and bringing the best of science to the masses. Trained by the thought leaders in wellbeing science at the University of Pennsylvania, and now an adjunct senior fellow at the University of Canterbury and co-founder of the New Zealand Institute of Wellbeing and Resilience, Lucy's research is published internationally, and her PhD was acknowledged for its outstanding contribution to wellbeing science.

 See [www.nzivr.co.nz](http://www.nzivr.co.nz)