Resilience: a Sum or a Product Game?

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Mid December 2015 during the Chief of Transformation Conference I had for the first time a discussion on resilience. One of my colleagues was preparing a paper on this new buzzword. As the drama at the centre stage was not that attractive, I couldn't help reading her first conceptual ideas. Soon we were discussing the topic, even after the conference was over.

Having the resilience to withstand shocks like natural disasters, failure of critical infrastructure, military or terrorist attacks is crucial to security and stability. Resilience is a society's ability to avoid, absorb and recover from these shocks without suffering complete failure through a combination of civilian, economic, commercial and military means. It is the power to return to the (near) original posture.

In February 2016, Defence Ministers of the NATO nations assessed the Alliance-wide state of civil preparedness and agreed on seven baseline requirements for national resilience. These cover sectors essential for the Alliance's security: continuity of government, energy, population movements, food and water resources, ability to cope with mass casualties, civil communications, and civil transportation. The quest for improving resilience is on.

Last week I attended a conference on resilience hoping that it would give me more insight on this topic. I was looking on how to enhance resilience of an organisation, of a population. My major question was if resilience would be enhanced when a big nation joins up with a smaller one?

The Individual Level

The seminar did not provide the answers I was looking for. I should have known it because the speakers were MDs, psychologists and consultants. Professionals interested in getting sick people or organisations better, most not concerned in how to improve one's health. It is not because the patient is no longer ill, that he is healthy.

At an individual level resilience is the ability to bounce back after a traumatic event or illness. It is clear that resilience has an individual dimension, an important one that influences the collective result. It is also interesting to look at that level in order to learn from it as a collective, the sum of individuals. Resilience seems to be greater when a person can combine 3 traits (the 3Cs): control, challenge, commitment.

- The more control we perceive – so it must not be real control - to have over the situation, the less we have difficulty to cope with it[1].

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[1] The late Dr. Viktor Frankyl, a psychiatrist who was a prisoner in the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz, said the one thing that you cannot take away from a person is their choice of how they deal with the difficult situations which they find themselves in.

- Challenge is about how we perceive the events that occur in our lives; seeing our difficulties as challenges rather than as threats and accepting that the only thing in life that is constant, is change. If we view change as a total threat or see every difficulty we encounter as threatening to us then this is going to trigger a stronger 'fight or flight' response than if we see event as a challenge. Stress hardy people do not spend time ruminating over why things have to change, they are not frightened by it, they accept it as being a natural part of life, not a threat but an opportunity to learn and grow.
- Commitment means having a purpose. When committed to something we tend to be motivated to put in more effort and to be less distracted by external factors.

Reading the list above it is no wonder that people who are used to work in traumatic situations (like fire-fighters, military, emergency response teams) have drilled-in reactions (control), consider their work as challenging, and are highly motivated (commitment). For a society this means that in times of crisis its leaders must give at least the impression, through actions and communication, that they have a certain degree of control over the situation, explain that the situation is a crisis but also an opportunity, and demonstrate that they are committed, determined to solve it[2].

The Organisational Level

However within this article I want to limit the application to a military point of view although this does not mean that I will consider only resilience in the face of an external military aggression. Collective resilience must be analysed in regard to the resistance against such an attack (like a traumatic event at the personal level) and against a slow infiltration (an illness) like a disinformation campaign or a hybrid warfare strategy. Resilience is proactive in positioning the organisation to survive and thrive given known and unknown challenges.

Looking at the world and our history it seems that we are evolving to a global society that is less resilience. The ever increasing level of individuality with a higher attachment on life, of luxury with a higher dependency on things, of real-time connectivity through social media making remote crises personal, make people's perception of a high control on things prone to be shattered more easily. Resilience that came natural must now be built into organisations and societies.
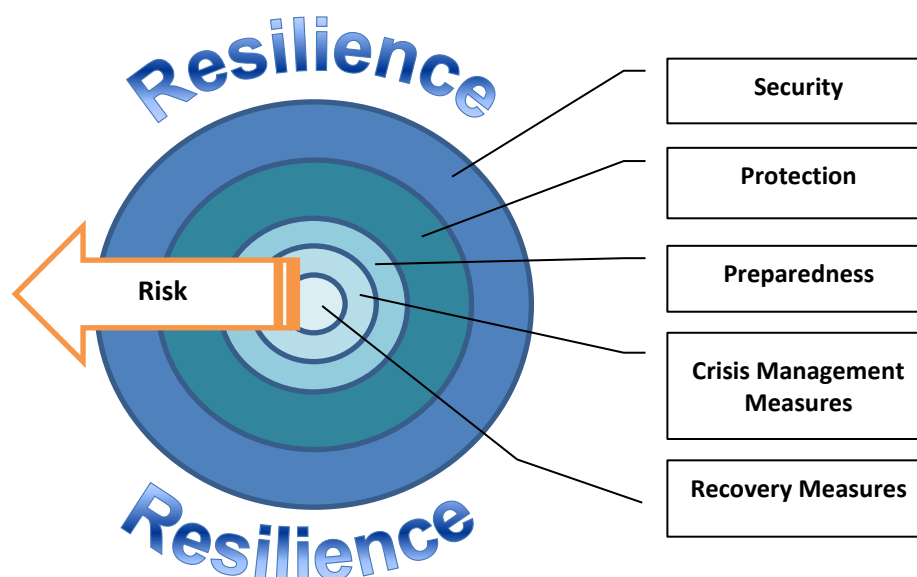
Although resilience greatly depends on effective crisis management it is enhanced by an integrated combination of approaches[3].

