

# TOUGH AT THE TOP?

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NEW RULES OF RESILIENCE FOR  
WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP SUCCESS.

**SARAH BOND**

FOR BUSINESS SAKE CONSULTING LTD

**DR GILLIAN SHAPIRO**

SHAPIRO CONSULTING LTD

NOVEMBER 2014

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**Savvy employers are paying increasing attention to resilience as a vital quality for leadership success in this volatile and complex world.**

The changing demands of the workplace — and the fact that most of us will be working for longer than ever before — mean that resilience is the new behaviour for working people.

But while a huge amount has been written about resilience and leadership, and resilience and mental health and well-being, quite a lot less has been written about resilience and its contribution to career progression.

And almost nothing has been written about women, resilience and their career success.

This report aims to fill this gap, by answering three questions:

1. **How much difference does resilience really make to career success?**

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2. **Does the resilience of women at the top differ from that of men?**

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3. **How, in practical terms, can employers help build career resilience for women in the pipeline to the top?**

The research found tangible ways that organisations and individuals can work together to develop the resilience of women en route to the top, and defines new rules of resilience for women's leadership success.

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## NOTE FROM OUR SPONSORS



I was fascinated by the results of this research which gets to the core of how important resilience is and how it can be encouraged and nurtured in women and men in different ways. For women, resilience is so much more than picking yourself up after a setback; it's about keeping going, tackling difficult relationships in work and dealing successfully with challenging situations. Understanding this enables us as employers to continue to develop environments in which male and female employees are given equal opportunities to thrive.

I'm proud of how Nationwide supports women and men so they can successfully progress in their careers. I believe this support and development is one of the reasons why the Sunday Times recognises us as the best bank or building society to work for and why we continue to deliver for our members by being the number one high street financial institution for customer satisfaction to name just one example.

We want to create an even more inclusive organisation which better reflects the diverse communities and members we serve and we will use this research to do just that.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alison Robb".

Alison Robb,  
Nationwide's Group Director of People, Customer, Communication and Commercial.



This research seems to confirm what Sartre said: hell is other people. But it also shows that relationships with others is part of the solution. The research provides valuable insights into the characteristics of resilient people and makes recommendations on how to develop resilience, a key attribute for people in this often complex, politically charged world we inhabit.

Vodafone enables everyone to be confidently connected. This report shows how important personal connections can be in enabling people to have the confidence and resilience we all need.

I commend it to you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rosemary Martin".

Rosemary Martin,  
Group General Counsel & Company Secretary, Vodafone Group Plc.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## 1. NEW RULES OF RESILIENCE

### OLD BELIEFS

Resilience is about bouncing back from crisis.

Career resilience is seen as less of a priority by employers than other aspects of leadership development.

Resilience is different for different people, and there's not much that organisations can contribute.

### NEW RULES

**RULE 1:**  
Career resilience is about more than bouncing back.

People define career resilience both as an in-the-moment response to set-backs and crisis, and as a long-term behaviour. Four out of five people define resilience as 'recovering well from set-backs', but 64% also said it's about the ability to 'adapt well to change', and 61% said it's about being tenacious/ keeping on going.

**RULE 2:**  
Resilience should be integral to leadership development.

Resilience is vital for career success — it's in the top three career success factors for our most senior interviewees. It's also learnable, and should be an integral part of leadership development for the future.

**RULE 3:**  
Organisations can do more to help employees develop resilience.

76% of people at Board level say that resilience is essential to career success, but only 10% of people at any level say that their organisation places a lot of emphasis on building and maintaining resilience as a factor in career success.

When asked for the best piece of advice they had been given about resilience, many people responded that they had not been given any at all. Very few people had received advice from their employers on resilience. There is real need for employers to provide more positive and constructive advice on resilience to their employees.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



WOMEN ARE MORE  
LIKELY THAN MEN TO  
SAY THEY WANT TO BE  
EVEN MORE RESILIENT  
IN THE FUTURE.

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 OLD BELIEFS
 

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Women are less resilient than men.

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 NEW RULES
 

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**RULE 4:**

**Women and men are both resilient, but talk about it in different ways.**

Whilst both women and men *define* resilience in similar terms, they talk about the experience of resilience at work in different ways. Two differences in particular stand out:

- Women, more often than men, talk about vulnerability when they describe what it means to be resilient.
- More women than men equate resilience with the need to suppress their emotions at work.

Although women and men see themselves as equally resilient, women are more likely than men to say they want to be even more resilient in the future (71% of women want to be more resilient, compared with 62% of men). It seems that women in the pipeline are 'bracing themselves' for a tough time en route to the top.

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You either have it or you don't. Resilience is about the individual.

**RULE 5:**

**Resilience is about relationships.**

The biggest single drain on the resilience of both women and men is not work-life balance, as we had expected, but the challenge of managing difficult relationships and workplace politics.

Three out of four survey respondents identified 'managing difficult relationships/politics in the workplace' as a reason for resilience (rising to four out of every five at Executive level). Difficult relationships and organisational politics stand way ahead of other factors contributing to the need for resilience at work.

## 2. DEVELOPING RESILIENCE FOR WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP SUCCESS

### 2.1 WHAT ORGANISATIONS CAN DO

- ✓ Pay greater attention to the contribution of resilience to career progression, and don't leave its development to chance. If resilience does not feature in your approach to leadership development, add it now.
- ✓ Look to the vital role of relationships in building the resilience needed to make it to the top, and stay there. Help employees get better at developing good workplace relationships and managing organisational politics, including getting into the habit of developing relationships with people that matter personally, professionally and politically.
- ✓ Recognise the value of challenging work, tricky relationships, curve-ball crises, in building resilience on-the-job. Allow employees to be more open about the challenges they face en route to the top – both personal and professional.
- ✓ Encourage senior people to be more open about how they built the career resilience needed to make it to the top.
- ✓ Take gender into account, through:
  - Acknowledging the existence of well-understood barriers to career progression facing women — and therefore the additional resilience women may need to succeed.
  - Helping women build their resilience, for example by incorporating skills for building the relationships that matter, and in particular navigating organisational politics, as core components of women's career development.
  - Ensuring women have access to sponsors, mentors and coaches to help them navigate challenging relationships and organisational politics in the pipeline to the top.
  - Removing the stigma of vulnerability at work, alleviating the pressure that women in particular appear to feel to suppress the expression of emotion emotions at work.
  - Encouraging both women and men at senior levels to be much more open about their own stories of vulnerability, resilience and career success.



**ENSURE WOMEN HAVE ACCESS TO SPONSORS, MENTORS AND COACHES TO HELP THEM NAVIGATE CHALLENGING RELATIONSHIPS AND ORGANISATIONAL POLITICS IN THE PIPELINE TO THE TOP.**

## 2. DEVELOPING RESILIENCE FOR WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP SUCCESS

### 2.2 WHAT INDIVIDUALS CAN DO

The career resilience of people at the top of organisations comes from a powerful combination of habits (behaviours built up over the long-term), attitudes (ways of thinking about themselves and their work) and responses (actions taken at a moment of crisis, to get them and their careers back on track). This combination provides a new model for resilience for both women and men in the pipeline to the top.



