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Communicating Resilience: A Discursive Leadership Perspective

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In this essay we challenge whether current conceptions of optimism, hope, and resilience are complete enough to account for the complexity and nuance of developing and maintaining these in practice. For example, a quick perusal of popular outlets (e.g., *Forbes*, *Harvard Business Review*) reveals advice to managers urging them to "be optimistic," or "be happy" so that these types of emotions or feelings can spread to the workplace. One even finds simple advice and steps to follow on how to foster these types of things in the workplace (McKee; Tjan). We argue that this common perspective focuses narrowly on individuals and does not account for the complexity of resilience. Consequently, it denies the role of context, culture, and interactions as ways people develop shared meaning and reality.

To fill this gap in our understanding, we take a social constructionist perspective to understand resilience. In other words, we foreground communication as the primary building block to sharing meaning and creating our worlds. In so doing, we veer away from the traditional focus on the individual and instead emphasise the social and cultural elements that shape how meaning is shared by peoples in various contexts (Fairhurst, *Considering Context*). Drawing on a communication, discourse-centered perspective we explore hope and optimism as concepts commonly associated with resilience in a work context. At work, leaders play a vital role in communicating ways that foster resilience in the face of organisational issues and events (e.g., environmental crises, downsizing). Following this lead, discursive leadership offers a framework that positions leadership as co-created and as the management of meaning through framing (Fairhurst, *Power of Framing*). Thus, we propose that a discursive leadership orientation can contribute to the communicative construction of resilience that moves away from individual perspectives to an emphasis on the social.

From a discursive perspective, leadership is defined as a process of meaning management; attribution given by followers or observers; process-focused rather than leader-focused; and as shifting and distributed among several organizational members (Fairhurst *Power of Framing*). By switching from the individual focus and concentrating on social and cultural systems, *discursive leadership* is able to study concepts related to subjectivity, cultures, and identities as it relates to meaning.

Our aim is to offer leaders an alternative perspective on resilience at the individual and group level by explaining how a discursive orientation to leadership can contribute to the communicative construction of resilience. We argue that a social constructionist approach provides a perspective that can unravel the multiple layers that make up hope, optimism, and resilience. We begin with a peek into the social scientific perspective that is so commonplace in media and popular portrayals of these constructs. Then, we explain the social constructionist perspective that grounds our framework, drawing on discursive leadership. Next, we present an alternative model of resilience, one that takes resilience as communicatively constructed and

socially created. We believe this more robust perspective can help individuals, groups, and cultures be more resilient in the face of challenges.

Social Scientific Perspectives

Hope, optimism, and resilience have widely been spoken in the same breath; thus, in what follows we review how each is treated in common portrayals. In addition, we discuss each to point to further implications of our model proposed in this essay. Traditionally taken as cognitive states, each construct is based in an individual or an entity (Youssef and Luthans) and thus minimises the social and cultural.

Hope

Snyder, Irving, and Anderson define the construct of hope as "a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (1) agency (goal-directed energy) and (2) pathways (planning to meet goals)" (287). This cognitive set therefore is composed of the belief in the ability to create strategies toward a goal and the belief that those plans can be realised. Exploring hope can provide insight into how individuals deal with stress and more importantly how they use past experiences to produce effective routes toward goals (Brown Kirschman et al.). Mills-Scofield writing in *Harvard Business Review* mirrors this two-part hope structure and describes how to integrate hope into business strategy. Above all she emphasises that hope is based in fact, not fiction; the need to learn and apply from failures; and the need to focus on what is working instead of what is broken. These three points contribute to hope by reinforcing the strategies (pathways) and ability (agency) to accomplish a particular goal.

This model of hope is widely held across social scientific and popular portrayals. This position, however, does not allow for exploring how forces of social interaction shape either how these pathways are created or how agency is developed in the first place. By contrast, a communication-centered approach like the one we propose foregrounds interaction and the various social forces necessary for hope to be fostered in the workplace.

Optimism

Optimism centers on how an individual processes the causality of an event (e.g., an organisational crisis). From this perspective, an employee facing significant conflict with his immediate supervisor, for example, may explain this threat as an opportunity to learn the importance of supervisor-subordinate relationships. This definition therefore explores how the individual interprets his/her world (Brown Kirschman et al.).

According to Seligman et al. the ways in which one interprets events has its origins in several places: (1) genetics; (2) the environment in the form of modeling optimistic behaviours; (3) environment in forms of criticism; and (4) life experiences that teach personal mastery or helplessness (cited in Brown Kirschman et al.). Environmental sources function as a dialectical tension. On one hand the environment provides productive modeling for optimism behaviours,

and on the other the environment, through criticism, produces the opposite. Both extremes illustrate the significance of cultural and societal factors as they contribute to optimism. Additionally, life experiences play a role in either mastery or helplessness. Again, interaction and social influences play a significant part in the development of optimism. Much like hope, due to the attention given to social and interactive forces, the concept of optimism requires a framework rooted in the social and cultural rather than the individual and cognitive.

