Can crisis resistance be improved?

The Executive F**i**RE Index and what we can learn from camels.

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Like in a sandstorm…

… this is how many people have been feeling over the last months. Since the Second World War, they say, there has been no greater all-encompassing crisis than the Corona Pandemic. It affects all parts of society and brings many companies, managers and their teams to the edge of their strength. Plans are suddenly worthless because everything is constantly changing and there is no overview. Sand penetrates every opening and prevents things from continuing to run smoothly. Suddenly, employees and managers are faced with new challenges: simultaneously dealing with pressure, uncertainty and a lack of clarity, because the sand prevents a clear vision. It is also harder than usual to maintain cohesion in the middle of a storm. Companies from industries that are already undergoing structural change are particularly affected by existential threats. They must now reorganize and adopt new ways of working, but without being sufficiently prepared for this. For many managers, the days are turning into one long video conference. Many feel cut off from the company and find it difficult to motivate employees to come back into the office. And the prospects do not suggest that the situation is likely to improve any time soon. Crisis resistance is therefore a necessary prerequisite for corporate success. But how can the crisis resistance of managers be improved? And how can the camel serve as a model of sovereignty and resilience in the face of crises?

In the following whitepaper we would like to present an exciting approach to solving these questions: The *Executive FiRE Index.*

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No long-term success without crisis resistance

Managers are particularly affected by the current situation. They have to deal with the same concerns that affect their employees, but at the same time they need to show confidence and direction and be sensitive to the pressing questions and needs of their employees, for which there is often no easy answer. It is in times like these that it becomes clear that the ability to effectively lead oneself in the face of crisis and uncertainty is indeed a key leadership skill. In fact, the ability to positively influence one's own inner world even in times of crisis and thus serve as a role model for one's own employees will become increasingly important for the success of companies in the coming decades, because the time after Corona will be anything but predictable and plannable. Major issues such as the climate crisis, demographic change and digitization were already unsolved challenges before the Corona Pandemic and will continue to affect companies and their managers for a long time to come. In the future, managers must therefore become even better at leading not only others, but above all themselves effectively through difficult times if they want to realize their full potential. There are inspiring examples in nature for dealing with difficult situations.

Learning from role models

One species that copes particularly well with the sandstorms of life is the camel. This herd animal has adapted perfectly during evolution to the conditions that prevail in deserts, such as drought, fluctuating temperatures and sand. Camels can drink up to 200 liters of water in 15 minutes and store it for up to four weeks. They have also developed mechanisms against UV radiation and sandstorms, such as lockable nostrils and extra-long, curled eyelashes that act as protective devices against flying sand. The large soles of the feet are padded with horny calluses, thus protecting equally against the heat and sinking into the sand. But there are even more characteristics that distinguish camels from other mammals: They belong to the few animals, that can drink saltwater without problems thanks to a special kidney.

Camels can survive both cold and heat. They are also enduring runners and can carry heavy loads across the desert. Camels can live up to 50 years and brave the elements in flat deserts and high mountains. Characteristic for camels is also their calm, balanced temper.

How can a confident handling of crises be trained?

What can we learn from camels when it comes to dealing with crises, be they sandstorms or pandemics? If one studies human behavior, it becomes clear that each form of development requires different prerequisites. At the beginning of every conscious development there is always the awareness of what needs to be developed in concrete terms, such as one's own resistance. Without this clarity about what is to be changed and why, improvement is less likely. Next, a decision is needed that a certain change of state should actually be initiated, for example the decision to become more persevering or relaxed. If we want to work on our strength or endurance, we first look for a sport that suits our preferences. Some people like to jog, ride a bike or go to the gym, while others find it far too boring. Team sports or courses with others may be more suitable for them. Once the rough direction has been determined, we first record our current physical condition, i.e. we measure, for example, our heart rate at

