



Tempered Resilience: How Leaders Are Formed In The Crucible Of Change

By Tod Bolsinger

In the path of leadership you will face many obstacles, problems and resistance. How will we handle these? At first these can be a welcomed challenge, but as the months and years go by, the same challenges can grow and wear us down. The author said “the question I find myself asking is not ‘Can I learn the skills I need to lead change?’ but rather ‘Can I survive it?’” To survive in leadership, we need more than skills, we need resilience. “Resilience is not about becoming smarter or tougher; it’s about becoming stronger and more flexible. It’s about becoming tempered.” To be tempered “means both to make stronger and more flexible”.

Leaders need *resilience* because they face *resistance*. “Resistance is the key difference between management and leadership: Good management is usually met with a grateful response from those whom we manage. Leadership is often met with stubborn resistance from the very people we are called to lead.”

Leaders face *resistance* because leadership isn’t about keeping people happy, it is about accomplishing the mission. “Leadership...is always about the transformation and growth of a people—starting with the leader—to develop the resilience and adaptive capacity to wisely cut through resistance and accomplish the mission of the group.” “One of the genuine crises of Christian leadership today is how inward focused it is. A movement founded on the salvation and transformation of the world often becomes consumed with helping a congregation, an organization, or educational institution survive, stay together, or deal with rampant anxiety (often all at the same time). It’s not enough to turn around a declining church, resolve conflict, restore a sense of community, regain a business’s market share, return an organization to sustainability, or even “save the company.” The question before any leader of an organization is “save the company for what?” Leaders must keep everyone and everything focused on the mission.

Key Attributes for a Tempered, Resilient Leader:

Grounded, Teachable, Attuned, Adaptable, and Tenacious



Grounded:

Resilience starts with having a grounded identity. “‘Courage requires a Christian identity of knowing you are loved and affirmed by God, and that your identity is not in your achievements or titles. Then, you can take risks and risk failure.’ A tempered leader can be resilient and withstand both failure of nerve and failure of heart. Both are failures of identity. Succumbing to a failure of nerve means that our sense of identity cannot take the rejection of the people we have been called to lead, so we join them in their anxiety and enjoy their ongoing acceptance. Experiencing a failure of heart means that we become so discouraged, so brittle and cynical, that we disconnect from the people we are called to lead and abandon—either emotionally or physically—both the people and our calling...To overcome both failures and stay connected to and faithful to the call to lead a people through change requires Christian identity that is grounded in something other than one’s success as a leader.”

Teachable:

We need cultural humility. “Competence assumes the acquisition of skill and knowledge that will leave one armed with tools to succeed in multiple and diverse settings. The problem is that the world is far too complex to be mastered like this. Cultural humility does not seek mastery of all things cultural, but seeks to develop a posture of life-long learning rooted in self-awareness, attentiveness, and increased capacity for discerning differences as well as similarities.”

Humility is not simply “marked by a self-effacing attitude but by the eagerness to learn. Even in interviews with job applicants, dynamic companies are now looking for managers who can demonstrate the capacity to continue to learn, including and especially from their mistakes or failures.”

Attuned:

We need empathy, good listening, and communication. “In a rapidly changing world, the ability to work well with people and teams of people is becoming more important than any technical know-how...Great teams run on “psychological safety” that is built through empathy, good listening, and communication.”

“For the nonprofit or religious leader who doesn’t have the ability to use high salaries as an incentive, who needs to motivate and mobilize volunteers, who is facing the challenges of a rapidly changing post-Christendom world, the capacity to lead others through empathy is even more critical.”

Adaptable:

We need to be flexible. “Resilience depends on the ability of leaders to face the reality of a situation, find meaning in those challenges and “*make do with whatever is at hand.*”

“Once you have decided what will never change, you must be prepared to change everything else.”

“Resilience requires creativity and innovation to find an adaptive solution amid an intractable problem without violating our core beliefs or mission.”

Tenacious:

We need grit. “Persistence, drive, and hope is not just some natural toughness that some leaders have and others don’t. It is a set of qualities that can be developed and formed in the life of a leader.”

