



# CORONA AND RESILIENCE

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Leadership Choices

## Resilience: good self-management in the times of Corona

### Difficult times

It has been said that since the Second World War there has been no greater, all-encompassing crisis than the Corona pandemic of 2020, which is affecting all sections of society and bringing many companies, executives and their teams to the limits of their capabilities. All of a sudden, employees and managers are faced with new challenges. They are now having to reorganize themselves and their manner of working, mostly doing this from home, and often without being sufficiently prepared for this. For many of us, the days are turning into one long video conference, often with fed up children on their laps or in front of the television. Some of us feel isolated and find it difficult to motivate ourselves. In addition, many of us are affected by short-time working and the risk of losing their jobs, and thus also by financial restrictions and sometimes the existential fears that go hand in hand with this. Many of us are starting to feel the impact of the pandemic more directly. Many of us have relatives or friends who have fallen ill and they are concerned about their health as well as their own. All these developments are affecting us and we are all having to find ways of dealing with them. And the current prospects do not make a rapid improvement of the situation seem very likely. The result is unprecedented levels of stress and anxiety about the future in large sections of the population. This has become at least as contagious as the virus itself.

*But how we perceive stress can be just as important for how we handle it as the amount of stress we experience.*

For many of us, the first reaction to psychological stress is to look for external solutions so that we no longer feel overwhelmed by the difficult situation. We comfort ourselves, for instance, by stocking up on supplies and closely following the latest pandemic updates several times a day. We distract ourselves and

watch hours of any old series on Netflix or follow self-appointed experts on Facebook. We complain about the incompetent politicians or we fall into “exaggerated activity” and keep ourselves busy this way. Such approaches – psychologists call them ‘coping strategies’ – bring short-term relief because they distract us from our own emotions. In the long run, however, they are not very effective. In order to find a good way of dealing with psychological stress, it is important to develop your own resilience. Nurturing this skill will help guide us successfully through crises and not leave us completely subjected to the whims of our worries, fears and other emotions.

### Only those who can manage themselves are able to lead others in the present crisis

Managers are particularly affected by the current situation. They are having 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 concerns and needs of their employees, for which there is often no easy, quick fix. To be authentic and to give direction despite your own uncertainties presents many managers with a seemingly insurmountable challenge. All too often, this leads to a situation where managers tend to ‘take cover’ rather than deal with the situation in an open and forward-looking manner. In such times it becomes clear that the ability to manage oneself effectively in the face of crises and uncertainty is indeed an essential leadership skill. In fact, the ability to positively influence one’s own inner world and thus serve as a role model for one’s own employees is likely to become increasingly important for the success of companies in the coming decades, because the time after Corona will also be anything but predictable or plannable.

You can strengthen your own resilience by using various methods and practices. One of them is acceptance. It is important to distinguish what we can control and what we can’t.

Life is always presenting us all with challenges and it is pointless to complain about them or ask why they happen. This is particularly true for the current crisis situation, for which none of us is responsible. It is, however, our responsibility to decide how we wish to respond to the pandemic. This applies regardless of the degree to which we are personally affected at the moment. If we accept the current situation as it is, it is easier to develop a constructive approach towards it than if we complain about it or resist it. A core aspect of resilience is the conviction that we can shape our own destiny and well-being. Psychologists also refer to this as “self-efficacy”. If we can ask ourselves: “How can I positively change this situation?” or “What could I learn from it?” instead of “Why me?” we can deal better with challenges and setbacks. The central question is how we can succeed in adopting this positive mindset. One reliable way that helps to keep one’s fear in check is to help other people. The feeling of being able to act and change things for the better is an effective remedy for the feeling of powerlessness that may otherwise develop. Another key aspect is a good measure of self-awareness and the ability to perceive and be aware of one’s own thoughts, emotions and needs. Furthermore, resilience is an active skill, i.e. it is about developing certain strategies, practices and rituals for oneself and then applying them in a disciplined manner. But before going into this in more detail, we would like to correct a widespread misunderstanding.