rest or current weight and see how far or how fast we can run or cycle. Objective data is best, but if necessary, a subjective self-assessment will also do. Indeed, we humans often find it easier to change our behavior if it can be measured, because progress brings a sense of achievement and self-affirmation. And even if partial goals are not achieved, this can be an incentive, in the sense of "Now more than ever!" Then comes the actual training, we work on our endurance and strength. We do this by leading our body out of its comfort zone and to its limits, for example, for intervals of varying lengths. This is followed by the recovery phase, which is at least as important in order to avoid overstraining. Technique training under expert guidance is also important in order to achieve the best possible results with the energy used and to put as little strain on the body as possible. Strong motivation is required for the implementation. The stronger it is, the better. Therefore, after a few repetitions, the measurements from the beginning are repeated. Ideally, our results improve significantly after a short time, which in turn increases motivation. The bigger and more protracted the planned change, the more important is positive feedback along the way.
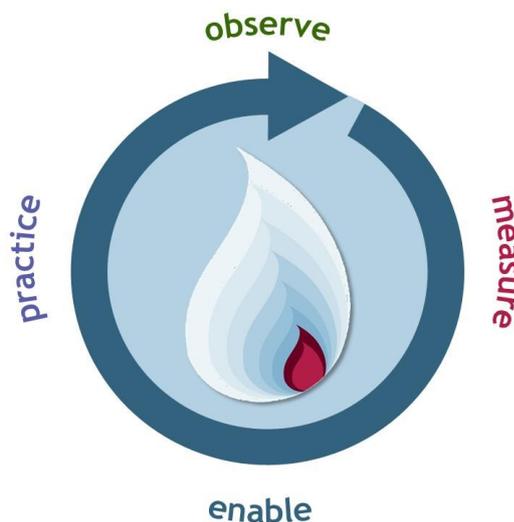

Illustration 1: A model for improvement

In summary, a methodology for increasing individual resilience can be described as a cyclical process as follows:

- Gaining clarity about approach
- Decision to change
- Individual Preferences
- Measuring current status
- Training & Recovery
- Improving technique
- Repeating measurement

Resilience is like a muscle

The situation is very similar when it comes to the resilience of managers. The stoic strength of camels in a sandstorm can be a good example. Imagine the potential of resilience as a muscle. Like any muscle, this resilience can be increased by regular use of appropriate strategies and by avoiding harmful behavior. This is a kind of internal fitness training, which follows the cyclical approach of *observe – measure – enable – practice.*

In our research, we have developed a model that integrates all factors that have a positive influence on human resistance: The Executive FiRE model of resilience. The acronym FiRE stands for *Factors increasing Resilience Effectiveness®.*

Most importantly, resilience is not simply an innate characteristic. It is also a competence that can be learned and internalized. It is also influenced by our general life situation. Therefore, our degree of resilience is fundamentally determined by three different concepts of personality psychology. These are called States, Traits and Habits.

They influence our behavior by interlocking like gears.

- Traits, i.e. time-stable personality characteristics
- Habits, i.e. learned behaviors
- States, the current level of life satisfaction

Traits can be understood as deep-rooted patterns of behavior, such as introverted versus extroverted. The need for predictability or stability in one's own environment, as well as openness to change and new developments are also part of this. They cannot be changed on a permanent basis. These factors inherent in

our personality are therefore also referred to as the *raw resilience*, because it is uncultivated. Habits are the sum of all learned behaviors as a result of socialization, life experience as well as professional behavior or even wisdom, which help us to better deal with stress. Therefore, these factors are also called *learned resilience*. Finally, states describe the current level of life satisfaction. Of all three groups, these are most frequently subject to fluctuations and changes. Thus, the current life satisfaction can be adversely affected by adverse external influences, while an inspiring conversation or sunshine with blue skies drives it up.
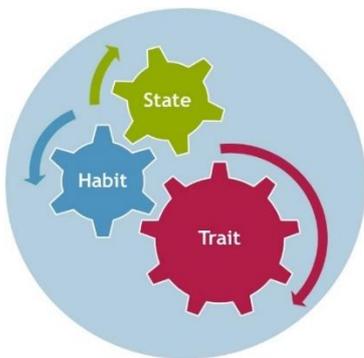

Illustration 2: The correlation of Traits, Habits and States

Traits are like roads through the desert

They are well paved and much used paths in our personality structure. They give a direction for our behavior and without a conscious decision and an application of energy we remain on them. Traits therefore represent a kind of network of paths. Of course, nobody has to cross the desert on a road, but it saves energy. The direct way through the sand is much more strenuous and also riskier. The oldest and best-known model to describe these traits is the Five Factor or Big Five model. It is also one of the best studied psychometric methods, as it has been mentioned in more than 3,000 scientific validation studies in recent decades. Therefore, it can be considered the golden standard of personality psychology today. The five personality factors are:

- Need for stability
- Extraversion
- Originality
- Agreeableness
- Conscientiousness

Desert roads and crisis resistance

These factors capture many aspects of the human personality. However, three of these personality factors in particular play a role in the degree of resilience a person can achieve based on his or her personality. These are the need for stability, extraversion and originality.

