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**WHITE PAPER**

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# **A Positive Psychology Approach to Helping Your Employees Become More Resilient**

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**4 Steps to Foster Resilience in Your Team**

Yvonne Kinney, PhD, Principal  
[consultingsolutions-llc.com](http://consultingsolutions-llc.com)



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## Executive Summary

The importance of resilience among employees in today's modern workplace cannot be overstated. As corporate environments grow increasingly complex and demanding, cultivating resilience—the capacity to navigate adversity and bounce back from challenges—among a company's employee base is critical for maintaining productivity and promoting employee well-being.

Researchers in organizational psychology now recognize organizations' roles in fostering a specific type of resilience among those they employ, appropriately called employee resilience (Kuntz, Naswall, & Malinen, 2016). In this context, employee resilience is understood as a product of both individual characteristics and the organizational environment (Kuntz et al., 2016), with the adaptability of organizations being supported by the resilience of their employees.

Recent research illustrates the correlations between employee resilience and these individuals' positive contributions to their employer organizations. Higher levels of employee resilience have been shown to correlate with increased job satisfaction, work productivity, and reduced absenteeism (Shatté, Perlman, Smith, & Lynch, 2017). Resilient employees are more likely to adapt effectively to changes while maintaining high performance levels (Britt et al., 2016), cope with stress in a constructive manner (Joyce et al., 2018), and ultimately contribute more meaningfully to their work environments (Shatté et al., 2017).

Positive psychology, the scientific study of well-being and optimal human functioning (Seligman, 2011), can play a significant role in fostering both personal resilience and employee resilience (Kurtz et al., 2016, 2017). A positive psychology framework focuses on promoting strengths, positive emotions, and constructive behaviors, making it a beneficial approach for empowering employees to build resilience in the workplace.

This white paper explores the role of positive psychology in fostering greater employee resilience in the workplace, helping cultivate an adaptive, engaged, and productive workforce. This discussion culminates in a four-step, multipronged approach that organizations can use to begin enhancing resilience among their employees.

By leveraging the principles of positive psychology, organizations across industries can help employees cultivate resilience, and along with it, the ability to effectively navigate the complexities of the professional world—ultimately benefitting the entire organization.

## Introduction

To understand how positive psychology can enhance resilience among employees, it is necessary to first establish a clear understanding of how we are defining the key concepts in this white paper.

At an individual level, individual or personal resilience is defined as one's ability to overcome adversity, failure, and conflict (Luthans, 2002) using personal, social, and psychological assets (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). In the context of the workplace, resilience pertains to an employee's ability to recover from challenges and excel in their professional role in spite of those challenges.

The groundbreaking research of Joanna Kuntz and colleagues (2016, 2017) laid the foundation for the emerging employee resilience theory, where employee resilience is understood as "the behavioral capability to leverage work resources in order to ensure continual adaptation, well-being, and growth at work, supported by the organization" (Kuntz et al., 2017, p. 224). This conceptualization emphasizes the role that organizations play in facilitating the development of employee resilience (Kuntz et al., 2017).

Employers that approach employee resilience as a capability that can be developed and that is supported by continual learning, and that focus on providing the necessary organizational resources to support employee resilience development, have found success in increasing organizational adaptability and resilience (Kuntz et al., 2017; Tonkin et al., 2018; Vanhove et al., 2016).

Positive Psychology, a branch of psychology that focuses on the study and promotion of positive aspects of human experience, including happiness, gratitude, and inner strength (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), has shown promise as a framework for development of employee resilience at an organizational level (Aikens et al., 2014; Haverman et al., 2013; Kuntz et al., 2017; Meyers et al., 2013).

Understanding these concepts and their interrelationships provides a critical foundation for exploring how organizations can implement positive psychology principles to support development of employee resilience in the workplace.

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*It's essential to differentiate personal and employee resilience from organizational resilience. Organizational resilience generally refers to an organization's ability to respond to and recover from adverse events like disasters or financial crises (Lee, Vargo, & Seville, 2013).*

*Organizational resilience encompasses the organization's structures, processes, and culture that enable it to withstand and recover from crises. This term is often used in crisis management and disaster recovery fields.*

## Importance of Employee Resilience in Today's Business Environment

With the advent of hybrid and remote work structures, organizations face unique challenges in maintaining employee engagement and productivity. These new work structures have led to a dispersion of the workforce, making traditional management and engagement strategies less effective. Employees working remotely often report feelings of isolation and loneliness (Bareket-Bojmel, Chernyak-Hai, & Margalit, 2023) and struggle to balance work and personal life when working from home (Adisa, Ogbonnaya, & Adekoya, 2021; Kniffin et al., 2021).