- **Risk management** consists of formal processes to identify threats and vulnerabilities (and opportunities), and the mitigation approaches it will employ. Risk management is moving toward a more proactive focus, but the traditional focus has been defensive in nature. Identifying and managing risks is arguably the most important factor in achieving resilience; however, it is one of many factors. Resiliency has a healthy consideration of posturing for future opportunities.

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[2] Looking it a bit different at it, resilience is the combination of the preparatory work to fend off harm with the ability to start the first Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) or Observe-Orient-Decide-Act (OODA) loop initiating constructive actions.

[3] Approach comprises aspects like preparation, documentation, education, training and exercise.

- **Security**, whether applied to physical, financial, personnel, cyber information or any other asset, entails the preventive measures against danger or loss. A significant breach in security could certainly impair an organisation's ability to exist, and thus is a critical concept underlying the organisation's capacity to be resilient. Security, as generally practiced, provides specific protection against identified or projected circumstances.
- **Protection** is often associated with the set of actions to harden assets to withstand identified contingencies, mitigate the damage, or make them a less attractive target. The focus is to maintain the assets' core function and ward off harm. Organisations plan for protection against specific threats or categories of threats. Resilience approaches the issue from a standpoint of taking reasonable protective actions, but having alternative capabilities as needed or the ability to withstand the disruption.
- **Preparedness** consists of the plans of actions for when the disaster or crisis strikes. Preparedness efforts are very specific sets of tactical actions (e.g. evacuation plans, sheltering plans, rehearsals, and stockpiles) that will be taken to mitigate the effects of predicted disasters/crises situations. Resilience requires prudent and serious attention to preparations for known likely disasters, particularly those that are highly likely. Resiliency would address preparedness as a specific emergency management business function; but more importantly, as being impacted by numerous functions across the organisation.
- **Crisis management measures** refer to the set of actions and capabilities in place to effectively respond to and contain a situation. The situation can vary from natural, man-made, or environmental challenges, whether internally or externally generated. Most consider crisis management to largely consist of actions that go into play when the crisis occurs and subside after it is considered 'over'. There are plans and preparations, but the actions are not often dealt with as part of normal operations. Business Continuity Management is a subset of crisis management as it focuses on the survival of the organisation as a precondition to return to normal.
- **Recovery measures** are tools and services designed to support the transition from withstanding the crisis treatment to recovery to normal business. This last part creates the capability to bounce back to a situation similar to the one before the crisis.

In short, this integrated approach lifts the 3Cs at an organisational level. It is about the perception of control through pre-planned measures to communicate and act, accepting change as a challenge by discussing action plans, and to take up the challenge by being committed to be prepared to deal with the worst, the unexpected, and the unknown[4].

Sum or Product

But what about alliances? It is quite intuitive that a smaller nation could increase its resilience by joining a big nation. Having more resources should result in being a harder target and an increased ability to bounce back. Right? Let's assume for the sake of discussion that this statement is true. Then, why would a big nation be interested in stepping into an alliance with a small nation? If the weakest link determines the strength of the combination, a big nation has no interest in joining up[5]. Or is resilience just a matter of adding up resources so that even a small contribution helps? Is the accumulation of resources the way to enhance resilience?

It would be in a one-dimensional world where danger is coming from one direction, but that is not how the real world looks like. Danger is lurking form all sides and on all levels of society. So, like in the Domino Theory of the Cold War era which held that if one country fell under communist influence or control, its neighbouring countries would soon follow, just adding resources is not the way to go. More of the same does not enhance resilience. This also means that being big isn't necessarily better. So what does the trick?

Having access to lots of resources certainly helps, but it is more important and useful to accumulate more options to react. The more, flexible answers, the better the chances to withstand all kinds of crises. Diversity in thinking patterns and approaches, the 'raison d'être' of jointness[6], combined with the willingness to learn from each other increases the success rate so elegantly expressed by Darwin's 'Survival of the fittest'. A big nation has an interest in joining up with a small one with a different culture. Diversity combined with a common goal is key to strong, mutually resilience increasing alliances[7].

Diversity to Enhance Resilience

Resilience, the combination of civil preparedness and military capacity, is a society's ability to resist and recover easily and quickly from crises. This ability can be enhanced by an integrated approach to stay in (perceived) control before, during and in the aftermath of sudden or continuous crises. The more different options in the portfolio, the better the chances of national survival (and recovery).

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[4] Measures designed to meet identified, known crises providing the flexibility in use are the only preparation for the unknown. Example: evacuation measures designed to evacuate a building in case of a fire, may be used for 'similar' dangers like an EOD in that building.

[5] Of course there may be other reasons (e.g. political, utility as a buffer) for such cooperation.

[6] Jointness as a true cooperation of different branches in the military, a 'Gentse waterzooi' and not a 'Stoemp'.

[7] A loose alliance may be a weakness instead of strength.

This broad spectrum of options can be achieved through diversity in thinking and approaches making intercultural alliances based on common goals key to enhance resilience.