## INTRODUCTION

We conducted this research to gather insights into the incredible resilience of women who make it to the top of UK organisations, and to share these insights with women in the pipeline to the top, and the organisations that employ them.

With just 7% of female executive directorships in the FTSE 100,<sup>1</sup> there is plenty of evidence of how tough it is to make it to the top as a woman — and stay there. 93% of women and 68% of men think that, even with equal skills and qualifications, women have much more difficulty reaching top management positions than men.<sup>2</sup> Our hunch was that overcoming these additional barriers must require enormous resilience. It seemed clear to us that others might have a lot to learn from the insights of women themselves on the subject.

We found that senior leaders (both women and men) have developed their resilience through a combination of habitual behaviours, an optimistic outlook and some very effective crisis responses. Above all they have learned to manage difficult relationships and organisational politics in a way which works for them and for the people around them. And largely they have done this without any knowing support from their employers — because what we also found is that few organisations are taking the type of action that our research suggests really matters.

So this report also calls for organisations to take a much more proactive approach than at present to helping people build their career resilience — in particular one that looks at the vital role of personal, professional and political relationships in building the resilience of people in the pipeline to the top.

We are proud and grateful that Nationwide Building Society and Vodafone shared our interest in resilience, and agreed to sponsor this research. Our thanks go to them, to the 835 employees from private, public and third sector organisations in the UK who responded to an online survey, and to the 24 inspiring and resilient women and men, many holding leading positions at the top of UK business, with whom we conducted in-depth interviews.

'Tough at the top?' presents what we learned from our interviewees and survey respondents about women, resilience and career success, and suggests where women, men and the organisations that employ them may collaborate to help build resilience for the future.

Sarah Bond  
for business sake consulting ltd  
[www.forbusinessake.com](http://www.forbusinessake.com)



Dr Gillian Shapiro  
Shapiro Consulting Ltd  
[www.shapiroconsulting.co.uk](http://www.shapiroconsulting.co.uk)



# PART I:

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## NEW RULES OF RESILIENCE

## PART I: NEW RULES OF RESILIENCE

## RULE 1:

### CAREER RESILIENCE IS ABOUT MORE THAN BOUNCING BACK

So what does it mean to be resilient in your career? Our research found that both women and men define career resilience as an in-the-moment response to set-backs and crisis, *and* as a long-term behaviour.

Top of the list of definitions of resilience for most people is the ability to 'bounce back', 'to recover well from set-backs'. Four out of every five people we surveyed define resilience in these terms.

*'Coping with life's ups and downs, twists and turns'.*

*'Ability to cope with what's thrown at you, and not be taken down by people, circumstance or challenge'.*

*'An emergency, out of hours or occasional requirement beyond 'endurance''.*

But it's clear that resilience isn't just about the ability to 'bounce back' in a crisis; for many people it's also about long-term behaviours of adaptability and tenacity. 64% said resilience is about the ability to 'adapt well

to change', and 61% said it is about the ability to 'be tenacious/keep on going'. Almost half of the people we surveyed said they need to be resilient at work all or most of the time.

*'I have survived, thrived (to some extent) and still enjoying working for the same organisation for over 33 years'.*

*'My role has been changing over a long period of time. Permanently adapting to change shows resilience'.*

We didn't see any significant differences in how people responded on the basis of gender, ethnicity or any other demographic group; it would seem that resilience at work means similar things to most people. For both men and women, career resilience is about dealing successfully with a crisis when it arises, and otherwise hanging on in there, against a background of constant change.

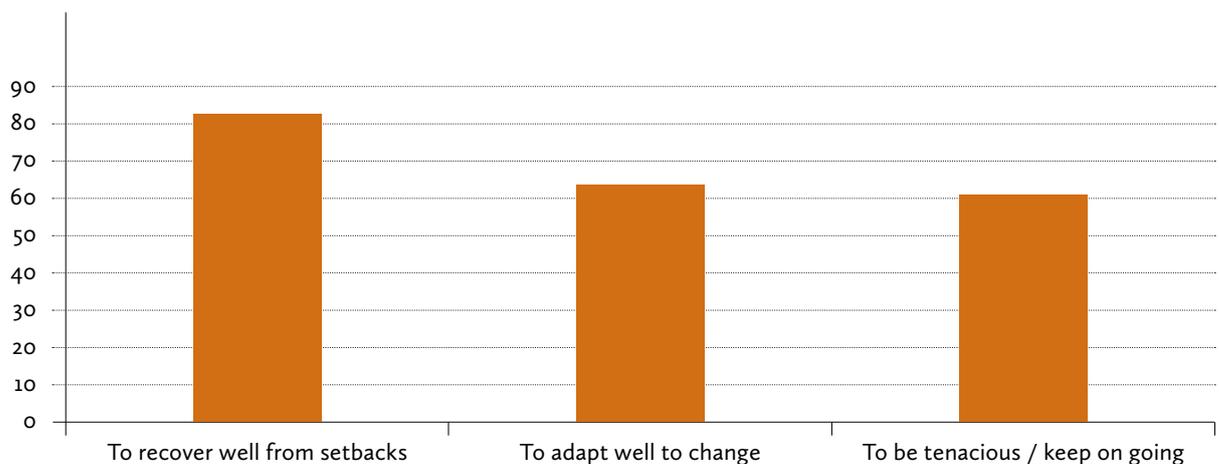


Figure 1 – Top three definitions of resilience

## PART I: NEW RULES OF RESILIENCE

## RULE 2:

### RESILIENCE SHOULD BE INTEGRAL TO LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

There's no doubt that resilience is one of the 'leadership qualities that matter the most' in this 'more complex, global, latticed, networked and unforgiving world'.<sup>3</sup>

By common consent, you can't be an effective leader these days without it.

A female executive director says *'You wouldn't get to the top if you weren't'*.

Another tells us *'It's in my top three'*.

A male senior civil servant says *'90% of the battle is just to keep going'*.

They're all talking about the importance of resilience in career success.

We asked people how important resilience had been in their careers to date. 99.9% of respondents regarded resilience as important to career success. 56% said it had been 'essential' to their careers (rising to 76% at Board level) and another 34% said resilience had been 'very important'. And most of the people we interviewed put resilience in the top three success factors in their careers.

*'My job is challenging, but rewarding, and without resilience I would have given up by now'*.

*'My resilience is what has got me to this point in my career; I made a three year plan and had to be resilient to achieve it. I have two small children and took up a part time degree that took me away from home for two nights a week as well as working full time'*.

*'Colleagues with more knowledge but less resilience have not reached the same level'*.