In such a context, employee resilience plays a critical role. Given that remote workers with low levels of employee resilience experienced lower levels of job engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ojo, Fawehinmi, & Yusliza, 2021), devising organizational initiatives for employee resilience development are especially critical for organizations with hybrid and remote work environments to help them maintain high levels of productivity despite the stressors of a changing work paradigm (Britt et al., 2016; Joyce et al., 2018).

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## The Value of Resilience Among Employees

Employee resilience encompasses a group of behaviors rooted in adaptability, learning, and leveraging of one's network (Kuntz et al., 2016). This adapted checklist based on the research of Kuntz and colleagues (2016, 2017) provides a helpful foundation for establishing expectations around employee resilience in an organizational context:

### Employee Resilience Behavior Checklist

#### Adaptable Behaviors

- *Engages in personal and professional development as a result of changes in one's role*
- *Successfully manages resources to navigate a high workload*
- *Participates effectively in crisis management*

#### Learning Behaviors

- *Approaches mistakes as learning opportunities*
- *Requests feedback and uses it to improve one's work processes*
- *Regularly reassesses one's work performance to inform improvements*

#### Network-Based Behaviors

- *Collaborates with peers, supervisors, and other internal and external teams*
- *Seeks support and resources from others (supervisors, peers)*

The connection between employee resilience and productivity in the workplace is well documented in recent research. Resilient employees exhibit higher job satisfaction and work productivity while demonstrating lower absenteeism rates (Shatté et al., 2017), while employees with higher resilience levels also demonstrate better job performance and positive job attitudes (Avey et al., 2009).

Additional areas impacted by high levels of employee resilience include:

- **Employee Wellbeing** – Employee resilience is associated with reduced psychological distress and increased job satisfaction (Grant & Kinman, 2013), and has been shown to be a protective factor against stress and burnout to help enhance employee wellbeing (Moreno-Jiménez, Rodríguez-Muñoz, Pastor, Sanz-Vergel, & Garrosa, 2009; Robertson et al., 2015).
- **Organizational Resilience** – Organizations with more resilient employees are better able to manage operational disruptions and recover more quickly from setbacks (Kuntz et al., 2017; Liang & Cao, 2022; Sutcliffe, Vogus, & Dane, 2016). Employee resilience is also positively associated with organizational commitment (Avey, Wernsing, & Luthans, 2008).

These findings highlight the importance of employee resilience in both maintaining and enhancing workplace productivity, particularly in today's increasingly complex and multifaceted work environment amidst diverse workplace structures.

## Exploring Positive Psychology & PsyCap

Positive Psychology, founded by Martin Seligman in the late 1990s, focuses on positive human functioning and flourishing, promoting the factors that allow individuals and communities to thrive (Seligman, 1998). This framework places a particular emphasis on happiness, strengths, personal growth, and positive institutions.

An important concept that emerged from Positive Psychology is PsyCap, which includes a collection of four positive and adaptive psychological resources, specifically hope, optimism, self-efficacy, and resilience (Luthans et al., 2006). This set of psychological assets, including the capacity to recover from hardships (sometimes referred to as PsyCap resilience), signifies attitudinal and motivational elements that may support the development of resilient behaviors. In a workplace environment, PsyCap can be beneficial because it helps individuals establish self-awareness about their own performance improvement and supports managers in purposeful professional development of employees (Luthans et al., 2015).

### *Importance of PsyCap & Positive Psychology in the Workplace*

PsyCap has been found to be a significant determinant of employee performance and well-being in various work environments:

- **Healthcare.** PsyCap was found to be a protective factor that decreases the effects of psychological stressors on job satisfaction among frontline healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Caponnetto et al., 2022).
- **Law Enforcement.** Officers with higher levels of PsyCap were found to be more resistant to job stress and had lower rates of turnover intention (Avey, Patena, & West, 2006).
- **Family Business.** PsyCap was linked to greater work engagement and reduced family-work conflict (Memili, Zellweger, & Fang, 2013).

