

**FAST READ:** How can you effectively recover if you stumble? You need to work at it, deliberately choosing to grow when times are trying. An executive coach offers six ways to build your bounce-back: develop support networks, clarify your purpose, build self-awareness, enhance self-care, actualize strengths and broaden your coping strategies.

**TAGS > RESILIENCY, LEADERSHIP**

# Get Your Bounce Back

Successful leadership requires resiliency: the ability to function and adapt in tough times. And the good news is it's a skill you can cultivate.

**BY KEVIN NOURSE**





**The 10-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina striking New Orleans is an excellent reminder of the importance of resilient leadership. That crisis illuminated how effective leadership is critical to preparing for, responding to and recovering from disaster. The capacity of leaders to lead effectively in the midst of the chaos became a life-and-death proposition in some cases, and it influenced the extent to which organizations recovered.**

Although most speech-language-hearing professionals are not often in life-and-death situations, many of you serve in—or strive to serve in—leadership roles that require you to face significant challenges. As was the case for leaders during Katrina, navigating these challenges requires you to draw on your resiliency.

What is resiliency? It's the ability to function and adapt despite tough circumstances. And it's a skill you can develop and maintain.

My experiences and research have informed my perspectives on this important aspect of leadership. In the late 1990s I was a human resources director with seven staff members and a charge to guide my organization through an ugly downsizing. I had chosen the human resources profession because of my passion for supporting development of people, so being asked to do the complete opposite as part of my role was a tremendously stressful experience. Making choices on whom to retain and fire called forth a significant need to maintain my own resiliency as a manager.

I subsequently decided to downsize myself and launch my own consulting and coaching practice in 2001. A major focus was providing transition support for people who had lost their jobs after

9/11. Some of my clients reframed the job loss into an opportunity to pursue their career passions. Now, I share what I've learned from them and others about resiliency with communication sciences and disorders (CSD) professionals in ASHA's Leadership Development Program ([on.asha.org/ashaldp](http://on.asha.org/ashaldp)). The strategies I teach are meant to help these CSD professionals advance their careers, and they can do the same for you.

### **Emergence of resiliency**

Humans have evolved to adapt to threats in their environments. Our very survival depends on this. When faced with tough times, people draw on internal and external resources to cope. Potential outcomes of this coping process include:

- Succumbing to the adversity and giving up.
- Surviving the situation but experiencing some impairment in your ability to function.
- Bouncing back to your pre-adversity level of functioning (resiliency).
- Thriving: transformation and growth from the adversity, resulting in a higher level of functioning.



## Get Your Bounce Back

To thrive, a person must be resilient and first return to a baseline level of functioning after a tough situation. The ability to thrive and grow involves intentional choice. This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and when we commit to growing from tough times, in most cases we do.

Several decades ago a major shift happened in the field of psychology. The traditional medical model—with its emphasis on repairing people—shifted to emphasize human potential and strength. One of the earliest positive psychology researchers who explored resiliency in the face of adversity was Viktor Frankl, an Austrian psychologist and writer who survived as a prisoner during the Holocaust. Frankl observed victims in the concentration camps who were resilient in the face of extreme conditions.

In his book “Man’s Search for Meaning,” published in 1946, he concluded that several key factors enabled these prisoners to maintain their resiliency despite their circumstances. One was their ability to choose their attitude toward their experiences. Another was making meaning of their adversity. Frankl himself described how he kept his hope alive by envisioning himself lecturing to students about his experiences in the camps after being freed from them.

Fast-forward to 1955, the year psychologists Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith began a study tracking 700 children on the Hawaiian island of Kauai from birth until age 40. Out of this early research, two models of resiliency emerged: the challenge model and the protective factors model. The challenge model assumes that people can increase their resiliency when gradually exposed to challenges over time. By successfully engaging these challenges, they inoculate themselves against future challenges, much like lifting increasingly heavy weights builds muscle. The other model of resiliency recognizes that certain protective factors like optimism or social support are critical for helping a person through tough times. By establishing these internal and external resources in advance, a person is more likely to remain resilient.

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### Leadership resiliency

Resiliency is critical for leaders in two domains: the development of it while journeying to a leadership position and the sustenance of it once that position is attained. The journey from individual contributor to a management position is often fraught with setbacks and failures.

Many emerging leaders are asked to participate in “stretch” work assignments that require them to step up their game and risk failure. Resiliency is critical to clearing these hurdles, says Deborah Adamczyk Dixon, ASHA director of school services. “It helps those on the path into leadership roles keep their energy level up and prevents them from giving up,” she says.

For those already in management, recovering and learning from adversity can mean success instead of failure. For example, resiliency is essential for leaders in the health care arena, says Janet Brown, ASHA director of health care services, because the industry is “squeezing people to their limits in an effort to save money.”

In this atmosphere, staff look to their leaders for guidance and reassurance, she notes. “The amount of change happening now in health care organizations, combined with the uncertainty of what is to come, requires that managers be able to model resiliency for staff who may feel anxious and fear for their jobs,” Brown says. “There is a major shift from qualitative to quantitatively oriented performance metrics, and because we are such a caring profession, it can make it difficult to show our value to administrators.”