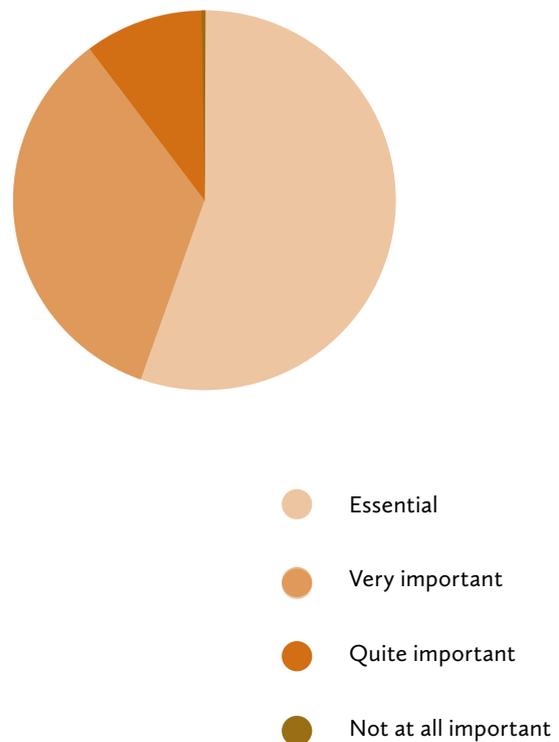


Figure 2 – How important is resilience to career success?

## PART I: NEW RULES OF RESILIENCE

**RULE 3:****ORGANISATIONS CAN DO MORE TO HELP EMPLOYEES DEVELOP RESILIENCE**

Where do working people get their resilience from? 90% of people identified themselves as a source of their own resilience; 52% gave relationships (past and present, both inside and outside work), with just under half as many again (20%) giving the work they do as a source.

But barely 12% of people identified their organisation as a source of resilience.

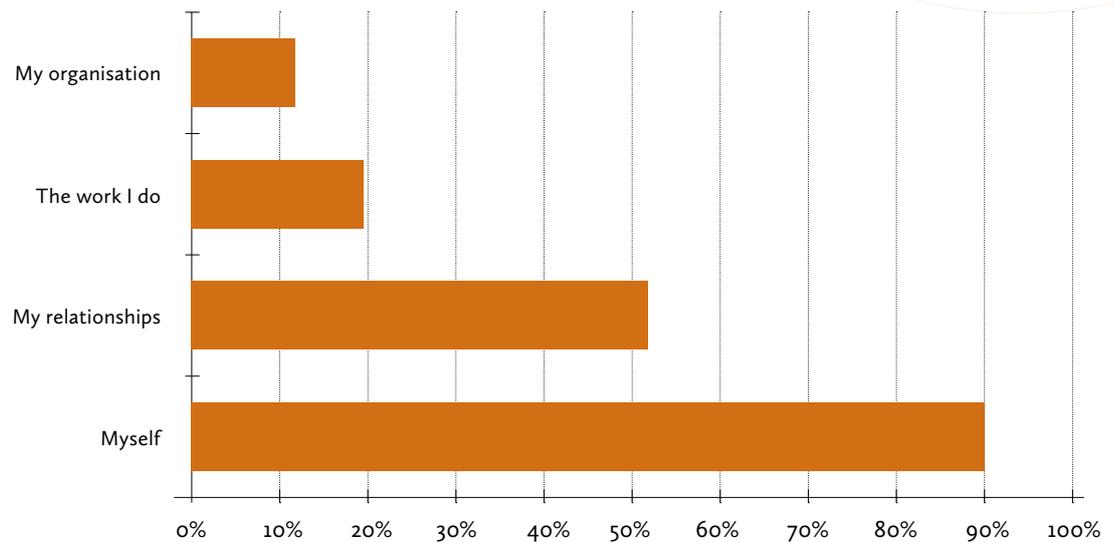


Figure 3 – Sources of resilience

Our research would suggest that organisations are at best ambivalent about helping employees build resilience; most appear to be paying it very little attention at all:

- 76% of people who have reached Board level said that resilience is essential to career success, but only 10% of people we surveyed at any level said that their organisation places a lot of emphasis on building and maintaining resilience in general as a factor in career success.
- Nearly a quarter (21%) of Executives said their organisation places 'no emphasis' on building and maintaining career resilience.
- Only 6% of people said their organisation provides a lot of support in building and maintaining resilience.

NO-ONE HELPS ME. I DO IT MYSELF - FROM INNER DETERMINATION AND DRIVE. I REMEMBER WHAT I AM GOOD AT. I MUST BE NATURALLY RESILIENT.

## PART I: NEW RULES OF RESILIENCE

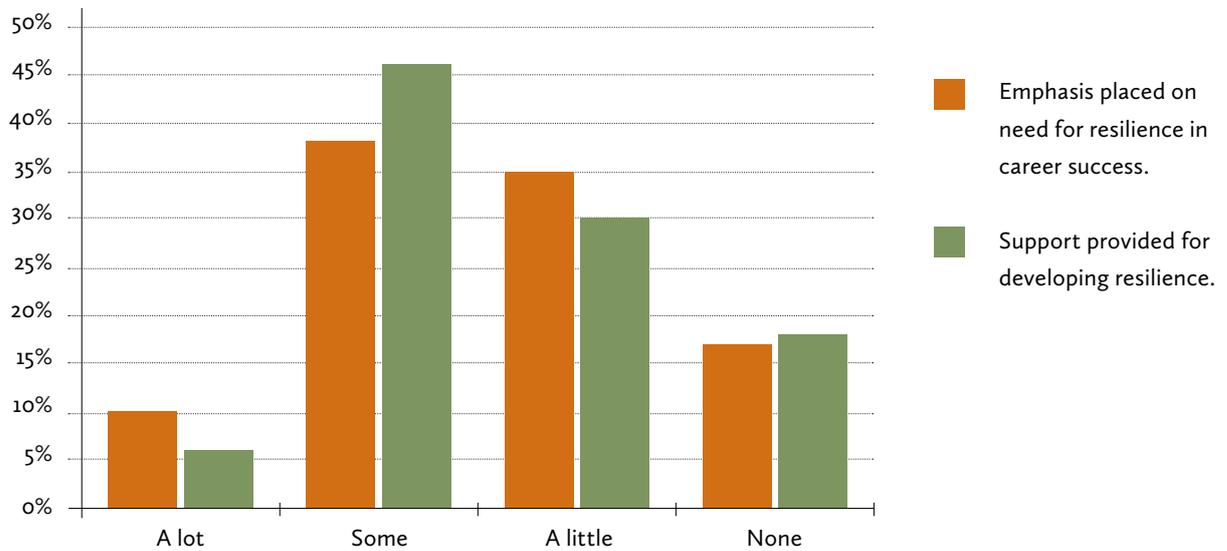


Figure 4 – Organisational emphasis on and support for resilience

*'Being resilient is often in spite of the organisation, not because of it.'*

*'I don't think my organisation has ever intentionally supported my resilience — it has helped it by having a difficult and male culture that has indirectly required me to be resilient!'*

*'I think that I am resilient but, in terms of the office I work in, there is nothing that helps me to be resilient. I am resilient despite the environment in which I work.'*

In fact, most organisations seem to help employees build resilience almost by accident. 77% of people in the survey said they get their resilience from doing challenging work — learning from experience and succeeding in the tough times — though there are limits:

*'My work generates situations where I'm in conflict with others in the business. Working through that and surviving those situations develops resilience.'*

*'The work itself doesn't help me be resilient — other than continually testing/stretching the limits of my resilience!'*

*'Nothing about my work helps with resilience, instead it creates the need for resilience.'*

Interestingly, more women than men agreed that their organisation provides a lot of support on building and maintaining resilience. This may be because women employees are more likely to be targeted with coaching and mentoring support than men, or because — as we have already seen — women are more keen than their male colleagues to increase their own resilience and so may be more proactively looking out for support to enable this. A similar phenomenon has been noted in other recent women's leadership research, which describes how women are more likely than men to feel supported by 'formal professional relationships that tend to be one to one and set up for their development'.<sup>4</sup>

**MOST ORGANISATIONS  
SEEM TO HELP  
EMPLOYEES BUILD  
RESILIENCE ALMOST  
BY ACCIDENT**



## RULE 4:

### WOMEN AND MEN ARE BOTH RESILIENT, BUT TALK ABOUT IT IN DIFFERENT WAYS

Whilst both women and men define resilience in similar terms, the research found that how women and men talk about the experience of resilience at work differs between the sexes.