These findings underscore the universal value of PsyCap in supporting employee resilience and other workplace factors across different work environments. Considering the documented effectiveness of interventions rooted in a positive psychology and/or PsyCap framework for enhancing employee outcomes in the workplace (e.g., Avey et al., 2006; Caponnetto et al., 2022; Kuntz et al., 2017; Memili et al., 2013), organizations and their employees are increasingly favoring such interventions as a more appealing option compared to expensive, reactive approaches intended to enhance employee wellbeing (Meyers et al., 2013).

In fact, a meta-analysis of 39 randomized controlled trials, including both clinical and nonclinical samples, showed that positive psychology interventions initiated by organizations significantly improved psychological wellbeing (Haverman et al., 2013). Among these wellbeing interventions in an organizational context, two common factors included promoting positive feelings and thoughts (Aikens et al., 2014), and supplying the necessary resources to encourage resilient behaviors.

Below is a condensed list of types of positive psychology interventions that have been documented in recent research, adapted from Haverman et al. (2013):

- **Doing acts of kindness.** Self-help delivery (Buchanan, 2010)
- **Executive coaching.** Group and individual delivery (Grant, 2009)
- **Online mindfulness intervention.** Self-help delivery (Aikens et al., 2014)
- **ResilienceOnline.** Self-help delivery (Abbott, 2009)
- **Writing about best possible selves.** Self-help delivery (King, 2001)
- **Working for Wellness Program.** Group delivery (Page, 2012)
- **Positive future thinking.** Self-help delivery (Peters, 2010)
- **The Wellbeing Game.** Self-help delivery (Tonkin et al., 2018)

This extensive research demonstrates that shorter-term, easy-to-implement positive psychology initiatives can have a positive impact on employee resilience, and in turn, on employee wellbeing (Tonkin et al., 2018).

While targeted resilience-building interventions are a useful starting point, recent research supports a multipronged approach aimed at integrating resilience development activities and behaviors in the daily processes and functioning of an organization (Britt et al., 2016; Kuntz et al., 2016, 2017; Tonkin et al., 2018). The following four-step framework outlines our recommendations for implementing such an approach.

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## 4 Steps to Enhance Resilience Among Employees

The research makes a strong case for applying positive psychology principles to resilience-building initiatives at the organizational level. In line with the prevailing theory around employee resilience (Britt et al., 2016; Kuntz et al., 2016, 2017; Tonkin et al., 2018), we advocate for a multifaceted approach that involves activities that are incorporated into the daily functioning of the organization.

Based on our synthesis of previous studies and our consultants' own on-the-ground experience implementing similar resilience-building programs, we present this four-step guide for developing employee resilience at your organization.

### ***Step 1: Promote a Supportive Work Environment that Values Employees***

Organizations can create a supportive and psychologically safe work environment where employees feel valued, respected, and are encouraged to express their thoughts and concerns (Catmull, 2014; Edmondson, 1999; Rozovsky, 2015). When employees feel psychologically safe, they share a belief that they are collectively safe for interpersonal risk-taking (Edmondson, 1999). A psychologically safe environment is shown to foster openness, creativity, and learning.

Get started with these action items:

- Implement open-door policies giving employees open access to supervisors and leadership.
- When feasible, offer flexible work arrangements that help facilitate work-life integration.
- Provide ongoing, informal and formal recognition to employees for both large and small achievements.
- Conduct regular team-building activities to foster trust and engagement among colleagues. Implement wellness initiatives rooted in positive psychology like mindfulness workshops, The Wellbeing Game (Tonkin et al., 2018), and similar interventions. Provide mental health resources (and benefits when possible).
- Leaders perform “rounding” (Studer, 2003) in their division and amongst their team(s) where they consistently engage with and ask focused questions of employees with the goal of nurturing relationships, staying tuned in to wins, challenges, and areas for systems improvement. In remote work environments, this can take the form of regular one-on-one meetings.

### ***Step 2: Provide Ongoing Employee Development***

The importance of ongoing employee development underscores the interdependence of employee resilience and organizational resilience. A combination of leadership, operational processes, and cultural values help facilitate the ongoing development of an organization's talent base (Kuntz et al., 2017; Nilikant et al., 2016). This involves development of employee work competencies and interpersonal skills at all levels, not just the executive or senior management level. Build a foundation with these actions:

- Provide leadership development specifically focused on fostering supportive leadership styles like transformational leadership, which has been shown to promote increased employee resilience (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Ducheck, 2020).
- Leaders model problem-solving using a solutions-based approach, encouraging learning in action among employees and teams when confronting work challenges.
- Create a coaching culture through provision of ongoing feedback and support both among peers and from supervisors, adopting a constructive approach to feedback focused on growth.
- Empower employees with a sense of ownership over their work and their role in the organization, with a focus on facilitating employee autonomy over micromanagement.

