

STAYING STRONG

HOW TO BUILD ORGANISATIONAL RESILIENCE LIKE THE KIROV BALLET

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St. Petersburg, Russia is home to the world famous Kirov Ballet company. Over 270 years since its foundation, the existence of the Kirov has been repeatedly threatened, by – amongst others – the Russian Revolution, the Second World War and the collapse of the Soviet empire. Each time, however, that its survival has been called into question it has emerged stronger than before. The Kirov has developed resilience as a core capability and today, under the leadership of Valery Gergiev, the institution is thriving still. Our research into high-performance powerhouse organizations around the world demonstrates that resilience is one of their critical capabilities. In this article we discuss our view of its definition and development.



Firstly definition. Resilience is often defined as the ability to recover from setbacks. For us, however, a key characteristic of resilient organizations is that they *minimise* the number and impact of setbacks that occur in the first place – by anticipating and mitigating risks well before they happen. As such we view high-performance resilience as a capability that is as much *proactive* as reactive.

Having defined the concept in this way, our research points to four key enablers of resilient organizations as follows:

1. **Focus on driving forward (vs. bouncing back):** History has many stories of great institutions that were blindsided by the events which led to their downfall. Hubris, lack of discipline, and denial are amongst the primary reasons cited for this. Resilient organizations guard against these dangers by investing in proactive, strategic risk management. They identify the biggest obstacles to winning and facilitate leadership in addressing (or avoiding) them ahead of time. They also track those leading indicators – both internal and external to the organization – that give early warning of potential setbacks that might arise. By proactively managing risk as part of driving forward, resilient organizations have less need of being able to bounce back.

2. **When things go wrong, cope with it!** Despite leaders' best efforts, however, in any organization things do go wrong. When this happens the ability to recover rapidly is critical. Resilient organizations develop tenacity, focus and strategic agility – they hold on to their target outcomes (for as long as they can) and adapt their plans such as to achieve the same outcomes in the changed circumstances. Rather than allowing setbacks to diminish their ambitions, they use them as prompts to recommit to their goals.
3. **Remember what doesn't kill me, makes me stronger:** We find that the concept of positive psychology, originated by Martin Seligman, is as relevant for organizations as for individuals. Organizations that can retain an optimistic outlook on the events that befall them tend to thrive better in adversity. Resilient organizations deal quickly and decisively with the emotional consequences of setbacks, and move on to respond in positive ways. The Kirov, under the leadership of Valery Gergiev, has developed a key institutional expertise in this area.
4. **Make meaning matter:** High-performance resilience is enabled by *purpose*. Dealing with adversity is much easier when the institution and its people share a visceral purpose. The Kirov is committed to being an iconic, enduring showcase for its city, its country and its artforms, and the strength of this commitment (together with the value it sees in this role) has allowed it to emerge stronger and better from every challenge it has faced over the years.

The best organisations in the world tend also to be the most resilient, however resilience as a capability is often understated and hard to discern. Building resilience as a core, proactive capability should be high on the agenda of any aspiring leader.



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