Chapter 6

Resilience in the Goal Hierarchy: Strategy Change as a Form of Perseverance

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Abstract

This chapter integrates the motivation phenomenon of goal hierarchy and equifinality into the employee resilience conceptualization to highlight adaptive manifestations of resilience to failure at work. Experienced failure offers an important context to consider adaptive resilience, as failure may offer feedback that pre-failure strategies will not lead to higher-level goal accomplishment; making lower-level goal changes critical for success. This chapter offers a fine-gained presentation of what employee resilience does (and does not entail), to address current concerns about: (a) a lack of agreement concerning what "positive adaptation" means; and (b) potential dangers in the unknowing encouragement of maladaptive resilience after failure (e.g., harms to employee well-being and success). Here, goal revision or abandonment at a lower-level of one's goal hierarchy, as opposed to higher-level goal abandonment, is presented as a form of adaptive employee resilience. This change places the focus of employee resilience on perseverance toward big picture goals, rather than traits or outcomes associated with perseverance; which helps to further distinguish resilience from related concepts, antecedents, and outcomes. This conceptual clarity is useful in furthering the nomological network development of resilience, and better equips researchers and practitioners for assessing and promoting adaptive resilient responses to failure.

Keywords: Resilience; goal hierarchy; equifinality; motivation; goal striving; failure

Introduction

Failure at work can be difficult to experience and overcome. The term "failure" implies that there was a goal one was striving toward, yet a signal (e.g., feedback) has been sent to the employee that the goal was not met. Goal striving can be a grueling, time-consuming, yet critical experience at work. Learning that one has "missed the mark" is often an undesirable and unpleasant experience. Further, particularly at work, the experience of failure can pose additional threats for individuals such as financial and identity-related concerns. As many work environments tie financial incentives (e.g., bonuses and promotions) to work goal accomplishment, whether an individual succeeds or fails at work goals may directly relate to her or his financial status and standard of living. In addition, our identity is often closely tied to work experiences, as we spend most of our waking hours at work and often use work goal accomplishment as an indicator of whether we are contributing to society in a meaningful way (see Landy & Conte, 2016). Based on the unpleasant, yet inevitable experience of failure, it is critical to understand *work life after failure*.

This chapter delineates an expanded set of responses to failure at work that characterize *adaptive employee resilience*. This delineation is accomplished via grounding the conceptualization of resilience in motivation theory. Here, based on the motivation concept *equifinality* (multiple possible routes toward achieving a goal; Unsworth, Yeo, & Beck, 2014; Winell, 1987), the case is made for conceptually integrating the phenomenon of lower-level goal revision into the employee resilience domain. Prior work has only recently begun to consider goals within discussions of resilience. As failure at work is a difficult yet inevitable experience in one's career, it is valuable to understand the diverse ways in which resilience can manifest; especially as the traditional "keep on going" or "bounce back" perspectives may not be possible or adaptive post-failure. Considering here that resilience may manifest as an adaptive change in one's lower-level goal striving strategy – revising a lower-level sub-goal to persist in the pursuit of the higher-level goal – is the perspective offered in this work. Overall, we argue for the necessity of considering goal hierarchies and goal revision in conceptualizations of resilience to failure at work and beyond.

This chapter's integration of goal revision into the resilience conceptualization offers three primary contributions. First, resilience research is integrated with motivation literature to detail the unexamined role of goal revision in conceptualizing resilience; expanding the consideration of what is (and is not) resilience. Second, the presented perspective furthers our understanding of employee resilience through a detailed, theoretically driven discussion of *adaptive* resilience, and how organizations and individuals can better ensure that a focus on resilience is healthy via integrating flexibility – allowing needed adjustment of lower-level goals that may benefit employee health and well-being in the goal striving process. Third, the goal revision literature is expanded to consider the role of failure at work and employee resilience as directly relevant to such discussions. An expanded resilience conceptualization, details on contributions offered, and specific implications for research and practice are presented.