### ***Step 3: Facilitate Transparent, Participative Communication***

Open communication is critical in building trust and fostering resilience within teams (Men, 2015). Leaders who regularly communicate with their employees and promote open dialogue can help create an environment where challenges are openly discussed and addressed. Organizations can empower employees through clear, transparent, and goal-oriented conversations about organizational changes and challenges to promote a sense of autonomy, ownership, and engagement among employees (Kuntz et al., 2017).

Adopting a participative communication strategy where employees are directly involved in the discussion of change and asked to provide their input (Bordia et al., 2004) is associated with positive outcomes at the organizational level (Helpap, 2016). Begin the process with these action items:

- Invest in leadership development around participative communication, including workshops and executive coaching.
- Hold regular department and companywide meetings communicating current goals and sharing details about any changes or challenges the organization is facing. We recommend a minimum of quarterly companywide meetings for this purpose.
- Communicate honestly about the impacts of change on employees and teams. Have the difficult conversations and ensure that employees are well informed—individually and at a group level—about any upcoming transitions or restructuring that will affect them directly.
- Schedule regular ask-me-anything (AMA) sessions for employees to ask the company president or CEO open questions related to the business.

### ***Step 4: Encourage a Culture of Learning and Resource Sharing***

By fostering a culture that values learning and growth, organizations can help employees view failures and setbacks as opportunities to learn and grow, thereby enhancing resilience. Promoting and modeling behaviors that encourage learning and collaboration—specifically, the

collaborative, learning, and resource-seeking and resource-sharing behaviors that make up the suite of employee resilience—will help facilitate high performance and other positive outcomes (Dess & Sauerwald, 2014; Kuntz et al., 2017). Lay the foundation with these actions:

- Encourage a growth mindset to help employees view challenges and mistakes as opportunities for growth and learning (Dweck; 2006; Ibarra, Rattan, & Johnston, 2018). Model learning in action during team huddles and discussions of goals and outcomes.
  - Formally reward learning and collaborative behaviors (for example, recognizing an employee who developed a successful partnership between two departments), and fund team initiatives that uphold these standards.
  - Promote cross-team networking, collaboration, and knowledge sharing through redesigning the physical workspace (where it makes sense), scheduling regular cross-team meetings to facilitate exchanges, and providing access to collaboration tools across teams.
  - Create mentorship programs that match more senior employees to junior employees and encourage peer learning arrangements along the lines of Google’s Googler-to-Googler program (re:Work, n.d.).
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## Putting the Steps into Practice

In today's complex and demanding corporate settings, nurturing resilience in employees is vital for sustaining productivity and enhancing employee well-being. Organizational psychology research acknowledges the organization's role in fostering employee resilience, linking it to both personal traits and the work environment (Kuntz et al., 2016, 2017; Tonkin et al. 2018). The resilience of employees, in turn, bolsters organizational adaptability.

This white paper recommends a multifaceted approach to employee resilience development involving four steps:

1. Promote a Supportive Work Environment that Values Employees
2. Provide Ongoing Employee Development
3. Facilitate Transparent, Participative Communication
4. Encourage a Culture of Learning and Resource Sharing

By applying positive psychology principles to support this process throughout the daily functioning of the organization, companies can support employees in building resilience and managing professional complexities, ultimately benefiting the organization as a whole.

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# About Consulting Solutions, LLC

Consulting Solutions is a business consulting firm based in Minneapolis, Minnesota that offers services informed by the science of psychology. The business principal, Yvonne Kinney, is a Business Psychologist and PhD who researches individual, group, and organizational behaviors and dynamics in the workplace with the goal of better understanding how people think and interact with one another for positive business results. Her firm works with organizations to understand the individual psychology of employees, enabling them to support and develop their employees, hire intelligently, expand and grow, improve staff performance, enhance leadership effectiveness, and ultimately, achieve organizational goals faster.



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320.766.7788 | [yvonne@consultingsolutions-llc.com](mailto:yvonne@consultingsolutions-llc.com) | [consultingsolutions-llc.com](http://consultingsolutions-llc.com)

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