### Resilience is not about being tough

Managing 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 strict work ethics. Socially this is highly regarded, but there is a danger lurking here. If managers understand the concept of self-management purely and simply as “being tough with oneself”, then it is only a matter of time before they suffer or even collapse under this self-imposed pressure. Of course a certain amount of self-discipline is important. But one’s ability for self-reflection and having a conscious awareness of one’s own being – consisting of body, mind

and soul, along with their current needs and sensitivities – is just as important. The following diagram shows in a schematic and simplified manner that resilient managers tend to combine keen self-awareness with a high degree of self-management, while “tough” managers tend to rely exclusively and without further thought on discipline and the suppression of their own needs. If, though, there is a combination of a lack of self-awareness and a lack of self-management, we speak of “derailed” managers – comparable to a fast-speed train that has jumped the tracks and is racing uncontrollably through the countryside causing havoc. Researchers speak of a “knowing-doing gap” if a certain degree of self-reflection is combined with poorly developed self-management. This is a phenomenon most managers certainly succumb to from time to time, which is why we also call it “ambivalence”. 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, and even ignore it. Take the example of the manager, for instance, who actually knows that he should do sport and get enough sleep in order to be as balanced and cool-headed as possible in difficult times, but does not do so because the imminent consequences of the crisis and constant fear are regularly pushing him beyond his limits.

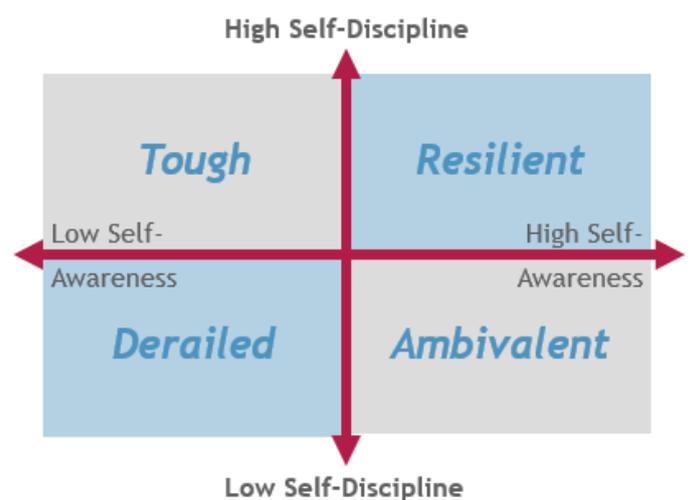


Figure 1: Self-Discipline und Self-Awareness (K. Drath: Resilient Leadership (Resiliente Unternehmensführung), Haufe, 2016)

## The FiRE model of resilience

To assist us in our work with managers we have summarised the various factors that come into play in effective self-management in the “FiRE model” which comprises eight different spheres. The acronym stands for “Factors improving Resilience Effectiveness”®. The purpose of the model is to summarise all known and scientifically proven strategies for maintaining or improving one’s own resilience in a well-structured and comprehensive way. The FiRE model was established with the help of sound concepts from renowned psychologists, psychiatrists, doctors, sociologists, biologists and brain researchers.

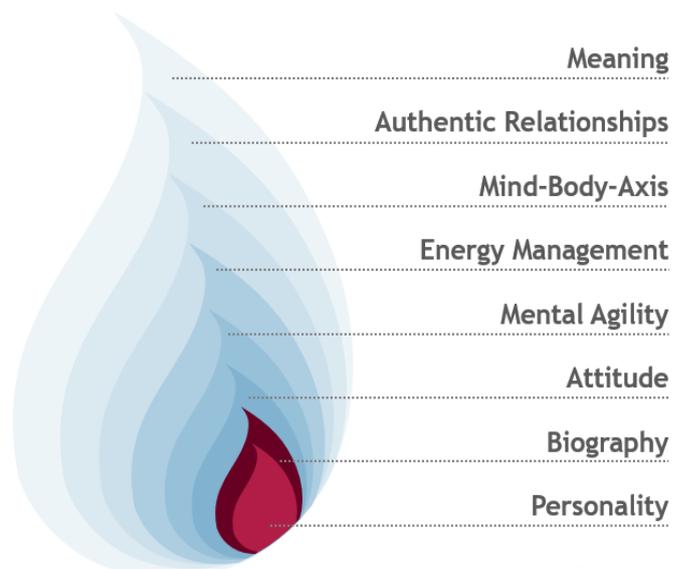


Figure 2: The FiRE Model of Resilience (K. Drath: *The art of self-management (Die Kunst der Selbstführung)*, Haufe, 2019)