Employee Resilience Post-failure at Work

> Progress in the area of resilience will remain seriously constrained as long as studies remain largely empirically driven as opposed to theoretically based. (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000, p. 552)

The study of resilience at work is important because individuals, teams, and units face stressful situations, setbacks, and failures throughout their lifespan. Resilience can foster success and thriving despite these difficult experiences, which benefits society more broadly through economic development and well-being. To date, most research in the resilience area has been conducted within the clinical and child development psychology domains, with relatively less research on resilience in industrial-organizational psychology and organizational behavior (see Britt, Shen, Sinclair, Grossman, & Klieger, 2016). There have been recent calls to focus greater attention on this key phenomenon for adults in the workplace (e.g., Britt et al., 2016; King, Newman, & Luthans, 2016). In a meta-analysis relating psychological capital (PsyCap; which encompasses hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism) to employee attitudes, behaviors, and performance, Avey, Reichard, Luthans, and Mhatre (2011) found significant positive relationships between PsyCap with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, psychological well-being, citizenship behaviors, and performance. There were also significant negative relationships between PsyCap with cynicism, turnover intentions, job stress, and anxiety. More specifically, resilience has been shown to significantly relate to critical outcomes in times of failure such as change acceptance (Wanberg & Banas, 2000), post-traumatic growth (Levine, Laufer, Stein, Hamama-Raz, & Solomon, 2009), and anxiety reduction (Griffith & West, 2013). Though additional research on the unique effects of resilience on important work experiences and outcomes are needed, prior research highlights the potential benefits of resilience in facilitating improved organizational processes and adaptive functioning despite failure at work.

Most resilience research takes on an individual, personality trait perspective, or discusses trajectories of functioning and success post-failure (see Britt et al., 2016). Specifically, Fikretoglu and McCreary (2012) note that most definitions of resilience describe an individual showing signs of positive adaptation after having gone through some significant adversity. What has not often been considered are the cognitive and behavioral factors that occur *between* inputs (e.g., personality factors and risk factors) and outcomes (e.g., success and goal accomplishment). This chapter presents a novel perspective on more proximal components of resilience in goal striving by integrating goal hierarchies and including diverse, adaptive potential responses to goal frustrations (i.e., adversity; e.g., failure) with what we know in the resilience domain.

Goal Revision as Resilience

> Individuals may (ideally) alter both goals and self-regulatory strategies to sustain learning and performance in the face of changing internal states. (Kanfer, 1990, p. 223)

The need for an expanded understanding of resilience is evident in the current practical cautions set forth concerning this term. In illustration, Britt et al. (2016) as well as Adler (2013) urge caution with regard to an organization's focus on resilience in mission statements and decision-making. Adler (2013) warned against the "shadow side to resilience" (p. 227), and asserted that a strong emphasis on resilience sends a message stigmatizing a change in one's goals as a character flaw. This potential perspective (i.e., stigmatizing goal revision) could be detrimental for employees managing failure, especially when current conditions may be mentally or physically dangerous for employees or when a strategy or goal change would be most adaptive for performance and health. In line with recent theoretical development integrating adaptation as an option in work teams' decision to bounce back from adversity (e.g., Stoverink, Kirkman, Mistry, & Rosen, 2020), this chapter specifically integrates understandings from foundational resilience work with motivation theory (i.e., goal hierarchy, equifinality, and goal revision) to expand our understanding of the term resilience across levels of analysis.

Consideration of goal hierarchies in the discussion of resilience offers insights into the connection of motivation to the study of employee resilience. Understanding the latent structure of goals and the processes by which persons shift attention across goal levels has been the target of much research and remains a central idea in motivation (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1981; Pervin, 1989). Researchers generally agree that goals are hierarchically structured (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; DeShon & Gillespie, 2005). In other words, goals are structured in a hierarchical web of complex, interrelated goal elements with a higher-level goal serving as the general, overarching desired end state and lower-level goals representing the sub-elements that help one to attain the superordinate goal (Cropanzano, Citera, & Howes, 1995). Goals may vary from long-term aims such as desired "values" and "identities" at higher levels of the hierarchy to specific project goals and day-to-day tasks pursued at lower levels. Since goals at the top of the hierarchy represent outcomes that occur as a consequence of accomplishing the lower-level goals, higher-level goals are typically more distal, complex, and may be less defined, relative to lower-level goals. Further, in the goal hierarchy, the concept of *equifinality* refers to multiple possible downward connections (Taversky & Kahneman, 1974) and affirms that multiple lower-level goals may link to a desired higher-level goal. This is important to consider in times when one lower-level goal may be rejected, become blocked, or simply be unhealthy for an employee to pursue (e.g., may lead to burnout, depression, or disengagement) post-failure.

