

# The future of great leadership lies in resilience

## Part 3

By Anke Weidling and Engin Guven

True leaders stand out in a crisis. And for sure, the corona pandemic is a crisis like no other – and one that’s severely testing leaders. How leaders react to the repercussions, how quickly they recover and the lessons they choose to learn will determine whether legacies are built or lost in the coming months.

So, precisely which competencies will the next generation of leaders need to steer their organization through future storms of similar providence, length and severity? At Egon Zehnder we believe that great leaders need to harness and build up resilience. To assess the future of leadership and the respective role of resilience, Egon Zehnder surveyed a number of leading chief human resources officers (CHROs)\*, asking them which characteristics they consider will be important for leaders to succeed in the next normal. CHROs are accurate seismographs for leadership throughout the corporate world and we examine their answers in the following series of articles.

## Drawing on individual resilience to transfer strength to others

*Leading* with resilience is not merely about being self-resilient and creating an environment for others to be resilient. Instead, it’s about building an adaptive organization that’s fit for the complex environment leaders will keep on facing post-COVID. It’s about expanding the five dimensions of resilience and applying them to the entire organization.

Organizational resilience is an emerging research topic. Jim Collins and Stanford professor Morten T. Hansen are among the first to explore it further. Their book “Great by Choice” provides a good overview of what makes an organization resilient, examining companies that thrive in complexity and perform exceptionally well in extremely challenging environments.

They found that highly effective leaders in these circumstances have great powers of analysis: they focus on what's working well, figure out why it's working, and build on these proven foundations. As Collins and Hansen suggest in "Great by Choice", "It's what you do before the storm comes that most determines how well you'll do when the storm comes."

Moreover, these leaders deliberately learn. They're also fanatical about working with the right people, "about getting the right people on the bus and into the right seats". They channel their egos and intensity into something larger than self, namely their companies and their purposes and define themselves by their impact and contribution. These extraordinary leaders focus on their company's strengths and successes and continuously prepare for challenges that may arise. And during times of uncertainty, they look at empirical evidence and rely on direct observation to build a foundation for decisions and actions regardless of what lies ahead. For as Collins and Hansen state, "There will be no 'new normal.' There will only be a continuous series of 'not normal' times (...). The next Great Disruption will come, and the next one after that, and the next one after that, forever."

All of the authors' points perfectly exemplify Egon Zehnder's own thoughts about resilient organizations, which it defines according to the following five dimensions:

- **A healthy core** – knowing what an organization is good at; looking inwards at its operating model, and ensuring it can serve markets, meet goals and deliver decisions.
- **A thriving context** – knowing who is good for them; looking outwards at how an organization interacts with its shareholders, customers, and suppliers.
- **Meaningful purpose** – knowing the "why" of an organization; understanding its values and its contribution to the world.
- **People strengths** – knowing and developing the strengths of its people.
- **Perspective** – knowing how to harness data and actively using big data to innovate the business model.

What does our survey\* tell us about the current levels of organizational resilience?

Responses reveal that executives spend the most time focusing on developing a company's healthy core and the least time on perspective. However, leaders need clear perspective to address both today's and tomorrow's business imperatives.

To build a strong organization, leaders need to look primarily for empirical evidence, like the leaders researched by Collins and Hansen who "rely upon direct observation, practical experimentation, and direct engagement with tangible evidence" instead of looking towards other people, conventional wisdom, authority figures, or peers when faced with uncertainty. Leaders harnessing resilience deliberately take a step back and reflect on how well they're doing as regards leading themselves, their teams and their organization.

At Egon Zehnder we advise leaders to:

1. Collect data on the status quo, e.g. via our online Pulse Checks on individual, team, and organizational resilience.
2. Hold regular (e.g. monthly) “retrospectives”, borrowing from Agile software development, where these are meetings held at the end of an Agile iteration.
3. Reflect on the following questions – loved: what went well in the last month? Learned: what are new capabilities we have built? New insights we have gained? Longed for: what didn’t go well? Where did we fail? Double-Loop-Learned: what will we harness going forward? What do we need to mitigate in order to be successful in the next normal?

Whatever lies ahead for executives, there is one trait that leaders will need to lead in this new world as time and again they are forced to meet, adapt and learn from ever-changing challenges. And that leadership trait is resilience. To conclude with the words of Jim Collins, taken from his book series “Good to Great”, “Resiliency, not perfection, is the signature of greatness.”

*\* The survey responses are taken from a sample of 47 CHROs in Turkey.*

*Bridges, William (2004): Transitions: making sense of life’s changes: Strategies for coping the difficult, painful, and confusing times in your life. DaCapo Press*

*Collins, J. & Hansen, Morten T. (2011): Great by choice: Uncertainty, chaos, and luck – why some thrive despite them all. Harper*

*For more information, contact:*



**Anke Weidling**  
Berlin  
anke.weidling@egonzehnder.com  
+49 30 32 79 55 96



**Engin Guven**  
Istanbul  
engin.guven@egonzehnder.com  
+90 212 381 66 22

## About Egon Zehnder

Egon Zehnder is the world’s preeminent leadership consulting firm, sharing one goal: to help people and organizations transform. Our services include: Leadership development, individual, team and organizational effectiveness, CEO search and succession, executive search and assessment, Board advisory, and cultural transformation.

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