## The sphere of personality

An individual’s level of stress resistance is a personality trait which is partly genetically predetermined and partly depends on that individual’s early childhood experiences. Of all spheres of resilience, the personality sphere is the one that is the most difficult to influence. It is only possible to alter basic, underlying character traits such as introversion and extraversion or a person’s emotional stability within very strict limits. The inner sphere is of central importance when it comes to becoming better acquainted with yourself and your own character traits, strengths and weaknesses in order to be better able to influence them. This can only be achieved through self-reflection, external feedback and through the use of tools from the field of personality psychology.

person’s objectively-viewed, individual stress situation. The reaction of some colleagues may be excessively positive or they may become hyperactive, while others may feel despondent or become cynical. Try to remain sensitive to these subtle differences in spite of the hectic pace of life. Keep in touch with each one of your employees and use the scale to regularly assess their level of happiness. If your employees are feeling depressed, don’t try to “fix things”. Listen and keep in close touch with your staff. This may not appear to be very spectacular, but in the long run it is a very effective way of ensuring the well-being of your team.

## What can you as a manager do for yourself in this crisis?

Make use of this crisis period to get to know yourself even better. Regularly take 15 minutes, ideally daily, for reflection, and note down your thoughts and feelings. Also record your level of happiness on a scale from 0-10. If your mood is upbeat, give yourself a high score and vice versa. Find out what factors put you in a better mood.

## What can you do for your employees in this crisis?

Every employee will react differently to the crisis, and this is largely independent of that

## The sphere of biography

The sphere of biography is concerned with the resources needed for coping with difficult situations in one’s own past. Being aware of your own biography can have a positive effect on how you deal with challenges in the present and on your expectations of the future. How has your life been so far? What immediately comes to mind? Most people can immediately remember a few events that have been significant in their lives. In most cases the negative events spring to mind first, followed by the positive ones. Few events stand out in our memory like a beacon that can be seen for miles along the coast. Other events fade into

the background. We have all experienced and overcome crises and difficult times in our lives. These are important resources we can draw on when it comes to dealing constructively with new stressful situations and not allowing them to get us down. In fact, a person's biography can also be understood as a set of resources. Most of life's stories contain three essential parts:

- positive events: remembering such moments gives us strength.
- negative events: the fact that these crises have been overcome and dealt with is proof of our ability to cope well with crises.
- insights and decisions: these insights and the way they give direction are an expression of your ability to self-manage.

### What can you as a manager do for yourself in this crisis?

Give yourself a bit of time and write down important life events that spontaneously come to mind. Put the events in chronological order. You can continue the list over several days, whenever you feel like it. When the list seems sufficiently complete, note down for each event the level of happiness that you felt at the time. Use a scale from -10 (very negative) to +10 (very positive). Now plot the line of your life graphically, e.g. in a system of coordinates with the axes of time and level of happiness/well-being. What do you notice? Which crises have you successfully overcome? Which moments of happiness do you remember? In which periods of your life have you learned

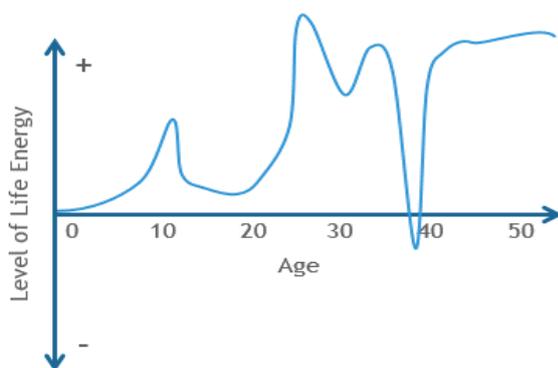


Figure 3: Working on your own biography (K. Drath: *The art of self-management (Die Kunst der Selbstführung)*, Haufe, 2019)

the most? What lessons learned from the ups and downs might be helpful to you now?