Angela Duckworth writes: “The highly successful had a kind of ferocious determination that played out in two ways. First, these exemplars were unusually resilient and hardworking. Second, they knew in a very, very deep way what it was they wanted. They not only had determination, they had direction. It was this combination of passion and perseverance that made high achievers special. In a word, they had grit.”

“There is much wisdom in the words of Nietzsche: ‘He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.’”

Becoming a Tempered Leader:

Using the analogy of how steel is made flexible and strong by Working, Heating, Holding, Hewing, and Tempering, the author shows how we can become a tempered leader.

BECOMING A TEMPERED LEADER

Working: Leaders are formed in leading.

Heating: Strength is forged in self-reflection.

Holding: Vulnerable leadership requires relational security.

Hammering: Stress makes a leader.

Hewing: Resilience takes practice.

Tempering: Resilience comes through a rhythm of leading and not leading.

Working: Leaders are formed in leading.

We become stronger by enduring stress. “Stress, when handled well, makes the leader stronger.”

“The forming of a resilient leader that occurs amid the very demands of leadership is an ongoing, intense, repetitive, and humbling process of personal transformation.”

“It is not in the still calm of life, or the repose of a pacific station, that great characters are formed,” Abigail Adams wrote to her son John Quincy Adams amid the American Revolution. “The habits of a vigorous mind are formed in contending with difficulties. Great necessities call out great virtues.”

Heating: Strength is forged in self-reflection.

We must know ourself. “All leadership begins with self-leadership, and self-leadership begins with knowing oneself.”

John Dewey said: “We don’t learn from experience, we learn by reflecting on experience.”

“Insecurity and defensiveness are what make a poor leader,” Lynn Ziegenfuss told me, “because it keeps them from being learners.”

“Self-reflection must lead to self-awareness, and self-awareness—if courageous, honest, and practiced in a place of engaged exposure—leads to feeling vulnerable. And since that vulnerability is a critical asset of a leader, growing in self-awareness is vital to the process of becoming a change leader.”

Holding: Vulnerable leadership requires relational security.

We need others. “What often gets overlooked in discussions of grit and perseverance is how pervasively important is the power of relationships to help us develop tenacity.”

“A lack of community is a leading factor in job burnout.”

“Leaders who seek to bring change and to allow themselves to experience the vulnerability and self-awareness from a life of honest self-reflection need more relationships, not fewer. They need a “thick, heavy” anvil of a host of relationships: partners, colleagues, allies, friends, family, and, perhaps most importantly, mentors.”

“[Matt] Bloom writes that to flourish in ministry or other forms of social leadership, leaders need to be conscious of at least three different contexts, and the relationships needed to flourish in those contexts: ‘front stage, backstage, and offstage.’...The front stage is the place where the actual work of leading a group of people toward a shared transformational goal occurs. Front stage relationships are peers and teammates, our partners and colleagues... Backstage relationships are the supervisors, mentors, and coaches who help you lead even better when you step on to the front stage again...spiritual directors, psychological therapists, and support groups are invaluable to the leader as the kind of offstage sanctuary that Heifetz commends. This is also the stage where most of us experience the grace of a loving spouse

and family, where our friends show up firmly on our side and encourage us to be our very best selves.”

Hammering: Stress makes a leader.

We must remember that stress makes us stronger. It transforms us. “Jonathan Sacks writes, I learned over the years that we make mistakes, but it is from our mistakes that we learn. You cannot get it right without first getting it wrong. If you lack the courage to fail, you will lack the courage to succeed. It is from our worst mistakes that we grow. We learn humility. We discover that you cannot please everyone. We encounter resistances, and as with the body so with the soul: it is resistance training that gives us strength. What matters is not that we succeed, but that we enter the arena, are forced to fight with the weaknesses of our nature, that we put ourselves on the line, commit ourselves to high ideals, and refuse the easy options of cynicism, disillusion, or blaming others.”

“Stress makes a leader when that stress is focused on a particular formational purpose. In other words, what gets hammered into a leader becomes the very attributes they will use to hew hope from despair.”

“Spiritual practices for a leader are not about being better at the practice itself but forging the strength and character that has the resilience to resist a failure of nerve and overcome a failure of heart and hew stones of hope out of a mountain of despair.”