Need for stability

This factor reflects individual differences in experiencing and coping with challenging situations. High values correspond to a high susceptibility to negative stress, but also stand for empathy. People with a high level are more likely to be affected by events in their personal environment. They tend to be more insecure, more anxious and generally need more time to recover from stress. They are good at anticipating problems and often have a strong ability to empathize with other people. Low scores mean a high resistance to stress, but also a less pronounced ability to empathize with others. People with a low expression are calmer and more balanced and rarely experience strong emotional excitement. In addition, they tend to perceive feelings in general with less intensity.

Extraversion

This characteristic describes differences in dealing with other people, especially in situations that are perceived as energy consuming or energy replenishing. High values mean that someone gains energy when they are active and in contact with many people. These people are often outgoing, person-oriented, warm-hearted, optimistic and easy to inspire. Low values mean that someone is more likely to gain energy from being in contact with a few people and to rest. These people are often more likely to be served in social interactions. They prefer one-on-one conversations and often like to be independent.

Originality

This factor describes how a person deals with external changes that are not actively driven by him or her. Depending on the value, a person may have a tendency to feel deprived of energy in response to an external change or may even feel inspired. High values stand for attributes such as resourcefulness, curiosity and a preference for the unknown. Low values indicate a

preference for predictability, consistency and predictability.

Risk and protection factors

Today, we know from resilience research that in the logic of the *Five Factor Model* a lower need for stability can be interpreted as a protective factor. The background to this is, that a low value simply means that people are stressed less easily. Conversely, high scores are seen as a risk factor, since people with this tendency are generally easier to get out of a state of calm. A high degree of extraversion is seen as a protective factor. People with this attribute can easily talk to others about their inner world, an aspect that is central to their inner stability. The same is true for originality. High values correlate with the tendency to accept change more easily, which helps to cope better with a constantly changing environment.

Practiced behaviors are crucial

Various personality or resilience instruments are well suited to measure the level of traits, i.e. the aspects of individual resilience that are stable over time and inherent to a person's personality. This is very useful because under great pressure and when we are exhausted, these aspects often determine our actions. For example, the test procedures based on the Five Factor model are considered very valid here. However, these procedures cannot be used to capture the learned aspects of self-management,
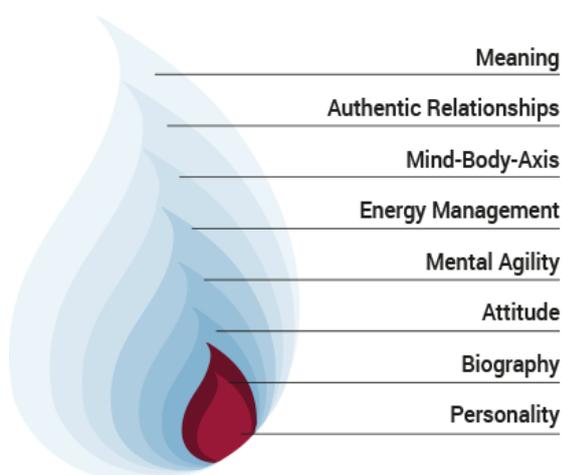

*Illustration 3: The FiRE model of resilience
(Drath, The Rules of Success, Haufe, 2018)*

i.e. the behavioral patterns and coping strategies integrated into daily life, such as regular

meditating, a conscious examination of one's own biography or regular jogging. Thus, a further development of the learned resilience cannot be measured. Nor can these methods be used to measure the effects of current satisfaction in various areas of life on our resilience. For this reason, these instruments are also not suitable for demonstrating improvements in one's own resilience over time, since they only measure the time-stable parts of the personality. In other words: Even if you are very happy at the moment, meditate daily, have made your biography a resource and regularly think about what you can be thankful for today, the development of your time-stable personality traits and thus your degree of resilience would not change one bit.