A significant drawback related to optimism (Brown Kirschman et al.) is the danger of unrelenting optimism and the possibility this has on producing unrealistic scenarios. Individuals, rather, should strive to acknowledge the facts (good or bad) of certain circumstances in order to learn how to properly manage automatic negative thoughts (Brown Kirschman et al.). Tony Schwartz writing in *Harvard Business Review* argues that "realistic optimism" is more than putting on a happy face but instead is more about telling what is the most hopeful and empowering of a given situation (1). Thus, a more interaction-based approach much like the model that we are proposing could help overcome some of optimism's shortcomings. If the power of optimism is in the *telling*, then we need a model where the telling is front and center. Later, we propose such a model and method for helping leaders' foster optimism in the workplace and in their communities.

Resilience

Resilience research offers several definitions and approaches in attempt to examine the phenomenon. Masten defines resilience as a "class of phenomena characterized by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development" (228). Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker argue that resilience is "a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (543). Interestingly, resilience and developmental researchers alike have positioned resilience as an individual consistently meeting the expectations of a given society or culture within a particular historical context. Broadly speaking, two central conditions apply toward resilience: (1) the presence of significant threat or adversity; and (2) the achievement of positive adaptation (Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker. Masten goes on to argue that resilience is however ordinary and naturally occurring. That is, the adaptive systems required during significant threat are already present in individuals and is not solely retained by a select few. Masten et al., argues that resilience does not come "from rare and special qualities, but from the operations of ordinary human systems in the biology and psychology of children, from the relationships in the family and community, and from schools, religions, cultures, and other aspects of societies" (129). Based on this, the emphasis of resilience should be within adaptive processes, such that are found in supportive relationships, emotion regulation, and environment engagement (Masten et al.), rather than on individuals.

Of these varied interpretations of resilience, two research designs drive the academic literature—outcome- and process-based perspectives (Kolar). Those following an outcome-focused approach tend to concentrate on functionality and functional behaviour as key indicators of resilience (Kolar). Following this model, cognitive states such as composure, assurance, and confidence are examples of resilience. By contrast, a process-focused approach concentrates on the interplay of protective and risk factors as they influence the adaptive capacity of an individual (Kolar). This approach acknowledges that resilience is contextual and interactive, and

is "a shared responsibility between individuals, their families, and the formal social system rather than as an individual burden (Kolar 425).

This process-based approach toward resilience allows for greater inclusion of factors across individual, group, and societal levels (Kolar). The rigidity of outcome-based models and related constructs does not allow for such flexibility and therefore prevents exploring full accounts of resilience. A process-based approach allows for the inclusion of context throughout measures of resilience and acknowledges that interplay of risk and protective factors across the individual, social, and community level (Kolar). Bearing this in mind, what is needed are more complex models of resilience that account for a multiplicity of factors.

An Alternate Framework: Social Construction of Reality

Language is the tool storytellers use to generate interest and convey ideas. From a social constructionist standpoint, language is the primary mechanism in the construction of reality. Berger and Luckmann present language as a system that allows us to categorise subjective ideas, which over time accumulates into our "social stock of knowledge" (41). As our language creates the symbols that we use to make sense of the world around us, we add to our social knowledge thereby creating a *shared* vision of our own social reality. Because we accumulate varying levels and amounts of social knowledge, what we know of the world constantly changes. For example, in organisations, our discourse and on-going interactions with each other serve to shape what we consider to be real in our day-to-day lives. In this view, subjective experiences of individuals are central to our understanding of various events (e.g., organizational change, crises, conflict) and the ways in which we cope with such occurrences (e.g., through hope, optimism, resilience).

Alternative Models of Resilience

We take Buzzanell's framework as inspiration for an alternative model of resilience. Her communication-centric model is based in messages, d/Discourse, and narrative where communication is an emergent process involving the interplay of messages and interaction (Buzzanell). Furthermore, the communicative construction of resilience involves "a collaborative exchange that invites participation of family, workplace, community, and interorganizational network members" (Buzzanell 9). This alternative perspective of resilience explores human communication resilience processes as the focal point rather than examining the person or entity. This is essentially a design change, where the focus shifts from the individual or singular toward the communication *processes* that enable resilience. Essentially, according to Poole, "in process, we can see resilience as dynamic, integrated, unfolding over time and through events, evolving into patterns, and dependent on contingencies" (qtd. in Buzzanell 2).

Buzzanell describes five processes included in the communicative construction of resilience: (1) crafting normalcy; (2) affirming identity anchors; (3) maintaining and using communication networks; (4) legitimising negative feelings while foregrounding productive action; and (5)

putting alternative logics to work. Here, we highlight two that most directly relate to the alternative model we propose.

First, *legitimising negative feelings while foregrounding productive action* may sound like repression, but in fact it emphasises that negative feelings (nonproductive emotions) are real and that focusing on positive action enables success while facing significant threat. Furthermore, as a communicative construction, this process includes reframing of a situation both linguistically and metaphorically. This communicative process address a major drawback related to the optimism construct presented by Brown Kirschman and colleagues regarding the potential danger of unrelenting optimism.