We asked people if they think of themselves as resilient, and got an overwhelming response: 97% see themselves as resilient some, all or almost all of the time at work.

- 53% see themselves as resilient all or almost all of the time.
- 44% see themselves as resilient some of the time.

*'I am in a leadership role — my team, peers and senior management expect me to be [resilient all the time].'*

*'I'm not running from battle to battle, but part of my job involves getting people to do work for my benefit and not their own. This requires resilience in the face of hostility and setbacks.'*

Given the contribution that resilience makes to career success, it's unsurprising that the majority of people (69%) would like to be even more resilient than they currently are. They recognise the role of resilience in career success, and want more of it.

However, there is a difference in the responses of women and men here which hints at the different experiences of women and men in work. Although they see themselves as equally resilient right now, women are more likely than men to want to be even more resilient in the future (71% of women want to be more resilient, compared with 62% of men).

Two differences stand out in how women and men describe being resilient at work. First, when respondents describe what it feels like to be resilient, as opposed to simply defining it, you can see, hear and feel some significant differences in the experience of women and

men. Both women and men often described the feeling of being resilient as 'heroic', upbeat and positive:

*'Generally feel life is under control and have sufficient freedom to choose what I do and the way I do it.'*

*'I bounce back from set-backs and if things don't go to plan, I make another plan!'*

But more often women describe the experience as draining, highlighting vulnerability as well as triumph in overcoming crisis or simply carrying on. Even resilient women were much more likely to show this side of themselves in their responses than men.

*'Several years ago I would have answered 'I am resilient at work' almost all of the time. However, after suffering from chronic fatigue for a period I now feel I am less resilient than I used to be and I tend to get more stressed.'*

*'I suffer from insecurity and self-doubt constantly — but nevertheless do seem to keep going!'*

Second, more women than men appear to equate resilience with the need to suppress their emotions at work:

*'I'd like to be able to take anything in my stride without feeling upset.'*

*'I would like to be somebody who does not feel as acutely as I do, when I feel personally vulnerable.'*

Our hunch is women look at their likely career path and assume they will have to increasingly 'toughen up' to get to the top, which feels unsustainable. Simply acknowledging that this is happening, and encouraging senior women and men to speak out about their own experiences of vulnerability en route to the top, will go a long way to countering this view.

## RULE 5:

### RESILIENCE IS ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

A major surprise for us from this research is that that 'juggling day-to-day life and working responsibilities' comes relatively low down the list of circumstances requiring resilience for both women and men. We had expected it to be much closer to the top.

With 43% of people identifying it as a factor, it's clearly important, but is placed sixth out of seven on the list. Our findings challenge the myth that what wears women down is the practical and emotional strain of balancing work and family. Our interviews with senior people echoed this finding, with few mentions of work-life balance as a drain on resilience. Other things — and in particular other people — drain resilience more.

Difficult relationships and organisational politics stand way ahead of other factors contributing to the need for resilience at work: our respondents told us clearly that the single biggest drain on resilience at work is other

people. Three out of every four survey respondents identified 'managing difficult relationships/ politics in the workplace' as a reason for resilience (rising to four out of every five at Executive level). Employees are constantly dealing with difficult personal and small 'p' political relationships at all levels, with bosses and managers as well as with peers, and to do so requires resilience.

*'I had a very difficult relationship with my line manager. Just coming into work felt like a challenge.'*

*'I have had various upheavals in my personal life throughout my working career, however I find it easy to focus on work at these times. My resilience is mostly tested in the workplace on a day to day basis. The work is fast paced, challenging and often quite political.'*

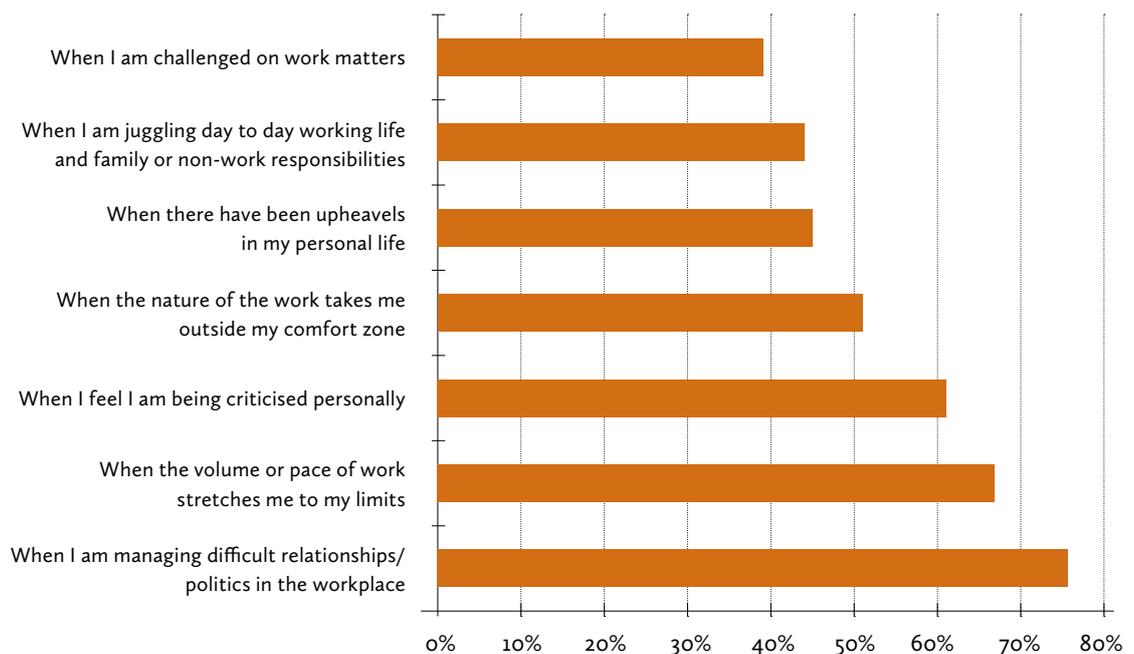


Figure 5 – What drains my resilience

## PART I: NEW RULES OF RESILIENCE

*'I most have to draw on my resilience when dealing with difficult relationships/politics in the office. I find it difficult at times to deal with people who have their own agenda rather than doing the best for the customer/business. Dealing with rude people has also been challenging.'*

And though our research found little difference in the responses of women and men on this point, data published elsewhere suggests that 'office politics' is indeed the number one career frustration for women.<sup>5</sup>

Though workplace politics and challenging relationships create the need for resilience at work, there is support to be had at work too:

