

Elena Aguilar



How to Coach Resilience in Leaders

Three strategies can help refill leaders' "resilience reserves."

I've coached Walter (a pseudonym) for seven years—starting in his first years as a principal and then as a central office administrator. He's one of the most resilient leaders I've ever known and draws on a deep bank of strategies to keep himself going through all kinds of crises. But in the fall of 2021, his morale

positional leaders, what follows are three strategies for filling the resilience reserves of leaders like Walter.

1 Decrease Loneliness

First, remember that resilience is all about emotions—how you understand, engage with, process, and experience them. The most common (heartbreaking) statement I hear from site leaders I coach is, "This job is so lonely." A principal holds a great deal of information that cannot be shared with others. As their coach, I am often the only person with whom they can speak about everything—which means that I can help tremendously by just listening.

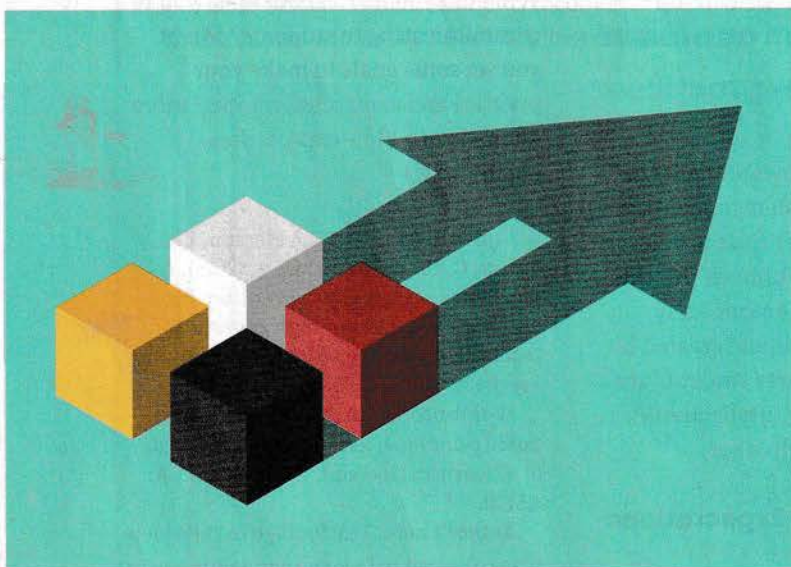
When someone is having a hard time, frequently what they need above all is to be heard. They don't need to be fixed; they don't need advice or suggestions. They need space and time to verbally process with an empathetic listener. By just listening, I communicate confidence in my client—in their ability to sort through their thoughts and to find their own solutions.

If you coach or support leaders, when they are struggling, resist the temptation to save them. Just listen. And if you are a leader whose resilience is running low, then find someone you trust who can listen to you. They don't necessarily need to be a colleague or school leader, just someone who listens well. Be assertive and say, "I really need some space to process and talk through my thoughts and feelings, and I need you to just listen. Please don't offer any advice or suggestions."

When a leader has space to talk about their experiences, the loneliness dissipates, and connection grows. Connection is cathartic; it fills the resilience tank.

2 Clarify Control

A sense of powerlessness will drain your resilience until there's not much left. Especially during times of crisis



was lower than I'd ever observed. I worried about his physical and emotional well-being; he wasn't sleeping, he felt powerless and hopeless, and he couldn't see any light at the end of the tunnel. For the first time ever, he contemplated leaving education.

Coaching toward resilience is a top goal in the transformational coaching model that I've developed. However, I use different strategies to coach positional leaders than I use to coach teachers, because there are unique distinctions in what leaders need to become more resilient.

Whether you are an administrator or you support

(such as the last two years of pandemic teaching), anxiety about what can and can't be controlled will surge. Here's the tricky thing: Leaders are perceived by others to have control over things—usually far more control than they really have. Sometimes leaders fall into this belief trap themselves, thinking they can control things that they cannot. But more often, the trouble comes from the murkiness around what is and isn't within one's sphere of control. (Spoiler alert: You have a great deal of influence and perhaps even control over what you think, feel, and do; but you can't control what other people think, feel, or do.)

When I coached Walter last fall, I often asked him, "What's within your influence right now? What's within your control?" There's a subtle but important distinction between the two, and framing these questions in this way allows leaders to reflect on those differences. As Walter talked through these questions, he found his way back to his agency. He also reminded himself of what matters most—his core values and big goals. He'd say things like, "I can control how I show up at that meeting today" and "I can control how I speak to students today." While there were always a few things that were completely uncontrollable, Walter frequently identified things he'd previously overlooked that he could influence. And as a result, his sense of empowerment increased and his resilience tank was filled.

3 Avoid Jumping to Conclusions

If you aren't familiar with the Zen parable, "Maybe, Said the Farmer," look it up. It's basically a lesson about

equanimity in which seemingly bad things happen, but then on second glance, or after another event, the bad things look to be not so bad. Last fall, I often texted Walter one word—*Maybe*—as a reminder of this story. It became a cue for him to anchor himself in the present moment and to hold off on issuing verdicts on the many things that happened that day. *Maybe* what occurred was a bad thing, *maybe* it wasn't.

When we're in the midst of a hard time, we often come to hyperbolic conclusions: *This is the worst thing ever!* It's important to explore our fear in those moments. I often ask clients, "What's the meaning you're making of what's happened?" or "What's the fear about?" When we have space to explore and name our fears, we diminish their power. Some of our fears, when they emerge from the shadows, are manageable. Some are not. (The fear of death lurks below more fears than we are aware of.) But we are always more powerful when we can identify them.

Taking a *maybe* attitude isn't about forcing a Pollyanna outlook or straining to find silver linings; it's about seeing everything and staying open. It's about remembering that the story is not yet over. When we connect with our ability to do this, we'll feel stronger, more resilient, and more capable.

Turning the Page

Resilient leaders are aware of their emotions, accept what they can and can't control, and are skilled at balancing optimism with clarity about what's happening in the moment. Those who support leaders to become more resilient give those leaders space

to talk about their emotions, to delineate what they can and can't control, and to cultivate equanimity. As for Walter: he hasn't quit, and he's feeling a whole lot better than he did in September. His story is not yet over. **E**

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