### What can you do for your employees in this crisis?

As a manager you are a role model for your team, especially in times like these. The way you manage yourself will set an example for your employees. So, tell your employees about your experiences with biographical work and what you have learned about yourself. Encourage your team to give it a try but without putting them under pressure. Share your insights with them and ask them what they have learned from this and how these insights might help them today.

### The sphere of attitude

A person's inner stance influences their approach to challenges in life. It ultimately determines whether an unforeseen event is seen as an excessive strain or a challenge. This distinction is already inherent in the word "crisis" itself. It is derived from the Greek verb "krínein", which means "to separate" and "to distinguish". Does a manager see himself as a "creator" who shapes his own fortune? Or rather as a "victim" who loses control of the circumstances in his life, who pities himself and blames others for his misery? Such a victim mentality is expressed both verbally and non-verbally; it reduces your own emotional self-assurance and capacity to think, as well as weakening the quality of your decisions. And yet it is not easy to give up such a victim mentality. We all know that. The sphere of attitude is, therefore, concerned with developing strategies for constructively influencing your inner stance.

### What can you as a manager do for yourself in this crisis?

In the US Army, in preparation for deployment, soldiers are trained in an exercise called "hunting the good stuff". The exercise involves reflecting daily on three events of the day for which they feel genuinely grateful. This seems easier, when reading this, than it actually is in practice. It specifically has to do with the small and unspectacular events that have happened in the course of that day. These may be encounters, conversations held, gestures or observations made. For which

three events of today do you feel grateful? Write them down and repeat this exercise for the next nine weeks. Numerous studies have shown that this exercise has a lasting positive effect on your emotional stability and your sense of satisfaction in life.

### What can you do for your employees in this crisis?

Tell your employees about your experience with this exercise. Maybe you can even motivate one or more of them to try this out themselves.

Another exercise you can do with your whole team is called the “Circle of Control”. The point of this exercise is to make yourself aware of what you mostly focus your attention on. There are three areas in this model:

- In the first area – control – we can control things directly. This includes, for example, my attitude in dealing with employees, colleagues and superiors and whether I offer my support to colleagues when needed. In this area, we can all have a direct impact.
- The second area – influence – includes all aspects of life that a person can influence indirectly. This might include, for example, the atmosphere at work or the sense of cohesion within the team.
- The third area of – concern – is, on the other hand, nearly impossible for anyone to influence, even with the greatest personal commitment. This is the area where you merely feel anxiety, for instance about the effects of Corona on your workplace.

Together with the members of your team, reflect on what most of them are currently focusing their attention on. Which areas are they currently actively shaping and positively influencing? And where are they just getting upset or worrying about things that cannot be changed? For a high degree of resilience it is beneficial to spend a lot more time on those areas that you can directly control or indirectly influence. By contrast, it is detrimental to spend a lot of time worrying about things that are beyond your control or are in the

past. Agree with your team on a sign or gesture that everyone can use when a colleague drifts too far into the area “concern” in discussions.

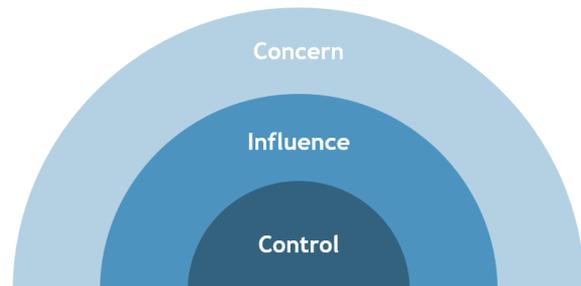


Figure 4: The model of “Circle of Control” (K. Drath: *Resilient Leadership (Resilienz in der Unternehmensführung)*, Haufe, 2016)

### The sphere of mental agility

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 the willingness to improvise. In this sphere everything revolves around learning techniques to enhance this ability in oneself. Good resources (see “Sphere Energy Management”) support one’s “mental agility”.