*'The team I worked with, and many colleagues around the organisation were always providing honest feedback about my performance, which helped me to become a better person.'*

*'I adore my teams. They get every bit of me – they see me laugh, they see me focused, crying, joy. There is complete trust. They trust me and I trust them.'*

However, most of the participants who told us that relationships help with resilience are talking about relationships with people outside work. The research was littered with examples of family, friends, partners and parents all turned to in crisis and for day-to-day emotional and practical support:

*'My family set a strong example re work ethic, not making a fuss, getting on with things, achieving.'*

*'My wife is an extraordinary support to me both professionally and personally. It helps that she is a qualified coach but I really wouldn't be able to do what I do without her love, compassion, honesty and wisdom.'*

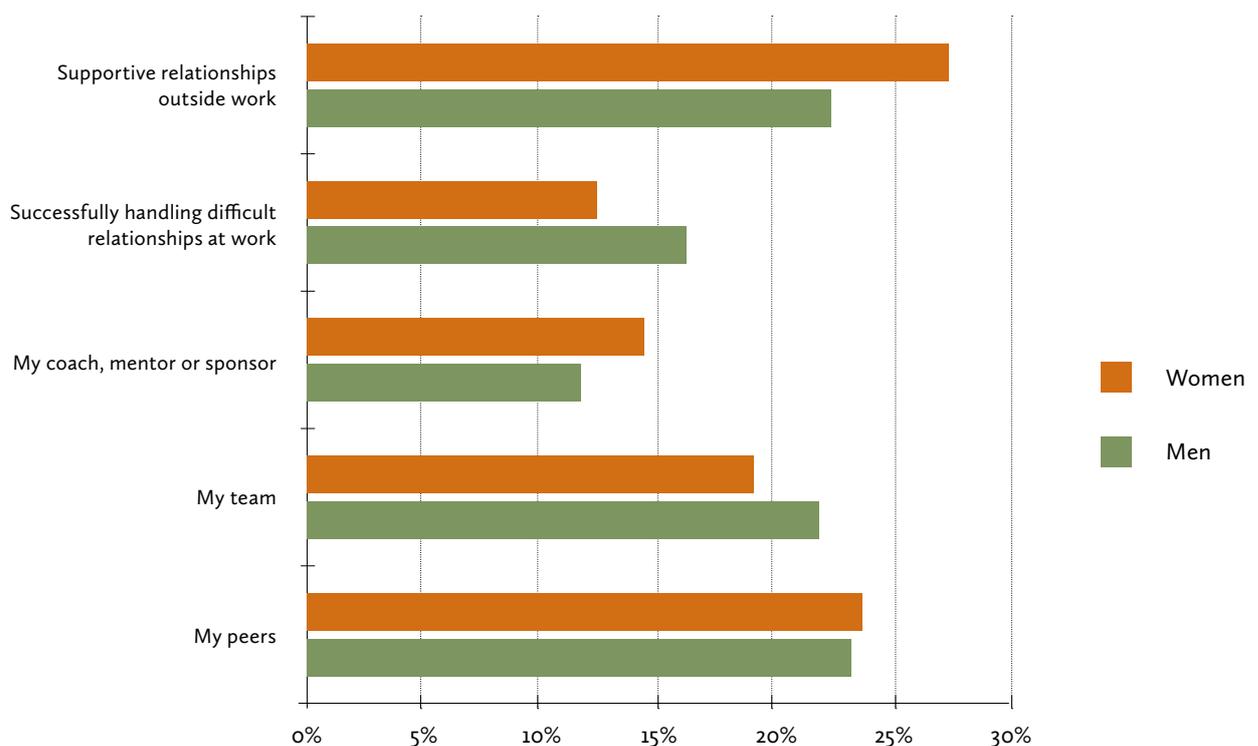


Figure 6 – Sources of resilience (relationships)

# **PART 2:**

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## **DEVELOPING RESILIENCE FOR WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP SUCCESS**

# 1. WHAT ORGANISATIONS CAN DO

One of the objectives of the research was to find out how employers can help build career resilience for women in the pipeline to the top.

We unearthed several steps which organisations can take to help build resilience for all employees — for men, as well as women — and some specifically targeting women themselves.

A clear finding is that organisations need to pay greater attention to resilience as a key factor in career progression. All of the Board members we interviewed said they would not have got to where they are without it, but barely 6% of respondents told us that their organisations were doing much at all to help employees develop career resilience. As a first step, employers simply need to talk more about resilience with their employees, and do more to take seriously the vital contribution of resilience to career success.

Second, the key to developing career resilience is for employees to get better at developing good workplace relationships and managing organisational politics — to develop the habit of building relationships with people that matter, personally, professional and politically. 76% of respondents identified 'managing difficult relationships/politics in the workplace' as the reason resilience is needed at work, rising to 80% for Executive level respondents. In this way we echo other reports emphasising the vital role of relationships in corporate life;<sup>6</sup> the significant insight from this research is the realisation that resilience is a relational, as much as an individual, quality. Paying attention to work-load, work-life balance, health and well-being are vital, but to make a real difference to career resilience, organisations need to focus on building the skills of relationship management and the navigation of workplace politics.

Third, resilience can be learned. The learning takes place on-the-job, through challenging work, tricky relationships, curve-ball crises and the day-to-day experience of organisational life. But for the real learning to happen, people need to be able to talk about the tough times they are going through. And this means a significant change to the culture of organisations. So a third step for employers is to make it allowable for people at all levels to be more open about the challenges they are facing — both personal and professional. Removing the stigma associated with vulnerability would help employees build career resilience more effectively.



THE KEY TO DEVELOPING  
CAREER RESILIENCE IS FOR  
EMPLOYEES TO GET BETTER  
AT DEVELOPING GOOD  
WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIPS  
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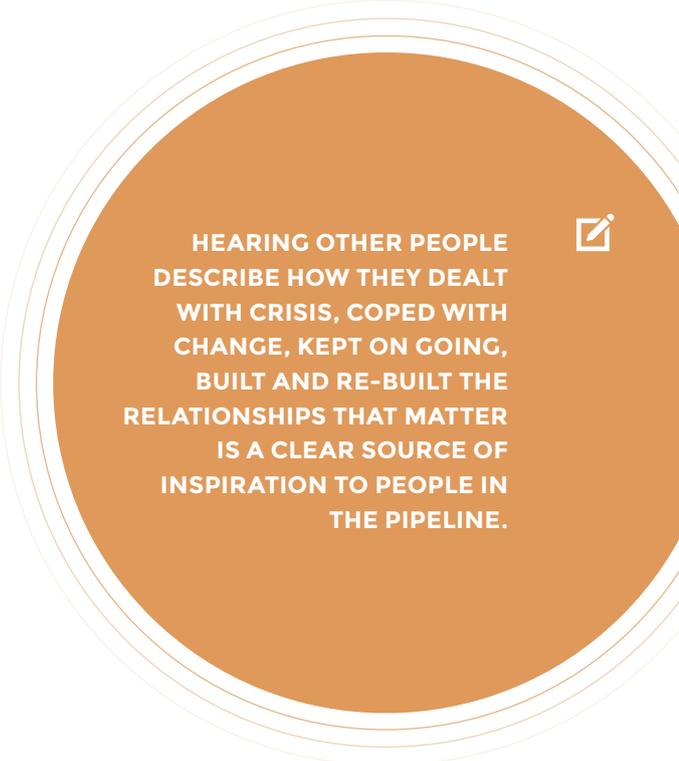


## PART 2: DEVELOPING RESILIENCE FOR WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP SUCCESS

Fourth, career resilience is catching. Hearing other people describe how they dealt with crisis, coped with change, kept on going, built and re-built the relationships that matter is a clear source of inspiration to people in the pipeline. When we asked people what organisations could do to help them build resilience, the response was often a request for 'role models' — for people at senior levels prepared to be open about how they built the career resilience needed to make it to the top.