As goal hierarchies are made up of broad superordinate goals that are progressively subdivided into chains of more concrete sub-goals, individuals may choose to alter or abandon certain sub-goals depending on their progress in the goal striving process (Cropanzano et al., 1995). Research commonly discusses goal revision as a response to observed discrepancies between current state and desired end state, termed goal-performance discrepancies (GPDs; Donovan & Williams, 2003). Previous work asserts that individuals tend to revise the sub-goals where they received feedback related to failure (i.e., where the largest

GPDs are observed; Cropanzano et al., 1995), and that an individual's GPD significantly predicts the amount of goal revision they will engage in (Donovan & Williams, 2003).

This work presents the distinction between employee lower-level goal changes and higher-level goal abandonment (i.e., ending overall goal pursuit, Carver & Scheier, 1981) as indicative of resilient versus non-resilient responses to failure, respectively. We argue for the utility of considering goal hierarchies and potential lower-level goal revision or changes in chosen sub-goal pursuit in conceptualizing resilience. As discussed above, presenting resilience as a "stay the course no matter what" behavior brings about a potential "dark/shadow side" to resilience, and this may be due to current conceptual confusion concerning the behaviors that may characterize employee resilience. Such characterizations portray altered plans (e.g., lower-level goal changes) or any changes in methods of goal pursuit as non-resilient, and as associated with the negative stigma of quitting. Though the current work presents resilience as continued higher-level goal pursuit, this characterization of resilience includes the potential for changes made to lower-level goal choices. Based on this presented conceptualization, only high-level goal abandonment is considered "non-resilient," as the goal structure established prior to adversity would no longer be pursued in that instance.

There are multiple reasons why changes made to lower-level goals should not fall within the conceptualization of non-resilient behavior. First, the experienced adversity or challenge may pose constraints beyond the individual employee's control to "stay the course." For example, if one's organization were submerged in a flood it would not be logical to characterize an employee from this location as non-resilient because they moved to a different organization. *The attribution of resilience should be based on factors under the employee's control.* Second, allowing for lower-level goal adjustments in the characterization of resilience is important because current lower-level goals may no longer be conducive to the attainment of the higher-level goal post-failure. For example, if an individual aims to become vice president of an organization but their company removes the vice president position, pursuing prior set lower-level goals (e.g., extended tenure and promotion at the current organization) may no longer be conducive to the pursuit of the higher-level goal of reaching the vice president position. Therefore, if that employee moves to a different organization or department to continue pursuing the vice president goal, this may be an *adaptive* form of resilience. *Lower-level goal adjustments may be a vital component of post-failure resilience.*

As behavior is multiply determined and resilience attributions are made directly about the individual, it is useful to characterize individuals based on their chosen goals and subsequent actions; taking a person-centric, behavioral approach. This approach involves evaluating an individual's goal hierarchy in the designation of resilience, to eliminate confounds that may lead to mischaracterizations (e.g., a focus on expectations that are no longer possible post-failure, are not under the individual's control, or are maladaptive and harmful for employees).