This is what led us to develop the *Executive FiRE Index*, a measuring method that can holistically record and measure all the different aspects of resilience. The instrument is based on the resilience model we have developed over many years.

How crisis resistance can be measured

For our work with managers, we have combined the various factors of crisis resilience into the "FiRE model" with its eight different spheres. The abbreviation stands for *Factors improving Resilience Effectiveness®*. A sphere is a collection of similarly positioned impact factors. The model serves to structure all known and scientifically proven strategies for maintaining or improving one's own resilience and to combine them with a holistic view. The FiRE model was developed with the help of founded concepts of recognized psychologists, psychiatrists, physicians, sociologists, biologists and brain researchers.

Personality – our basis for crisis resistance

A person's stress resistance is a personality trait, half of which is genetically determined and half of which depends on the early childhood developmental phase of a person. Of all spheres of resilience, the sphere "Personality" is the least consciously influenceable. Basic characteristics such as introversion or extraversion or the emotional stability of a person can only be changed deliberately and permanently

within very narrow limits. This inner sphere is of central importance, since it is about getting to know one's own person with his or her characteristics, strengths and weaknesses better in order to be able to control oneself better. This can be achieved through self-reflection, feedback from outside and through personality psychology instruments.

Biography – experienced resources from the past

The "Biography" sphere deals with resources for coping with difficult situations that lie in one's own past. A conscious approach to one's own biography has positive effects on one's attitude to the challenges of the present and expectations for the future.

How has your life been so far? What comes to mind immediately?

Most people spontaneously remember a handful of events that have shaped their lives so far. Mostly it is the negative events that we become aware of first, followed by the positive ones. Few events stand out in our memory like a lighthouse that can be seen for miles along the coast. Other events fade away. We have all experienced and overcome crises and difficult times in our lives. These are important resources when it comes to dealing with new stressful situations constructively and literally not letting them get you down. In fact, the biography of a person can also be understood as a collection of resources.

Most life stories contain three essential parts:

- Positive events: remembering such moments gives strength.
- Negative events: the fact that these crises have been overcome is proof of the ability to lead yourself.
- Insights and decisions: these insights and steering impulses are an expression of your ability to lead yourself.

Attitude – how we deal with crises

A person's inner attitude influences how he or she deals with the challenges of life. It ultimately determines whether a crisis is seen as an excessive demand or a challenge. This distinction is already in the word "crisis" itself. It is derived from the Greek verb "krínein", which means "to separate" and "to differ". Does a

manager see himself as a "shaper" who is the architect of his own fortune? Or does he feel more like a "victim" who is in over his head, who feels sorry for himself and finds responsibility for his misery in others? Such a victim attitude expresses itself in verbal and non-verbal communication, diminishes one's own emotional sovereignty as well as one's ability to think and thus also reduces the quality of decisions. And yet it is not easy to break free from a victim attitude. We all know that. The sphere "Attitude" therefore stands for developing strategies to consciously and constructively influence one's inner attitude.

Mental Agility – leaving the comfort zone

This sphere is about the ability and the will to keep on learning, to react flexibly to rapidly changing conditions and to deal confidently with uncertainty and complexity. This requires above all the willingness to leave one's own comfort zone when entering new territory, as well as the ability and willingness to improvise. In this sphere everything revolves around learning techniques to further develop this ability within oneself.

Energy Management – managing your own recourses

The sphere "Energy Management" deals with simple, quickly effective strategies to improve one's own energy balance in a targeted manner. They are the first-aid kit for executives and all those who then want to work on grounding themselves, recharging their batteries, creating inner distance to worries and problems and thus preparing themselves for difficult situations.

The range of possible resources from which one can draw new energy is large and varies greatly from person to person.

Resources usually have to be worked out first and then used regularly so that they can have a positive effect. By working on this level, one learns to consciously control one's own emotional state and the thoughts that go with it in order not to get stuck in the hamster wheel, even under great pressure, but to view things with a healthy, inner distance and thus with confidence.

Mind-Body-Axis – the body as an important tool

We consist of body and mind. Both are closely connected. They influence each other mutually and should therefore receive equal attention. This is especially true for managers. Due to long working hours and frequent travel, they often have a lifestyle that is contrary to a careful handling of their own bodies. In addition, managers glorify resilience, toughness and roughness, which makes it difficult for them to manage their own energy reserves. The work on the mind-body-axis begins with the amount of sleep and the quality of nutrition and leads through various forms of physical activation, such as sports, yoga or autogenic training, to mindfulness and meditation exercises. The work in this sphere focuses on using the body to achieve a greater degree of balance and mental clarity.