### What can you as a manager do for yourself in this crisis?

We are undoubtedly going through a crisis that is costing many lives, forcing many to make sacrifices and posing a real threat to the majority of us. This is a fact we need to face. And yet, such a crisis also always brings with it the opportunity to do things that one would otherwise not have had time for. For example, you could make progress with the innovative project that you have been putting off for some time or you could further modernise and digitalise your work processes. You could also invest in your own training or the training of your employees. Such initiatives do not always have to be expensive, because necessity is also the mother of invention. All it takes is the will and the courage to act and think outside the box.

### What can you do for your employees in this crisis?

Involve your team in these thoughts. Assuming that this period also offers opportunities, what could be done with the resources that have been freed up? Which projects or initiatives would your colleagues prioritize if they were allowed to do so? Try not to comment on every suggestion and manage the process. Give your team room for controlled experimentation. Your team's creative potential and implementation skills may take you by surprise. And, before you know it, you have taken a step towards "agile working" without ever having used the term.

### The sphere of energy management

The sphere of energy management deals with simple, fast-working strategies to consciously improve your own energy levels. They are like a first-aid kit for managers and everyone who wishes to work on grounding themselves, recharging, creating more distance within themselves to worries and problems and, by extension, arming themselves for difficult situations. The range of potential resources from which new energy can be drawn is immense and varies greatly from person to person. Usually, resources first have to be developed and then applied regularly to have a positive effect. By working on this level, you learn to consciously control your own emotions and accompanying thoughts, so that even under great pressure, you do not get stuck in the hamster wheel, but are able to view things calmly and with a healthy, inner distance.



### What can you as a manager do for yourself in this crisis?

It is essential to have a well-structured, daily work routine set up when working from home. Otherwise you run the risk of rushing from one video call to the next from morning to night and not paying enough attention to yourself. This might be fine for a few days, but in the long term it can become a problem. You should

therefore set up a good daily work routine. Routines and daily rituals also provide orientation in such times of uncertainty. How much time have you planned in for work, breaks, exercise and for your social contacts? Enter these key elements into your schedule. If you have small children that you need to look after during the day, remember that this is also an important part of your working day. Be realistic about the amount of work that you can manage right now. In times like these, dedicating 100% of your work time to the company is often unrealistic. Depending on your life situation, it can be 80%, 60% or even only 20% – regardless of whether you are on short time or not.

### What gives you strength?

*There are many possibilities – even in times of Corona. They range from outdoor exercise as well as playing music to arts and crafts or similar creative endeavours. Actively pursue activities that make you feel good and maybe even make you laugh. Watch comedies or read a cheerful book. Integrate these activities into your daily and weekly routine.*

### What drains you?

*Avoid these "energy thieves" as far as possible. For example, limit your consumption of the latest Corona news and avoid information from dubious sources, whose purpose is often just to arouse fear. This is particularly true for the time just before going to bed and immediately after getting up.*

### What can you do for your employees in this crisis?

Encourage your employees to structure their day well and to plan their work time and breaks in their calendars. Consciously reduce your expectations of what is possible during this time in terms of workload and discuss this with your team. Be frank about your own level of energy and performance. Discuss what gives energy to each individual in a team meeting. Make a note of the team members' sources of energy and inquire about them at a regular basis. Also report on your experiences with your morning and evening ritual – maybe

you will inspire others to do something similar.

### The sphere of mind-body axis

We consist of body and mind. Both are closely connected. They influence each other mutually. They should, therefore, be given equal attention. The same applies to managers, for them in particular. They often have a lifestyle which, as a result of long working hours and frequent travel, does not allow them to take proper care of themselves. Furthermore, resilience, toughness and robustness are qualities that are particularly highly regarded among managers, which makes a considerate approach to one's own energy reserves difficult. Work on the mind-body axis starts with the amount of sleep and quality of nutrition and goes on to cover various forms of physical exercise, such as sport, yoga and autogenic training, as well as mindfulness and meditation exercises. Work in this sphere focuses on using the body to achieve a greater degree of balance and mental clarity.

#### What can you as a manager do for yourself?

Make sure you get sufficient and undisturbed sleep regularly. This is important for your body and your mental balance. Avoid mobile phones in the bedroom. This way you are less likely to be unsettled by some bad news that might come in. Eat regularly and healthily and drink enough water. Take your meals at about the same time every day and make sure you have some rest after eating. Try to go outside as often as possible, at least three times a day for at least 15 minutes. Incorporate light sport into your everyday life. A lot is still possible: jogging or walking, cycling, walking up and down stairs and/or simply try out virtual sports activities. Try out online breathing exercises and meditations, which are helpful tools to improve your inner focus and build inner resilience.