Similarly, *putting alternative logics to work,* in its practical application, creates resilient systems through (re)framing. Through (re)framing, individuals, groups, and communities can create their own logics that enable them to reintegrate when facing adverse experiences. That is, (re)framing provides an opportunity to endure unfavorable situations while creating communicatively creating conditions that enable adaptation. This idea can also be seen in popular press such as in the *Harvard Business Review* blog "Craft a Narrative to Instill Optimism" (Baldoni). According to Baldoni, leaders have a choice in creating the narrative of our world. Thus, leaders serve as the primary meaning managers in the workplace.

Leadership and the Management of Meaning

Kelly begins our discussion toward an ongoing discursive turn in leadership research. Much like hope, optimism, and resilience, Kelly proposes that leadership has been wrongly categorised and therefore has been inadequately observed. That is, due to focusing on trait-based leadership models espoused by leadership psychology the area of leadership has been left with significant deficits surrounding the very core of leadership. The lessons learned about the reductionist treatment of leadership can be applied to our understanding of resilience. Thus, we draw on discursive leadership because it provides an example for how leaders can foster resilience in various settings.

The discursive turn stems from the incongruity seen in these traditional trait or style-based leadership approaches. From a social constructionist perspective, researchers are able to explore the forms in which leadership contributes to the meaning construction process, much in the same way that a communication perspective, outlined above, emphasises resilience as a process. This ontological shift in leadership research not only re-categorises leadership but also changes the ways in which leadership is studied. Kelly's emphasis on a socially constructed view of leadership combined with alternative methodological approaches contributes to our aim to explore how a discursive leadership orientation can contribute to communicative construction of resilience.

Discursive Leadership

Discursive leadership views leadership as more of an art rather than a science, one that is contested and inventive (Fairhurst, *Discursive Leadership*). Where leadership psychology

emphasises the individual and cognitive, discursive leadership highlights the cultural and the communicative (Fairhurst, *Discursive Leadership*). Leadership psychology is analogous to common, social scientific understandings of resilience that typically confines resilience into something easily attainable by individuals.

The traditional leadership psychology literature attempts to determine causality among the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural elements of leader actors, whereas, discursive leadership takes discourse as the object of study to view how we think, see, and attribute leadership. Discursive leadership offers an optimal resource to view the communicative practices involved in the management of meaning and communicative construction of reality, including resilient systems and processes. Thus, we draw everything together now, and introduce practical interventions organisations can implement to foster hope, optimism, and resilience.

An Alternate Model in Practice

Attention to human capabilities and adaptive systems that promote healthy development and functioning have the potential to inform policy and programs that foster competence and human capital and aim to improve the health of communities and nations while also preventing problems (Masten 235).

Masten's words point to the tremendous potential of resilience. Thus, we wish to conclude with the implications of our perspective for individuals, groups, and communities. In what follows we briefly explain framing, and end with two interventions leaders can use to help foster resilience in the workplace.

A common and practical example of language creating reality is framing. Fairhurst, in her book *The Power of Framing* explores framing as a leader's ability to construct the reality of a subject or situation. A frame is simply defined as a mental picture where framing is the process of communicating this picture to others. Although words or language cannot alter any physical conditions, they may, however, influence our perceptions of them. Fairhurst goes on to "frame" leadership as co-created and not necessarily found in specific concrete acts. That is, leadership emerges when leader actors are deemed to have performed or demonstrated leadership by themselves and/or others. Leadership in this case is determined by attribution. For Fairhurst, leaders are able to shape and co-create meaning and reality by influencing the here and now.

From this perspective interventions should be designed around the idea of creating alternative logics (Buzzanell) by emphasizing the elements of framing. For the sake of brevity, we wish to emphasise two fundamental areas surrounding process-oriented and communicative constructed resilience. It is our hope that leaders may use these takeaways and build upon them as they reflect how to position resilience at the individual and organisational level. First, interventions should focus on identifying the supportive adaptive systems at the individual, group, and societal level (e.g., family, work teams, community coalitions). This could be done through a series of dialogue sessions with an aim of challenging participants to not only identify systems but to also reflect upon how these systems contribute toward resilience. These could be duplicated in work settings and community settings (e.g., community forums and the like). Second, to emphasise

framing, interventions should involve meaningful dialogue to help identify the particular conditions within a significant threat that will (a) lead to productive action and (b) enable individuals, groups, and communities to endure. Overall, an increased emphasis should be placed on helping participants understand how they are able to metaphorically and linguistically (Buzzanell) create the conditions surrounding adverse events.

Our aim in this essay was to present an alternate model of various human processes that help people cope and bounce back from troubling times or events. Toward this end, we argued that media and popular portrayals of constructs such as hope, optimism, and resilience lack the complexity to account for how these can be put into practice. To fill this gap, we hope our communication-based model of resilience, with its emphasis on interaction will provide leaders and community members a method for engaging people in the process of coping and *communicating* resilience. Honoring the processual nature of these ideas is one step toward bettering individuals, groups, and communities.

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