The school setting presents its own set of challenges. For example, SLPs or audiologists who become special-education directors may feel alone and without support. Other challenges include:

- Additional demands for new credentials.
- Projects that require your leadership but that don’t give you a formal management title.
- Limited understanding of or respect for your role as a CSD professional.
- Thorny regulatory, policy, legal and ethical issues.
- Financial and budgetary demands to do more with less, limiting the availability of staffing and tangible resources.



## Resiliency traits

In response to these industry challenges, an increasing number of organizations have identified resiliency as essential for effective leadership. The U.S. Office of Personnel Management, for example, named change leadership a core requirement of effective leaders—and one of the enabling competencies for this is resiliency.

The U.S. Army has resiliency training programs to help soldiers more effectively cope with effects of battle and to educate leaders about supporting service members.

What are some commonalities among resilient leaders? They:

- Anticipate emerging challenges and prepare for them in advance, thereby minimizing potentially negative impacts.
- Draw on internal and external coping resources to respond powerfully in crisis and maintain a calm demeanor.
- Avoid getting mired in failure and recover quickly from setbacks.
- Learn from their challenges to build effectiveness.
- Achieve greater influence with others based on their response to challenges.
- Set more ambitious goals and maintain their optimism despite disappointments, thereby achieving greater outcomes.

## Build your own resiliency

How do people thrive in the face of adversity? Most of us have to work at it, deliberately choosing to grow despite tough times. That's what talent-management consultant Lynn Schmidt and I have found in our recent research efforts. Based on these findings, we developed the Intentional Resiliency framework, consisting of six strategies to enhance or sustain resiliency:

### Develop support networks.

Resilient people cultivate professional networks that function

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like safety nets when they face adversity. Such a network includes trusted colleagues from your organization, profession and industry sector. For example, if you are working in a school environment, to what extent do you have professional supports and connections outside of your school or your professional role? The ASHA Leadership Development Program (LDP) includes the use of five-member learning teams that many participants have described as one of the best parts of the program. Many continue to meet with their learning teams long after they complete the program, forming success teams to help them with career challenges.

**Clarify purpose.** Frankl's story of his experiences during the Holocaust is a powerful example of how vision helps people sustain their resiliency. An authentic vision and clear purpose help us maintain our perspective and build optimism and hope. In the LDP, we review Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech as a powerful example of a compelling vision that inspired the social justice movement in 1963 and helped restore the resiliency of activists who had faced dark days. We also invite participants to formulate a vision of themselves as high-functioning leaders.

**Build self-awareness.** Just as a thermostat helps regulate the temperature in a building, self-awareness helps leaders manage their thoughts and behaviors. When a thermostat detects the temperature is too hot or cold, it prompts action to regain balance. It is impossible to regulate your own resiliency if you don't know when you're in danger of losing it. In the LDP, participants complete an emotional intelligence self-assessment tool and formulate developmental goals. LDP graduate Maura Fox, an SLP at the Fox Center for Awakening Learning Potential in Glens Falls, New York, explained that she "explored how my emotions impacted my thinking and vice versa ... I realized that I could control my thoughts and [this] could open doors for me."

**Enhance self-care.** Leadership resiliency rests on physical resiliency. If you are exhausted, over-caffeinated,

and eating an unhealthy diet, the stress hormone cortisol will flow, and your mood and motivation will ebb. I have had clients neglect their self-care and, as a result, overreact to others without realizing it—and damage trusted relationships. Amanda Tarr, a Denver-area medical SLP and LDP alum, explains that when she least feels like exercising or eating well, "it's a double-edged sword since that is the time you need to do it the most." She practices self-care by running, listening to motivational music and spending time in the mountains.

**Actualize strengths.** Resilient people know what they are good at, and develop and tap into these strengths. As a result, they are often better equipped to assert themselves and their ideas confidently and powerfully. In some cases, they may recognize the need to find a different work environment that better plays to their strengths. Such was the case for SLP Seijra Toogood, an LDP alum who recently accepted a job with the District of Columbia Public Schools, an organization that better fit her strengths and interests. "I was just surviving in the craziness of my job and became more aware that it wasn't the job for me," she explains. "This coincided with my growing self-confidence in my leadership skills."

**Broaden coping strategies.** Leaders who are resilient develop and practice multiple coping strategies. Rather than getting trapped in their emotional reactions to adversity, they problem-solve: They create a plan, formulate a vision, ask for help and find ways to get perspective. Reframing failure into a learning opportunity is key.

Stepping into a leadership role offers greater opportunities to make a difference, but it also involves greater challenges and potential setbacks. By proactively developing and maintaining your resiliency using these strategies, you can ensure that you not only survive tough times, but that you thrive. 🔄

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**Kevin Nourse** is an executive coach and facilitator based in Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles. He is co-authoring a book with Lynn Schmidt, "Intentional Resiliency: Six Powerful Strategies for Women to Thrive at Work."

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