#### What can you do for your employees in this crisis?

Talk to your team about the importance of good energy management, especially in times of crisis. Talk about how to consciously plan

breaks in your day. Arrange a joint virtual sports challenge with your team. If you don't have access to Meditation and Co. yourself, ask your team about their experience. Who knows, you might even find a volunteer to lead a joint virtual meditation session.

### The sphere of authentic relationships

Who do you speak to if something really gets to you? Who is your own personal "supervisory board"? Trustworthy, honest relationships are particularly important for managers, since it gives them a brief respite from always being the authoritative decision-maker who constantly has to have a solution for every problem.

*Authentic relationships to friends, close colleagues, mentors or a coach gives a manager the chance to voice his doubts or fears.*

This is what makes such relationships so valuable. This sphere is, therefore, about creating an awareness of the stabilizing effect of these relationships and, as a result, the ability to make contact with your own "supervisory board" more professional and more regular.

#### What can you as a manager do for yourself in this crisis?

It is good to spend a lot of time with your team now. As well as the aspect of authenticity, it will still be important for you to spread optimism and confidence. But who can you turn to with your own worries and needs? Just as you take care of your team, you also need to take care of your own social contacts. It is important that you spend time with people who are currently facing similar leadership challenges as yourself. So make sure you talk regularly to people you trust and who can understand and encourage you. Use all the channels available to you: video chat, phone, email, voice mail, or even a handwritten letter. Stay in touch and make a virtual appointment for a chat, a cup of coffee or a beer after work.

### What can you do for your employees in this crisis?

Keep in close touch with your team despite the constraints of working from home and the current crisis situation. Introduce having brief team calls on a daily basis to give your team structure and direction. 15 minutes a day is enough and whoever is there is there. Create informal WhatsApp groups and promote networking within your team. Even joint virtual breakfasts or lunch breaks are possible. Create occasions and initiatives to keep your team in touch with each other. While this may not always appear to be the most efficient use of time and resources, it strengthens cohesion and helps to maintain a positive atmosphere in the team.

### The sphere of meaning

What makes your life meaningful? Only those who see a purpose in what they do – whose actions feel right and meaningful – are better able to withstand crises and uncertainty. As the American philosopher Henry David Thoreau put it: “It is not enough to be busy. So are the ants. The question is: What keeps us being busy?” The sphere of meaning is about “making a difference” in the world through one’s own actions and feeling all the better for it.



### What can you as a manager do for yourself in this crisis?

Your primary job as a manager is to lead and to do so as confidently as possible. This is expected of you especially in difficult times and is also a great source of meaning. Be there for your people, especially now, and take good care of them – despite these adverse circumstances. Ask how they are doing and just listen. Try to be a role model yourself when it comes to getting through the crisis well. You will see that it is a very rewarding task to concentrate on managing yourself and others well.

### What can you do for your employees in this crisis?

What good can you do as a team now? Doing good makes you feel good and releases positive energy. Initiate a team discussion on how to use the possibilities available to the team in the current crisis for the benefit of society as a whole. If your team comes up with ideas, take them up if possible – even if you have an idea that you think is better. Not the result itself is important for the resilience of your team, but the initiative, or rather, the process of creating it together. Or to quote Erich Kästner: “There is no good unless you do it”.

### And what happens after Corona?

Whether the situation after the crisis turns out to be a success or a disaster for you and your team depends largely on what you do today and how you do it. Yes, it may be tough and you may have to make difficult decisions that hurt. But resilience research clearly shows

that individuals, teams, and entire organizations can emerge stronger from crises like this if they follow the principles of resilience presented here. We wish you all the best through this difficult time and hope that it will enable you to

grow as a person and as a leader. We also hope that your team will come together, invent new things together and support each other. And we hope that you will manage to keep as much of this positive energy as possible for the time after Corona – we will all be needing it.

## About the authors

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