Finally, for organisations wanting to build the career resilience of women, it's not about different steps, but about the same steps, taken differently — by taking gender into account. That means:

- Acknowledging the existence of well-understood barriers to career progression facing women — and the additional resilience women may need to succeed.
- Helping women build their resilience, for example by incorporating skills for building the relationships that matter, and in particular navigating organisational politics, as core components of women's career development.
- Ensuring women have access to sponsors, mentors and coaches to help them navigate challenging relationships and organisational politics in the pipeline to the top.
- Removing the stigma of vulnerability at work, alleviating the pressure that women in particular appear to feel to suppress the expression of emotion at work.
- Encouraging both women and men at senior levels to be much more open about their own stories of vulnerability, resilience and career success.



**HEARING OTHER PEOPLE  
DESCRIBE HOW THEY DEALT  
WITH CRISIS, COPED WITH  
CHANGE, KEPT ON GOING,  
BUILT AND RE-BUILT THE  
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IS A CLEAR SOURCE OF  
INSPIRATION TO PEOPLE IN  
THE PIPELINE.**

## 2. WHAT INDIVIDUALS CAN DO

We asked people what is it about themselves (their character, skills, behaviour or experience) that helps them be resilient. Three things struck us about what we heard:

First, the people in our research tell us that resilience is not something that can be acquired in theory, or built in the good times, but is learned through challenge and experience. Mostly people learn resilience through overcoming difficult challenges, and from making mistakes. The good news is that it is not just something learned in childhood, but a skill that can be learned and reinforced throughout adult life.

Second, people draw less on exercise, hobbies and relaxation than one might have imagined. Much of the existing guidance on developing resilience focuses on diet, exercise, sleep and self-care as important sources

of physical and mental well-being. It's clear these things matter to the people in our research, but they are definitely not top of the list as sources of resilience.

Third, women and men tend to respond in broadly similar ways about the sources of resilience (both placing learning from past experience top of the list) but with a slight difference in emphasis. In interviews and in the survey women appear to be more likely than men to say resilience is learned (from past experience or past mistakes); men seem more likely than women to say resilience derives from mental toughness (not taking criticism too personally, not letting things get to them).

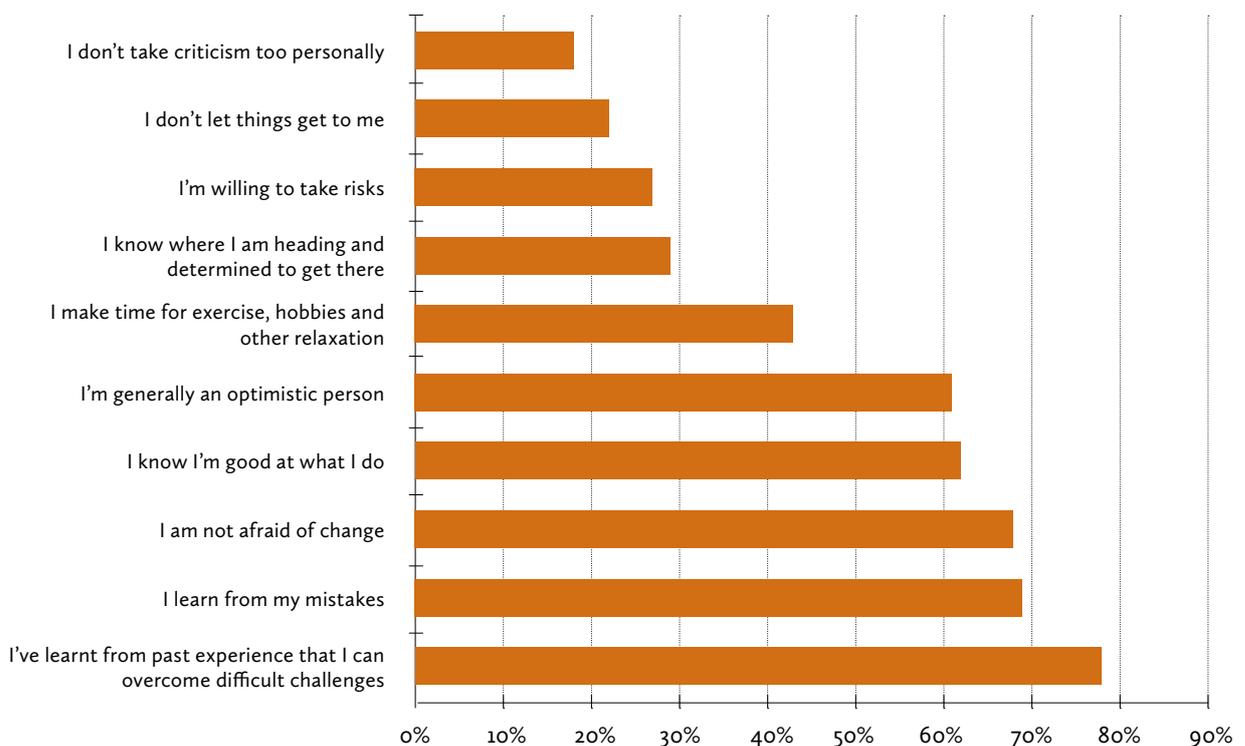


Figure 7 – Sources of resilience (self)