Summary

We integrate the motivation phenomenon of goal hierarchy and equifinality into the employee resilience conceptualization to highlight possible adaptive manifestations of resilience to failure at work. *Goal revision or abandonment at a lower-level of one's goal hierarchy, as opposed to higher-level goal abandonment, is here presented as a form of adaptive employee resilience.* The integration of motivation phenomena (i.e., goal hierarchies, equifinality, and goal revision) into the conceptualization of resilient responses to failure offers diversity to the indicators considered within this domain, and avoids the mischaracterization of flexibility and adaptive goal striving choices as "non-resilient." This integration counters the concern that resilience would be maladaptive to enact when adversities place undue strain on employees, as individuals are not encouraged here to "keep on going" with the same pre-adversity strategies and plans, because lower-level goal revision and strategy changes *are* adaptive resilience. Interestingly, failure offers an important context to consider adaptive resilient responses as failure may offer feedback and learning that the pre-failure lower-level goals or strategies actually will not lead to the desired higher-level goal accomplishment; making lower-level goal changes critical for success post-failure. As the demonstration of employee resilience is better understood, researchers and practitioners will become better equipped for studying and fostering adaptive responses to failure at work.

Illustrative Example

Robert began working at Income Generation Inc. about a year ago. At the annual company-wide review meeting employees are encouraged to share their current goals. Robert shared his goal of expanding the international reach of his division in the company to a new market. He understood that international market expansion was critical for his career progression in this organization and he valued engaging in tasks that moved the company forward. In pursuit of his goal of expanding his division to a new international market, Robert believed a first step would be to take on an international assignment to live and work in another country within the upcoming three-month period.

The week after the annual review meeting, Robert submitted his international relocation and expansion proposal to his leadership team. Unfortunately, his supervisor felt that Robert was not prepared for such a task and rejected his proposal. Robert felt a sense of personal failure in receiving that news. In the traditional conceptualization, resilience would entail Robert working to reapply for this relocation and expansion with a proposal again, and non-resilience would mean that Robert would abandon the international expansion goal after encountering this proposal failure. Such an operationalization of resilience places sole responsibility on Robert to, in essence, "do not change the strategy and succeed" in a time of significant adversity and experienced failure; potentially damaging his well-being and health and maybe not getting him closer to higher-level goal accomplishment (e.g., if the proposal is continuously rejected). This chapter

offers an expanded conceptualization; an alternative option for Robert to demonstrate resilience.

Employee resilience, here, is linked to employee higher-level goals, which offers a more specific and person-centric route to determining the characterization of resilience. As Robert's high-level goal is to expand the international developments of his division to a new market, adaptive employee resilience here would allow for a change in Robert's initial lower-level goal (i.e., take on an international assignment to live and work in another country within three months). Robert could instead work to pursue an alternative route (i.e., sub-goal) to his higher-level goal. For example, Robert could instead work to bring in international clients for his organization from the new market he is interested in expanding. Such actions may demonstrate to leaders Robert's capabilities for expansion and the company's potential for growth in this new market. Here, Robert did not (a) abandon his higher-level goal, and (b) did not take on maladaptive, potentially detrimental attempts to continually reapply for relocation. We assert that such choices in the goal hierarchy are adaptive resilience post-failure.

Discussion

This work asserts that the designation of employee resilience depends on an employee's goal hierarchy prior to experienced adversity (e.g., failure), and that the conceptualization of resilience should be expanded to include higher-level goal striving, despite lower-level goal adjustments in times of adversity. This conceptualization runs counter to the assumption that individuals who alter lower-level goals are non-resilient. Instead the conceptualization of resilience takes into consideration the goals being pursued, and whether the higher-level goal is continually pursued (resilience) or is abandoned (non-resilience) post-adversity.

Theoretical Implications

This work emphasizes the value of considering the purpose of behavior, before and after adversity (i.e., failure), in the conceptualization of resilience. Here, goal striving, goal hierarchies, and the potential for goal changes, based on the principle of equifinality, are incorporated to expand the employee resilience conceptualization and to help guide the use of the labels "resilient" or "non-resilient." Previous conceptualizations have highlighted that there are two components to resilience, the first being the adversity (that the individual responds to) and the second being the adaptive response or outcome (despite the adversity) (D. M. Fisher, Ragsdale, & Fisher, 2019). Beyond these conceptual commonalities, what exactly is meant by "overcoming" or "bouncing back" from adversity or the necessary conditions for this to take place are less well understood. The current conceptualization offered refines and extends this rhetoric by encouraging future resilience researchers to consider and measure goals pre- and post-adversity to assess potential changes, and to note where these changes occur in the goal hierarchy. This expansion has direct implications for resilience conceptualization and subsequent measurement by highlighting the need to consider goal

striving behaviors, rather than focusing solely on the current trait-like measures or the state-like attainment of success or well-being post-adversity. This change places the focus of employee resilience on *perseverance* rather than traits or outcomes of persistence, which can help to distinguish resilience from its antecedents and outcomes; furthering the development of a clearer nomological network of resilience. This chapter also offers researchers an opportunity to develop continuums of resilience in measurement that capture features of goal striving such as time taken to return to goal striving after failure or changes in intensity of goal striving following difficult experiences.

