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Principles of Peak Performance

Gold Medal Employees and Organizations

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Sports performance inspires us. There is something wonderful about seeing an athlete at his or her best. Ski enthusiasts were horrified to see Picabo Street take a terrible fall less than two weeks before the 1998 Winter Olympics. She broke her favorite downhill skis and suffered injuries and a concussion. The chances of a championship performance at the Olympics looked slim. Her fans were thrilled to see Picabo bounce back at Nagano to ski with thrilling abandon in the Women's Super-G and win the gold medal.

Peak performance stories are inspiring to us, especially when a Picabo Street comes back from overwhelming odds to win. We love that story because it speaks to us of our own hopes that we could also be so resilient. Why shouldn't we come back against all odds to triumph? We know peak performers because of how they react to difficulty. Resilience is demonstrated in the refiner's fire of adversity; weakness and vacillation are burned away and the pure gold of character emerges.

Isn't the same thing true of organizations? Think of the stories of a company coming back after adversity, of triumph after times of testing. The best qualities of leadership are shown when difficulties surround the company yet the company is not defeated. Just as individuals can be resilient, can bounce back from trials, so also teams and groups can show resilient qualities under fire.

What do we know?

Psychologists have been learning a good deal about resilience in the past few years. We have learned what kinds of thinking habits go into predicting a resilient response to some kind of setback. What we call character, grace under pressure, or old-fashioned courage is now known to be the result of habits that have become automatic. And while it is true that the most resilient among us, the Picabo Streets who bounce back quickly from trials and even defeats, are "born that way," studying those resilient individuals helps us to discover what thinking habits support resilience.

Resilient thinking habits can be internalized and utilized by anyone. If we really understood adversity, and if we practiced these habits of resiliency, we would see that it is in difficulty that people have the chance to shine, to rise to their highest potential. Here are some keys to using those powerful habits in your life and in your organization.

1. Acknowledge truth:

Assume a negative event has occurred. How do you handle it? Acknowledge the bad event and your own feelings then move on quickly. When the bad event happens, the resilient person talks openly about the bad event and how it feels. There is a sense of relief that we get when we acknowledge our reaction to the bad event.

And in your organization, leaders who acknowledge bad news quickly and openly are more trusted than those who do not. In fact, the most destructive thing the leader can do is to ignore or deny the bad news. Rumors will run rampant, and trust plummets. When that happens, your people are spending more of their energy thinking and talking about their own feelings about the organization than they are in focusing on meeting customer needs.

2. Move beyond the setback:

When you acknowledge the setback and your own feelings about it, you may notice a sense of getting some perspective. The resilient person understands that the feelings of discouragement, resentment, or frustration are natural. At the same time, they cultivate an attitude that things are always changing. The only permanent thing is change. Thinking about the loss or setback is only natural, and at the same time, those thoughts will pass. If you do understand that, you will also see something else: Thoughts do not have to control you. You can think about the loss but you can also think about your own thoughts. You might observe that they are just thoughts, and eventually they will pass.

3. I am to blame . . . but . . .

Limit your self-blame to things you can change or control, and discard thoughts of self-blame that focus on “character.” People who talk about how they were foolish or stupid are blaming themselves, but these are things that are very hard to control. Think about something you can learn or some habit you can develop to help deal with this type of situation. Assume your character is fine just as it is and don’t give it any more thought. Promote a quality of self-acceptance. Resilient people don’t spend any time trying to analyze their character, they analyze what they need to learn or develop and get on with that learning. They decide what they will do, and they do it.

4. Cultivate happiness:

Emphasize enthusiasm and practice a habit of happiness. The resilient person cultivates a habit of noticing the positive parts of life. Victor Frankl wrote movingly of how he found joy even though he was a slave laborer in a Nazi concentration camp. While working one day, he found he was noticing the joyful song of a bird. He realized the bird felt joy, and by cultivating an ability to identify with that bird, he felt that joy himself.

As you move through meetings, interviews, and even chance encounters, the feelings in your heart will naturally show up. If those feelings are happy ones, your whole organization will benefit. Your leadership is not a role you can take off like a coat. It is part of who you are, and to the extent that you show a genuine sense of happiness, everyone will notice that.

While many people learned these habits from childhood, others have not. The great thing about being a human being is that we can decide what habits we wish to cultivate and then go out and cultivate them. We are truly our own creators. As a business or organizational leader, as you create yourself, you are creating your organization, and in that you are creating your own success, the success of others, and a deeply satisfying life.

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And she is a breathtaking goalie. Watching her deny the opposing team’s goals is inspiring and astonishing.