## PART 2: DEVELOPING RESILIENCE FOR WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP SUCCESS

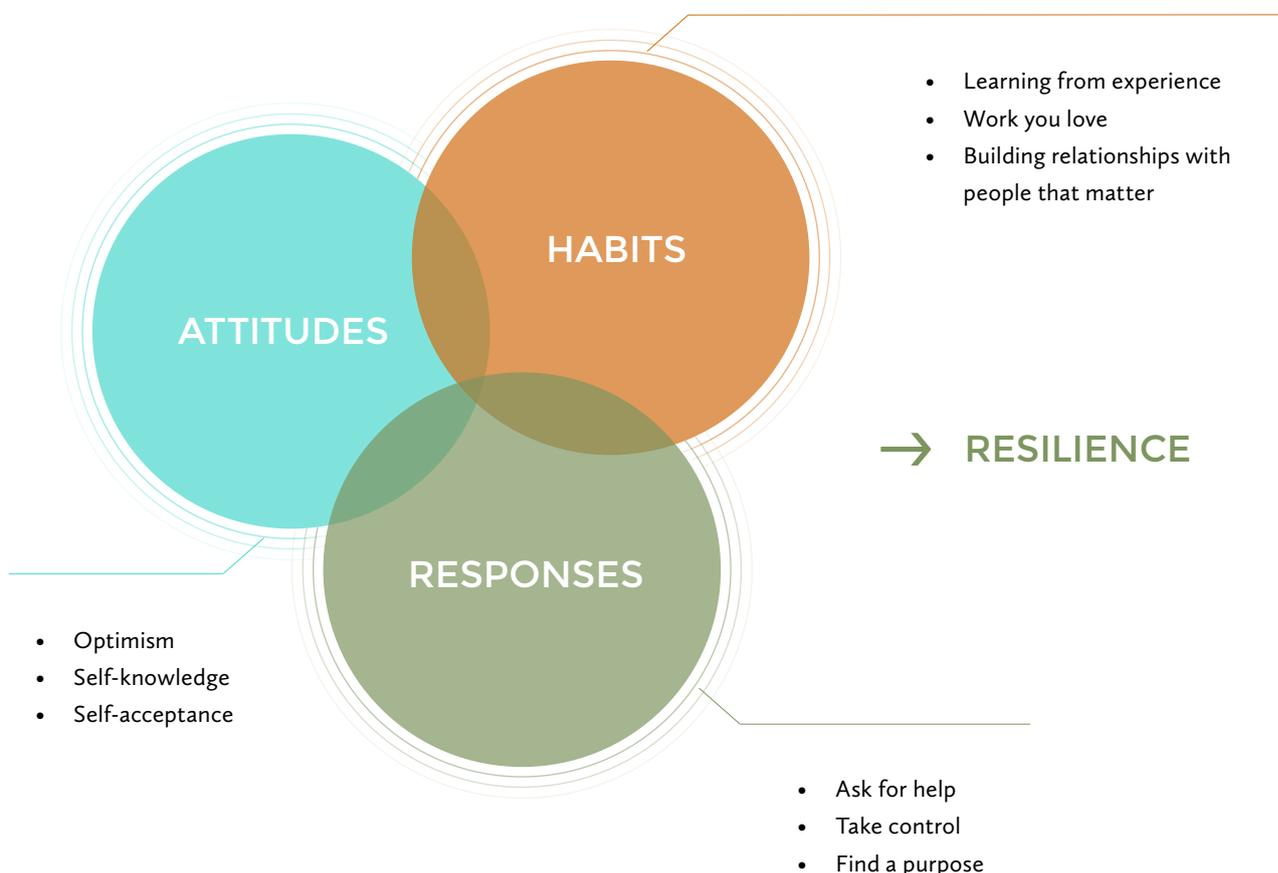
## RESILIENCE BEHAVIOURS

We have drawn together a set of behaviours from the experiences and insights of women and men in our research, that provide a guide to developing career resilience, which we think are worth sharing. The account of career resilience we present below is less a prescription, and more a description — of women, primarily — who have already made it to the very top of UK business.

We hope this gives organisations, line managers and employees a useful 'resilience checklist' against which they can self-assess, highlight strengths and areas for development, and measure ongoing progress.

What's clear is that there is no single way of 'being' resilient in your career. What resilience means, where people acquire it from, how and when they are called upon to be resilient, differs from individual to individual. Resilience is personal, and deeply complex. It's perhaps for this reason that so many prescriptions for resilience have been developed.

However, as a result of conducting this research, we now think of resilient people as displaying three different kinds of behaviour. We group these together as habits (behaviours built-up over the long-term), attitudes (ways of thinking about themselves and their work), and responses (the actions that resilient people take at a moment of crisis, to get them and their careers back on track).



## HABITS OF RESILIENT PEOPLE

LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE  
BUILD RELATIONSHIPS THAT MATTER  
DO WORK YOU LOVE

Building career resilience is learned; learning takes time, and effort. Turning learned behaviours into reliable habits takes longer still. Our career resilient interviewees have been on their way up and in senior roles for some time, and all demonstrate a number of habits which collectively cushion them against crisis.

The first of these is learning from experience, both positive and negative. Our interviewees described to us situations where being in a tough role, with tough clients, was the best thing that happened to them as far as building their career resilience was concerned: *'I was helped by being put on a project with a very difficult client. It was high profile and I did a great job'*.

The second habit of career resilient people is to amass people around them who matter. These may be people inside and outside work who matter personally, and who provide support, friendship, a shoulder to cry on, people to have a laugh with (*'I'm quite good at avoiding people who suck the energy out of the room'*). They are good at gathering talented people in teams around them and making them feel valued (*'I adore my teams'*). They also gather people around them who matter in small 'p' political terms. Given that managing politics is one of the biggest draws on resilience, the career resilient people we interviewed all had great political savvy, and had worked to amass and retain political

support around them (*'I build a strong network of people I trust – and make sensible use of that'*). Some of their toughest times were when organisational politics got the better of them (*'I believed I'd get the next move up, but then I was told I wasn't going to get the job. It felt like a real risk to my reputation'*). Career resilient people know that resilience is earned from the support and friendship of other people, as well as learned at an individual level; what this research has shown us, is that resilience is a relational as much as individual behaviour.

Their third habit is to do work they love, that gives them stretch and challenge and keeps them on their toes (*'I've always enjoyed working. Going to work is never a chore', and 'For goodness sake, get a job you love'*). We've seen this link between passion and resilience elsewhere, including in the 2008 article 'Centered Leadership: How Talented Women Thrive',<sup>7</sup> where Joanna Barsh and her colleagues at McKinsey describe in graphic terms how doing work that matters helps build resilience: 'Meaning is the motivation that moves us. It enables people to discover what interests them and to push themselves to the limit. It makes the heart beat faster, provides energy and inspires passion. Without meaning, work is a slog between weekends.'<sup>7</sup> None of the career resilient people we interviewed ever gave the impression of their work being a slog between weekends.

## ATTITUDES OF RESILIENT PEOPLE

### OPTIMISM SELF-KNOWLEDGE SELF-ACCEPTANCE

Our sense is that resilient people seem to share a number of attitudes relating to themselves and their work.

They generally have a positive outlook, which makes them entertaining company (*'He said, 'If only we could bottle what you have – you perk people up'*). They know themselves, warts and all (*'Not expecting perfection from yourself, being comfortable with yourself, being comfortable in your own skin, being at ease with yourself'*). They are not falsely modest about their success, but neither do they take success for granted (*'Now I'm on the UK Board — sometimes I look back and wonder how!', 'I say to myself, look up, it's amazing right? It's what you wanted!'*). They generally know they are good at their jobs, and therefore have choices about where they work and what they do (*'An occupational psychologist said to me, 'You don't fear getting fired, and I don't. It helps me push the conversation, challenge, use humour. I don't have to conform'*).

They share a strong work ethic, and often come from hard-working family backgrounds (*'I just think I should be working hard', 'Growing up I was always encouraged to work and do well and get rewards — earn your own money'*). They set high standards for themselves, and others, but they don't beat themselves up over failure or mistakes. Instead, they depersonalise it (*'This isn't about*

*me being a woman or being black'*). They understand the corrosive effects of guilt and shame, and make a conscious effort to avoid these (*'You have to look after yourself, you can do yourself a lot of harm by dwelling on bad experiences', 'Try to suspend judgement of yourself'*). Most of these attitudes are those that both women and men display; what's clear from our research is that not taking things too personally is more of a struggle for women in the pipeline to the top than for men.