Authentic Relationships - feeling cared for

Who do you talk to when something gets to you? Who forms your very personal supervisory board? Trusting, honest relationships are particularly important for managers, as they do not have to play the role of a sovereign decision-maker who always has a solution to every problem. Authentic relationships with friends, trusted colleagues, mentors or a coach give a manager the opportunity to show doubt or fear. This makes such relationships extremely valuable. In this sphere it is therefore important to create awareness of the stabilizing effect of these relationships and, as a result, to make contacts with one's own supervisory board more professional and regular.

Meaning - the „Why" as a source of power

What makes your life meaningful? Those who see meaning in what they are committed to - in other words, those who feel that their actions are not only right, but meaningful - are better able to withstand crises and uncertainty. As the US-American philosopher Henry David Thoreau put it:

"It is not enough to be busy. So are the ants. The question is: What are we busy about?"

The sphere "Meaning" is about making a positive difference in the world through one's own actions and thereby feeling better.

Strengthen crisis resistance with the Executive FiRE Index

The Executive FiRE Index was developed by us as an analytical instrument to capture all areas of individual resilience in analogy to the FiRE model described above and thus to make the individual development of crisis resilience visible in a differentiated way. In addition to the resilience factors of the personality, the traits, this tool also measures the effectiveness of the self-management and coping strategies of a person, i.e. the habit, as well as the current level of well-being, i.e. the state. In a structured questionnaire, all factors influencing the ability of a person to deal constructively with stress, adversity and setbacks are recorded. The structured questionnaire contains about 100 questions, all of which are in business language. The results are summarized in an easy-to-understand 28-page results report that visualizes the current level of resilience at all levels of the FiRE model and in various other ways. The accompanying report also contains concrete recommendations for action in daily practice. We use this instrument in our coaching processes and workshops with managers and have had very positive experiences with it, as the feedback shows very precisely where there is currently a need for action. In order to make the improvement in crisis resilience visible over time, the Executive FiRE Index is always used at least twice. In the beginning, the initial state is documented and after a few months of internal endurance training, the change in resilience is recorded in another run.

The structure of the instrument

The Executive FiRE Index consists of five parts.

- *Executive Resilience Summary*
  This section provides an overview of how a person's resilience is conditioned, i.e. how traits, habits and states contribute to actual resilience.

- *Spheres of Resilience*
  In this part the individual values for each of the eight spheres of resilience are summarized.

- *Resilience Continuum*
  The path to more resilience can look very different for different people. This section deals with the behavioral patterns and coping strategies of a person and how effectively they are used for self-perception and self-control.

- *Thinking Traps*
  Under stress, people tend to fall victim to thinking traps, which in turn can severely impair their sovereignty in dealing with difficult situations. This section contains the values for some of the typical thinking patterns under stress.

- *Reflection and Action Plan*
  In this section, the reflections and decisions on the previously made findings are recorded. It serves as a basis for discussing the Executive FiRE Index with a certified coach.

The nature of crisis resistance

The type or nature of resilience varies from person to person. Some people simply have a proverbial "thick skin" and do not let anything upset them. On the other hand, they may also be less aware of the emotions of the people around them. Others may seem less stable, but have had to learn many strategies and coping mechanisms in the course of their lives that have become second nature to them. Both persons can be equally resilient - but in a different way. Therefore, the nature of resilience is similar to the humps in camels. Contrary to popular belief, it is not water but fat that is stored here. The larger the humps of a camel are, the more fat it can store permanently. Camels with more fat reserves can survive longer in hostile environments. In short: They can endure more. Camels with smaller humps, on the other hand, have to conserve their energy and concentrate on their strengths. For example, they are lighter and therefore make faster progress in

Illustration 4: The Executive Resilience Summary

deep sand. This means they need less energy and reach the next water point earlier.

A certain degree of desert fitness can therefore be achieved with different "construction methods". A camel with large, well-filled humps can undoubtedly cover long distances through dry and dusty deserts. However, it cannot do this very quickly. A camel with smaller humps, on the other hand, may seem comparatively fragile and not very persevering. But it moves easier and faster and therefore needs less energy reserves.

