

August 2009

## Resilience Reignited

Sometimes life throws us challenges that we neither expect nor feel particularly prepared to meet. Some months ago one of Lee Hecht Harrison's coaches began an executive coaching assignment with a senior manager (let's call him George) who was experiencing the pointy end of the financial crisis. As an executive for a mining and resources company, boom had turned to bust, and in the space of a few months, unprecedented profit and vicious competition for talent had turned into shrinking profits and the prospect of wide scale lay-offs – the first that George had had to manage in his career to date. Psychologically, the odds were stacked against him.



You see, George doesn't like surprises. He is traditional and very cautious by nature. A driven and focussed perfectionist, he is highly strung and prone to doubting his abilities at every step. He wears his heart on his sleeve and deeply feels the impact that tough decisions have on his staff but he's not the most "touchy feely" leader you are likely to meet. In short, George doesn't like change and his personality profile paints the picture of a leader who is likely to struggle when his world is turned upside down. The thing is, George is not alone.

In our last issue we presented an article on the concept of Resilience and its importance in maintaining optimism and productivity for those impacted by organisational change. Lee Hecht Harrison's executive coaches in Australia and around the world have seen a marked increase in the need for developing resilient leaders who are able to meet the challenges of current global conditions.

In June LHH's General Manager Professional Services in Queensland, Aaron McEwan, was invited to speak at the Society for Industrial and Organisational Psychology of South Africa's (SIOPSA) 12th Annual Conference in Pretoria. The conference, attended by 450 delegates, had a special emphasis on how Industrial/Organisational Psychologists can help leaders construct and manage work in ways that meet the present needs of organisations and their people.

Aaron presented a paper entitled, "Developing Resilient Leaders: a practical approach for executive coaches". The paper provided a framework for linking LHH's model for Building Resilience with our 4 Phase Coaching Model and practices.

The Model encourages people to take personal responsibility for managing their reactions to change whilst also providing practical skills and strategies for increasing their resilience in 3 key areas:

### Understand Yourself

- **SELF KNOWLEDGE & SENSE OF PURPOSE:** Know your purpose; recognise your strengths
- **ATTITUDE:** Maintain an optimistic, receptive and flexible perspective and a sense of humour
- **PHYSICAL & EMOTIONAL HEALTH:** Attend to your overall wellbeing

### Know the Territory

- **THE BIG PICTURE:** Understand the forces shaping the workplace and your role in it
- **KNOWLEDGE COMPETENCIES:** Recognise the skills needed for future success
- **CAREER & LIFE PLANNING:** Prepare short and long-range goals and contingency plans

### Connect to Resources

- **PERSONAL SUPPORT:** Sustain positive relationships
- **RESOURCEFULNESS:** Be self-sufficient, adaptable and well organised
- **KNOWLEDGE OF RESOURCES:** Access resources in your organisation and industry



By incorporating this resilience model into existing executive coaching programs we have been able to assist clients to develop resilient behaviours and practical strategies for coping with turmoil whilst maintaining focus on what they are required to achieve in their businesses.

With focussed coaching around building resilience, George has not only conquered his demons, he has positively thrived in the new landscape. By leveraging off his strengths and incorporating new leadership behaviours into his repertoire, George has strengthened his resilience and that of his team to weather the storm and get some serious wins on the board. For example, George recently accepted a National Industry Award on behalf of his team in recognition of their outstanding achievements in innovation.

## Word Alert!

Trolling the Internet (as some of us intrepid travellers are wont to do), we found a blog which contributed an interesting new word to our vocabulary:

**Optimism or Opt-in-ism:** a word derived from optimism, positive mindedness and the fact of opting in, which is a willingly taken decision by each one to adapt a tendency to expect the best possible outcome or dwell on the most hopeful aspects of a situation, identify opportunities and overcome all possible challenges through positive thinking, adaptability, persistence, hard work, pro-activity and increased levels of creativity, flexibility, efficiency and productivity.

## Through My Eyes: a story of organisational change through the eyes of different participants

### An HR Director

Ouch! I've just come out of a meeting with Jim, our CEO, and it wasn't good news. I'd anticipated some fallout but hadn't realised just how bad it would be. It seems we will be closing down some divisions and merging others, which means job losses in the hundreds, and at all levels.

Jim has asked the HR team to put forward some recommendations. This will be one hell of a bloodbath and I'm pretty sure there will be cuts in HR, along with every other area. It will be difficult to call on my team, knowing that we will be working together to recommend and implement processes that may eventually affect them as well. One positive, and it is a big one, is that the leadership team is keen to do whatever it takes to support our people.

It's like I'm on one of those rides where you feel as though the bottom of your stomach's fallen out and your mind is filled with static. Faces flash before my eyes. There's John, Hannah, Martin. They've all got mortgages, children, commitments they can't bail out of.... And there's so many others! Some I know, others I know of, still others I've never seen or spoken to but I know they are part of the fabric of this place. They've been here for years and it's like a home away from home.



Oh hell, this feels so hard! And yet, this is my purpose, my *raison d'être* – I'm the "people person!" But where do I start? I close my eyes and try to focus on my breathing for a couple of minutes, still my mind (and my heartbeat). Okay.... We need a framework that will carry us through the maelstrom and help us look out for our people – **all our people**. We need a process that makes sure we come out the other side, slimmer and stronger, supportive of and supported by an even more reliable and resilient workforce, and with an unblemished culture and reputation.

Looking down at the pad in front of me, I notice I've been doodling, drawing faces. And there seem to be some words or prompts there - leftovers from that business luncheon I went to, the one with the speaker from Mitsubishi? Some of the ideas that came through, apart from obvious things like outplacement and redeployment, were the need for upskilling and re-training, financial advice, counselling, consistently clear communication, validating peoples' self worth and identity, and not just commiserating, but celebrating, with sensitivity.

I've not been involved in planning a major restructuring before, but I know from my HR colleagues, and others in my network, that downsizing also impacts heavily on the people who continue working. So looking past the restructuring, we need to:

- maintain an ongoing focus on team building
- make sure we have the ability to provide "stretch" assignments
- rebuild a sense of security by being fair and transparent
- keep communicating
- establish processes for effective problem solving; and
- make sure people have easy access to managers and senior executives.

Wow! It's been a tough morning but I feel like I'm in a better space now. I've made some notes and I think I'm ready to call the team together to begin brainstorming.

**"Fall seven times, stand up eight"**

[Japanese Proverb]