## RESPONSES OF RESILIENT PEOPLE

### ASK FOR HELP TAKE CONTROL FIND A PURPOSE

We learned from our interviewees that there are three things that career resilient people seem to do at a moment of crisis. These three behaviours create a 'virtuous cycle' of resilience responses, each reinforcing rather than undermining reserves of career resilience.

First, they ask for help — and crucially, they already know who to ask. They don't waste time wondering who can help and support them; they already know. The relationships and networks they have built as a habitual behaviour stand them in good stead when the moment comes. As one of the interviewees said, *'I naturally don't like to ask for help, but I knew I had to. If you feel like you're doing it on your own, you'll crumble'*. Another said, *'I can top it [resilience] up when I need to using my networks and asking for help'*. Both women and men rely on relationships to help them in tough times, but in our interviews only women mentioned the gender of those relationships: *'The only way we women cope is through talking to a small group of trusted female colleagues. There is trust, empathy and a desire and willingness to help one another'*.

Second, they seek to take control of the situation — and make it work for them (*'putting yourself in a different situation'*). Resilient people don't get buffeted around, either by other people or by circumstance.

One interviewee described how she took control of a difficult meeting:

*'I had to present to the most senior people in the company. My knees were knocking. Half way through my presentation one of them leaned back and said 'This is a load of bullshit'. It went through my mind that I had a number of choices and one of them was crying and saying 'Shove your job', but I thought 'I'm better than him, I'm going to show him what I'm made of'. I decided to try and communicate with him as an individual'*.

Third, resilient people find a clear purpose to the crisis they're facing — almost always a purpose beyond themselves, and often a purpose beyond resolving the crisis itself. It's a purpose that is closely linked to doing work they love — another habitual behaviour. And it's this purpose that helps them find the energy and self-belief to keep going when things get really tough (*'I had a vision for what I wanted. I just thought about the customer'*).

### 3. ADVICE ON HOW TO BUILD RESILIENCE

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We asked all of the people involved in the research for their best advice on resilience and/or the best advice they were given about resilience. Two things jumped out at us.

First, people are not getting a lot of advice from anyone about how to be resilient. When asked for the best piece of advice they had been given specifically about resilience, many people responded that they had simply not been given any, by anyone, ever. Family and friends feature highest on the list of advice-givers (along with the occasional song-writer ... ).

Second, very little of the advice heard came explicitly from employers, and often when advice is received from employers it is experienced as critical and negative.

We reproduce here the best tips that were shared with us.

#### WHAT'S THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE ANYONE EVER GAVE YOU ABOUT HOW TO DEVELOP YOUR RESILIENCE?

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- *I was told by our managing partner when I first became a partner that the foremost quality required to do the job successfully was resilience. That seemed odd to me at the time but I completely understand it now, and just having it articulated was helpful. At another firm I worked for, one of their values was “grace under pressure” which was also helpful. That is the sum total of the advice I have received on this topic!*
- *Anything really worth doing takes persistence, perseverance, and stubborn determination — resilience is part of this determination to be successful.*
- *During a performance feedback I was told I was not flexible enough to manage the business needs/context. It was a shock but I started considering the point and when I started looking at that more honestly I could start developing new skills and significantly improving my performance.*
- *Insisting that I went back to ‘business as usual’ working with someone who I had had a particularly difficult relationship with, rather than just avoiding them, talking to me about how to go about it and making it my choice.*
- *Stop working silly hours.*
- *It’s like a muscle — the more you use it the bigger it gets.*
- *This basic observation was on a fortune cookie: success is getting up one more time than you fall down!*
- *Keep on going on. Advice from my Dad!*
- *Doris Day — ‘Que sera, sera’; Bob Dylan — ‘It’s life and life only’.*

## PART 2: DEVELOPING RESILIENCE FOR WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP SUCCESS

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WHEN ASKED FOR THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE THEY HAD BEEN GIVEN SPECIFICALLY ABOUT RESILIENCE, MANY PEOPLE RESPONDED THAT THEY HAD SIMPLY NOT BEEN GIVEN ANY, BY ANYONE, EVER.

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### WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE YOUR YOUNGER SELF ABOUT HOW TO DEVELOP RESILIENCE?

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- *Don't take things too personally.*
- *Your opinion of yourself matters as much as the opinion others have of you. Keep in clear focus what you want to achieve and go for it.*
- *Trust yourself. Set your own standards and principles (by all means calibrate them against others) and measure yourself against those. Find a core group of people who understand what you struggle with and what you do well and create a mentoring community.*
- *Never to take the easy option; to seek out and seize the opportunities to do things that at the time seem daunting or frankly terrifying.*
- *When you are in a crowd and things are going wrong and you are scared, look around, everyone else is scared as well; it is normal. Take strength from that and take the lead because at that time everyone is looking for leadership and will welcome you.*
- *Have a Plan B, play to your strengths, and try not to worry about things that are ultimately out of your control. Value sponsors and mentors, and develop your network to help you ensure that Plan B is just as good as Plan A!*
- *Take time to have a real life outside work and develop your full potential across a range of attributes, this adds strength and is worth the time.*

# APPENDIX

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METHODOLOGY  
ABOUT THE AUTHORS  
ENDNOTES

## METHODOLOGY

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Our research was carried out during 2014 and included:

- A literature review of definitions of and approaches to resilience within organisations. We particularly looked for published research on resilience, leadership and career success, and career resilience and gender.
- Interviews with 15 senior and Board level leaders from UK corporate and public sector bodies.
- A focus group and interviewees with nine employees in the pipeline to the top.
- Survey responses from 835 individuals comprising:
  - 76% women and 24% men
  - 10% public, 88% private and 2% third/charity sector organisations
  - 14% Board level, 26% senior leader, 36% manager, 20% non-manager and 8% self-employed individuals.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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for business sake consulting ltd

### SARAH BOND, DIRECTOR, FOR BUSINESS SAKE CONSULTING LTD

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Sarah works with clients in the corporate and not-for-profit sectors to provide consulting advice and practical solutions on diversity, inclusion and organisational change. Prior to establishing her own consulting practice, Sarah spent over seven years as European Director and Head of Employee Engagement, Diversity and Inclusion for KPMG LLP.

[WWW.FORBUSINESSSAKE.COM](http://WWW.FORBUSINESSSAKE.COM)

### DR GILLIAN SHAPIRO, DIRECTOR, SHAPIRO CONSULTING LTD

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**S H A P I R O**

Gillian specialises in organisational and leadership development projects focused on inclusion and diversity. Over the last twenty years Gillian has worked with many of the FTSE 100 corporates as well as public and not-for-profit sector organisations, helping them to achieve their inclusion and diversity goals. She was previously an academic researcher leading pan-European projects on innovation and diversity.

[WWW.SHAPIROCONSULTING.CO.UK](http://WWW.SHAPIROCONSULTING.CO.UK)

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**TOUGH AT THE TOP? THE NEW RULES OF RESILIENCE  
FOR WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP SUCCESS.**

NOVEMBER 2014

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