“To diagnose a system or yourself while in the midst of action requires the ability to achieve some distance from those on-the-ground events,’ Heifetz and his colleagues write. They refer to this pattern of stepping back as ‘getting up on the balcony,’ comparing it to ‘listening on the dance floor.’ On the balcony we gain perspective, and on the dance floor we experience the relational intensity of the moment.”

“As James Stockdale learned as a prisoner of war in Vietnam, the optimists break first. Resilience requires a capacity to look the brutal facts square in the eye, to name the mountain of despair, and to keep hammering away with your tempered chisel.”

“The Stockdale Paradox (‘Retain absolute faith that you can and will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties, and at the same time, exercise the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be’).”

Christine Lee wrote: “I finally had to rest in the assurance that even if I wasn’t sure I wanted what was before me, I believed that something good would happen within me.”

Hewing: Resilience takes practice.

We need to develop the group. “The ultimate goal of adaptive change is not to master a pain-free solution to a pressing problem, it’s to create adaptive capacity: the wisdom,

courage, and resilience within a people to learn and survive the losses necessary to be transformed and thrive in a changing world.”

Adaptive leadership is not finding a new inspiring vision but reframing an original or enduring vision of the organization that allows everyone to see a new, compelling future for their beloved organization that is worth sacrifice and commitment.

“‘Make change a matter of identity,’ the Heaths encourage. Frame change not as a departure from the identity that has been shaped through shared history and relationships but as an affirmation that the decisions and effort to bring change are deeply resonant and consistent with who we believe ourselves to be.”

“Work the team, not the problem.”

“When we confront resistance, if we align with the resistance instead of trying to come up against it all the time, we create the space and safety to allow the other person to finally let the resistance go.”

“In any type of institution whatsoever, when a self-directed, imaginative, energetic, or creative member is being consistently frustrated and sabotaged rather than encouraged and supported, what will turn out to be true one hundred percent of the time, regardless of whether the disrupters are supervisors, subordinates, or peers, is that the person at the very top of that institution is a peace-monger. By that I mean a highly anxious risk-avoider, someone who is more concerned with good feelings than with progress, someone whose life revolves around the axis of consensus.”

“What then does a subordinate leader do when ‘consistently frustrated and sabotaged’? Lead relationally both horizontally with peers and up the org chart.”

Jonathan Sacks writes: “A leader must empower the team. He cannot do the work for them; they must do it for themselves. But he must, at the same time, give them the absolute confidence that they can do it and succeed. The leader is responsible for their mood and morale. During the battle, he must betray no sign of weakness, doubt, or fear. That is not always easy. Moses’ hands “became weary.” All leaders have their moments of exhaustion. At such times the leader needs support—even Moses needed the help of Aaron and Hur. In the end, though, his upraised hands were the sign the Israelites needed that God was giving them the strength to prevail, and they did.”

“Stay calm, stay connected and stay the course.”

Tempering: Resilience comes through a rhythm of leading and not leading.

We need rest. “A rhythm of stress and rest tempers a tool and builds in the strength and flexibility that bring resilience...” The key to resilience is trying really hard, then stopping, recovering, and then trying again.”

"Resilience comes from stress that creates strength. At the same time, too much stress means that both steel and leaders become brittle instruments that crumble beneath the task. This is the delicate balance."

The WHY.

If leadership is so hard, why bother? Because of the WHY behind leadership.

"Leadership is born not of the desire to lead but—at the center of our being—out of a call to service in light of the brutal facts of the world. It flows not from a desire to achieve, succeed, or accomplish, but to serve at the point of real need and experiencing that need as one's own calling."

"The end or goal of life for Jesus—whether for an individual or a community—is to love God and love others. And they are equal in importance. You cannot have one without the other. You must, must, must have both. Jesus says that to live with the ultimate end in mind, to live out the greatest commandment, to live in a way that pleases God is not just to love God but also to love the world the way God so loves it. It is this conviction that forms the why of leadership. For followers of Jesus there is nothing we are called to care about as much as the love and justice of God reaching our neighbor and being expressed in all of creation."