The *Executive Resilience Summary* illustrates the nature of individual resilience in managers and thus provides an overview of the various aspects that contribute to personal resilience. The vertical axis shows the score for *Stress & Ambiguity Tolerance*. This describes the "raw resilience", which is derived from the personality structure. The horizontal axis shows the scores for maturity of coping strategies. The values here reflect the effectiveness of the various strategies, routines and rituals that a manager has developed over time to deal with pressure, adversity and crisis. The circle segments in different shades of blue in the diagram indicate the degree of resilience a person has in dealing with stress. As explained using the example of the humps of camels, it is important to note that an equally high degree of resilience can be achieved both through stress and ambiguity tolerance, i.e. *traits*, and through self-management strategies, i.e. *habits*. At the intersection of the values for *traits* and *habits*, a circle represents the current level of life satisfaction, also known as the *state*.

What exactly makes us crisis resistant?

The ability of camels and their conspecifics to cope with drought, fluctuating temperatures and sandstorms is based on various factors. Some protective factors, such as the size of the humps, are innate, while other skills, such as calmness, stamina and the ability to find water holes, have yet to be developed.

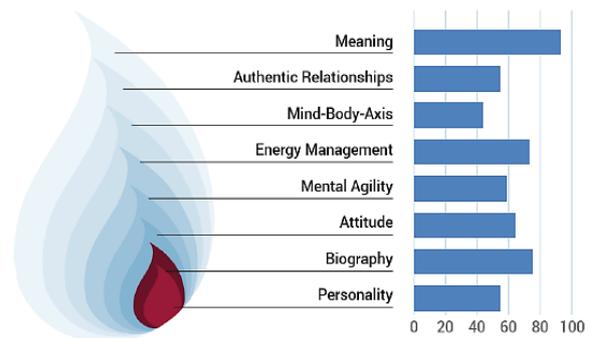*Illustration 5: The spheres of individual resilience*

It is precisely this deeper analysis of resilience that the main section of the Executive F**i**RE Index is about. This section is focusing on better understanding the elements of one's own resilience and the strengths and weaknesses derived from it, and thus being able to actively influence it. For each of the eight spheres of the Executive F**i**RE model described above, a value

is presented that represents the degree of resilience in a specific sphere of the resilience model. In addition, the result for each of these spheres is explained and interpreted in detail. Recommendations for action that can have a positive effect on the level of resilience are also given and the protection and risk factors that need to be further strengthened or compensated for are presented.

Resilience is not toughness

In order to achieve true resilience and to be able to withstand crises such as heat, drought and sandstorms, both stability and mobility are required. What at first sounds like a contradiction quickly becomes clear when you take a closer look at camels' strategies for dealing with sandstorms. For fragile natures, the desert is truly the wrong place. Sandstorms that last for days, in which breathing becomes a torture, require a stoic mind and a high degree of endurance. But hardness alone is not enough, you also need the right strategy. When a storm becomes too strong, the camel herd gathers together so that no animal is lost, and crouches on its knees to reduce the attack surface for the storm.

The same applies to the resilience of us humans. Leading oneself well is undoubtedly one of the most demanding tasks in both private and professional life. Many managers have learned to respond to difficult situations with a high degree of self-discipline and work ethics. This toughness is socially very much recognized, but there is also a danger lurking here. If managers translate the concept of self-management exclusively with "harshness against oneself", it is only a matter of time before one

suffers or even collapses under the self-imposed pressure. Of course, a certain self-discipline plays a role. But at least as important is the ability for self-reflection and the conscious perception of one's own person consisting of body, mind and soul with their current needs and sensitivities. Another part of the Executive FiRE Index therefore deals with the area of trained behaviors, i.e. Habits.