This work extends the conceptualizations of resilience by offering a novel perspective on this concept through the lens of goal striving, arguing that adaptive resilience can encompass assessing the situation and adjusting lower-level goals toward higher-level goal attainment. Furthermore, this work considers that goal pursuit processes prior to adversity are distinct from those chosen post-adversity, which can be explored in future theoretical and empirical work. In addition, no prior work to our knowledge has theoretically integrated goal hierarchy, goal striving, equifinality, and resilience. Overall, the current conceptualization of resilience highlights the importance of a person-centric, goal striving, behavioral approach, paired with cognitive motivational considerations, to refine and advance our understanding of employee resilience.

Practical Implications

Though resilience is currently regarded as important for organizational functioning, the conceptualization of resilience as continued high-level goal pursuit despite adversity enhances the linkage of resilience to potentially desired organizational behavior. Performance at work is goal-directed and understanding how this process can and should operate is potentially informative for organizational decision-making. First, the current focus on the conceptualization of resilience shifts attention to goal striving and perseverance rather than maintaining the status quo (e.g., potential stagnation) in times of adversity. This offers employees the option to exhibit adaptability in goal pursuit. This is also potentially important for organizations expecting or experiencing change, as this conceptualization of resilience would allow necessary adjustments without sacrificing resilience. Organizational goal setting and resilience efforts should focus on higher-level goals desired, in light of the flexibility with which lower-level goals may be approached or may need to be adjusted following unexpected and inevitable challenges.

Finally, this work offers progression toward stigma reduction in the resilience domain, as understanding exactly what resilience entails is important for the characterization of such behavior and individual attributions. Allowing for alternative sub-goal strategy pursuit post-failure can be more practically effective than the assumption that change in goal striving means non-resilience. Overall, this work offers advancement in employee well-being and performance perspectives concerning adaptive responses to significant challenges at work.

Future Research

In taking a step forward in conceptual clarity for the resilience construct via grounding resilience in motivation theory, this work also highlights additional research needs in this important area. First, empirical research could test implications of this work (e.g., the role of the expanded conceptualization in destigmatizing lower-level goal changes post-failure). In addition, tests of the linkages between continued higher-level goal striving and known predictors of employee resilience (e.g., hardiness and goal commitment) may offer indirect empirical support for the current conceptual presentation of resilience. Second, this work can guide the design and improvement of resilience measurement, as a theoretically based, behavioral definition is presented here. Such shifts offer guidance for item development and validity assessments. Third, this research highlights the need for a person-centric approach to designating significant adversity and demonstrated resilience. Future research could examine individual perspectives on resilient behavior and how these link to experiences and outcomes. For example, assessments of whether changes in goal strategy, though these behaviors may be resilient, are perceived as non-resilient by employees and others and subsequently affect experiences (e.g., satisfaction) and ratings (e.g., performance) for employees. As this framework highlights that resilience cannot be readily observed without consideration of the actor's subjective experience of adversity and goal hierarchy content, other-reported perceptions may offer unique insights on employee resilience. Finally, boundary conditions of employee resilience should be further explored. For example, it would be beneficial for researchers to determine whether the organizational context limits the choices employees have in goal striving and revision, and how this context offers a unique perspective on goal striving, goal revision, and the understanding of the resilience construct post-failure. Overall, the presented conceptual expansion on resilience is meant to foster future work that delineates the nomological network of employee resilience; specifically determining what predicts continued higher-level goal striving and what outcomes are the result of such employee resilience, despite experienced failure at work.

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