



Leaders should be proactive, not reactionary, and challenge their Soldiers to leverage their resiliency through experience and learning (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

Exposure Leads to Resiliency

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The post-war establishment of the Veterans Administration and The National Institute of Mental Health emphasized the mental illness disease model (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Subsequently, post-World War II, psychology

professionals predominantly use psychopathology in their treatment modalities (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). However, such strategies are reactionary and fail to leverage the proactive resiliency benefits.

According to Krasikova et al. (2015), proactive

measures decreased the likelihood of future (post-deployment) mental health and dysfunctional behavior diagnoses (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). Resiliency results from exposure, deliberately developing psychological experience and learning.

Exposure

Exposure (i.e., experience) facilitates personality changes from external pressures and innate physiological desires for survival (Hudson & Fraley, 2015). Colloquially, they are commonly referred to as the fight or flight mode. Fight or flight refers to physiological instinctive reactions brought on by stressful or scary situations that allow one to survive; however, according to Luthans and Youssef (2017), thoughtfully designed intentional interventions produce similar effects.

For example, I reported to basic combat training (BCT) on April 22, 2002, as a fearful young man who'd never been away from home; in fact, I lived at home until I was married. Reporting to BCT was my lifeline, an opportunity to create a life for my family after several miserable failures.

BCT is a thoughtfully designed intentional intervention that exposes Soldiers to pressure meant to develop and maximize their performance. I developed physical fitness and resilience; I completed the confidence course and rappelled down Victory tower. Before then, I'd never run a mile or rappelled from a tower. I failed my physical fitness assessment at the reception battalion and shouldn't have shipped to basic training - however, an NCO who believed in my resilience more than I intervened (really, she trusted the BCT process and the drill sergeants' ability to train Soldiers) and I shipped to BCT. Her intentional intervention allowed me to develop the foundational elements of psychological capital.

Deliberately Developing Psychological Capital

According to Merriam-Webster, capital is an asset that adds value (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Psychological capital is the competencies and attributes developed through intentional and incidental exposures that cultivate hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (HERO) (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017).

Hope consists of two qualities, positive momentum and the ability to develop the means (as well as alternative means) to achieve goals. Efficacy is the confidence to harness momentum to execute the chosen



Basic Combat Training is the process in transforming civilian volunteers into Soldiers. This training is a thoughtfully designed intentional intervention that exposes Soldiers to pressure to develop and maximize their performance. (US Army photo by Robin Hicks)

pathways successfully. Successful experiences, positive feedback, emotional alignment, and learning are the critical elements of efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

Resilience is the ability to rebound from failures, adversity, and the conflict of working with unfamiliar individuals - people we do not like (Luthans, 2002). Optimism is the ability to interpret adverse outcomes or situations as temporal and attribute success to intentional choices we make to achieve our goals (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). The intentional learning model used in BCT enabled me to become a HERO.

During BCT I was exposed to skills I'd never used before. I was expected to run two miles, ruck with relatively heavy loads, accurately fire various weapons systems, operate under increasingly stressful conditions with little sleep, and function as part of a team - with people I'd never met before.

Each challenge ends in successes, failures, and achievements, reinforcing hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (Holiday, 2014; Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). I learned to develop the psychological capital necessary to achieve my goal of creating a better life for my family; the obstacles determined my success.

Learning

Learning cannot be over-emphasized. It is integral to maximizing our performance. It combines personal risk mitigation measures enabling Soldiers to achieve their goals (Masten et al., 2009).

Furthermore, using real-time perspective to view each obstacle (Holiday, 2014) as an opportunity for growth and advancement is empirically linked to exceptional

outcomes (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). Therefore, learning is an active process that entails adjusting to adversity and success – our goals are not merely objective measures written on a piece of paper; they are our motives (i.e., purpose) and reflect why we chose our path in life (Buckingham & Goodall, 2019).

Conclusion

Exposure, psychological capital, and learning represent

the framework that enabled me to develop from a troubled young man into a Soldier who enjoyed fantastic success in the Army and life. These are the characteristics and attributes all leaders must deliberately and intelligently embed in training exercises and Soldiers must deliberately develop to achieve their goals. We must be proactive, not reactionary, by challenging Soldiers to leverage their resiliency through experience and learning. ■

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