In the adjacent diagram, the blue dot represents the value that a manager achieves in the area of learned resilience. It shows schematically and in a simplified way that resilient managers tend to combine good self-perception with a high degree of self-control, while *tough* managers tend to rely unreflectively exclusively on discipline and the suppression of their own needs. If, on the other hand, a lack of self-perception meets a lack of self-control, we speak of *derailed* managers, similar to a train that has jumped off the tracks,
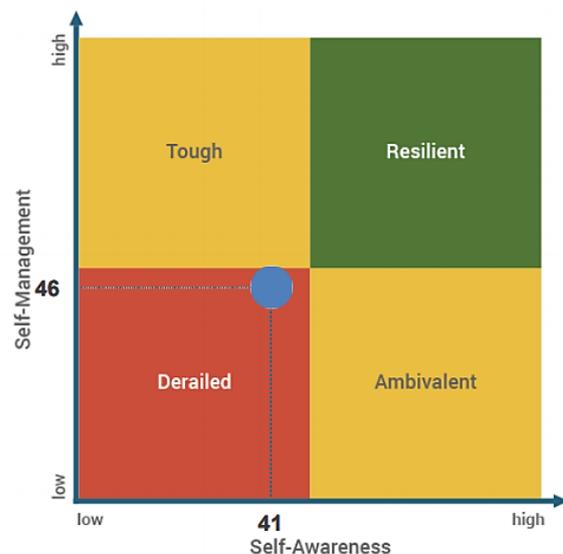

Illustration 6: The Resilience Continuum

races uncontrolled through the area and causes damage. If a certain degree of self-reflection meets weakly developed self-control, research speaks of a "knowing-doing-gap", a phenomenon that most managers certainly succumb to from time to time, which is why we also call it *ambivalent*. It describes the fact that we generally know very well what is good for us, our employees and our company, but often do not apply this knowledge, or even ignore it - like the CEO, for example, who actually knows that he should do sports and get enough sleep to be as balanced as possible and lead with confidence in difficult times, but does not do so because of the threatening consequences of the crisis and the omnipresent fear and permanently goes over his performance limit.

Thinking traps

Camels are known for their calm and balanced temper. But the peaceful giants can also get frightened and take flight heedlessly if they cannot assess a suddenly appearing development well. When managers are experiencing difficult and confusing situations, their inner world also starts to

Illustration 7: The analysis of thinking traps

vibrate, which can be very concerning. This inner vibration is expressed in so-called thinking traps. These are known as dysfunctional cognitive patterns, which can often be observed when a person is under a lot of pressure. Perhaps some of these thinking traps are familiar to you? Don't worry, if that is the case you are in good company. The damage potential of these cognitive distortions and generalizations can be immense, making an already difficult situation unbearable. Thinking traps are virtually the poison in one's own head, which can sometimes put people in positions of responsibility in supposedly hopeless situations. The good news is, that once a manager succeeds in pulling himself out of his emotional

swamp in the spirit of Baron von Muenchhausen, critical situations, for example in his own career, are usually well handled and lead to personal growth.

There is nothing good, unless you do it

Since 2010, we have been working on the fascinating human ability to constructively deal with setbacks and crises.

Over the years, we have come to realize that working on one's own resilience must always include improving one's own self-management.

In this sense, crisis resistance is a subset of resilience and is a central prerequisite for good leadership. The work on it requires some theoretical models and numerous practical tools, which we provide our clients with in our workshops, books and last but not least with the Executive F**i**RE Index. But the central insight is that the improvement of one's own self-management and crisis competence is above all one thing: Daily work on oneself. The models and tools must therefore not only be understood. Ultimately, the essential difference lies in the regular work with them. Erich Kaestner already knew "There is nothing good, unless you do it". In our opinion, the camel and its characteristic way of dealing with life's sandstorms can be a good example of this
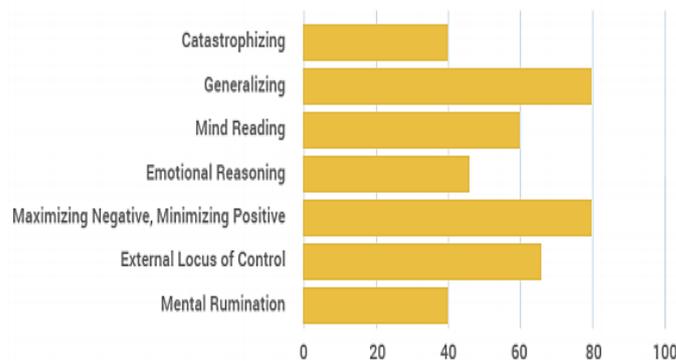
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If you would like to find out more about the Executive FiRE Index and its areas of application, please do not hesitate to contact us.

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