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Building Resilient Teams in Adverse Times

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Abstract

In light of the significant focus on how individuals and organisations cope with and adapt to the urgency of change in the business landscape, a growing number of researchers are now exploring how teams can develop resilience in the face of adversity. However, in spite of the burgeoning research in this area, the antecedents of team resilience require further attention from scholars. Building on the extant literature in this developing field this PhD draws on the job demands-resources theory as a conceptual lens to help explain how team resilience emerges.

Keywords: team resilience, job demands-resources, organisational context.

> *Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, 'I will try again tomorrow'*
>
> *— Mary Anne Radmacher*

Introduction

Adversity is becoming increasingly prominent in organisations, which is something that has been evident well before Covid-19 occurred. It is, therefore, no surprise that since the early 2000s, research on resilience in organisations has been on an upward curve. The term resilience originated from the Latin word 'resilire' (to leap back) and can be defined as the ability to positively adapt when faced with adversity. While the term is a popular buzzword, it is much more, as it provides individuals, teams and organisations with the ability to deal with challenges. Thus, in order to adapt to increasing stressors resilience is required now more than ever. Scholarship on resilience in an organisational context has primarily focused on resilience at an individual and organisational level, leaving team resilience underexplored. Herein existed an opportunity to investigate this gap as team level resilience can be considered different to individual and organisational resilience, as what makes individuals and organisations resilient may not necessarily make a team resilient.

The overall aim of this PhD is to explore how team resilience emerges within the workplace. The first phase identified what factors impact and contribute to the emergence of team

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resilience. This was followed by the second phase, which went beneath the surface and explored these factors in more detail and provided a sense of context into how team resilience emerges within a higher educational institute. A higher educational context was chosen as research on team resilience is scarce within higher education and is required now more than ever as Covid-19 has impacted teaching, learning and research.

Phase One

Research on the emergence of team resilience can help organisations respond appropriately to unexpected events which can threaten performance and survival. Recent studies on work team resilience have outlined that resilient teams are more successful in facing significant challenges. This thesis proposes that job demands-resources and team processes play a key role in the emergence of team resilience. Job demands can lead to a health-impairment process while job resources can lead to a motivational process. Indeed, understanding team processes can help differentiate team resilience from other forms of resilience. Overall, phase one aimed to empirically explore the relationships between job demands-resources, team processes and team resilience. Phase one was an online anonymous questionnaire which was developed from established scales. After removing incomplete responses, the sample comprised of 102 employees from 18 teams drawn from nine organisations across the services sector and educational sector. Participants occupied varying positions.

According to the findings, individual resilience, job demand-resources and team processes were found to be related to team resilience. As predicted *individual resilience* had a positive relationship with team resilience. This is in line with the view that resilient individuals help make up resilient teams. In addition, as expected, the job resources social *support* and *autonomy* had a positive relationship with team resilience. This is consistent with the view that the more resources available the less employees will be vulnerable to stress and the more they will be able to respond positively to adversity and build resilience.

As expected, the job demand *role conflict* had a negative relationship with team resilience. Role conflict is considered a hindrance stressor which occurs when people find themselves with incompatible demands. Employees consider hindrance stressors such as role conflict as out of their control and unmanageable which can prevent personal growth opportunities. *Workload* had a positive relationship with team resilience though this relationship was not significant. This is in line with the idea that workload is a challenge stressor. A challenge stressor such as workload enables employees to perceive potentially stressful demands as manageable and under their control, therefore they can allow personal growth opportunities. These conceptualisations are in line with research that has identified and distinguished types of stressors by whether the stressor is appraised generally as challenging or hindering.

Connectivity was positively related to team resilience which is in line with the idea that when team members are connected team resilience is cultivated. Connectivity is a characteristic of positive work relationships that are generative in nature. When connectivity is present

in a team it encourages openness, new ideas and opportunities. This relational connection enables individuals to engage in in-depth discussions over conflicting perspectives and differing options. This discourse is key to enable team members to create, chase, and apply new ideas. Having connectivity in relationships also enables attentiveness towards others and better respect to diverse influences, thus encouraging new opportunities for learning and development. Therefore, connectivity can influence team resilience as it empowers teams to see opportunities in challenges and create new insights which can expand a team's capacity to positively adapt when faced with adversity.

Emotional Carrying Capacity (ECC) was also positively related to team resilience which is in line with the idea that the more emotional expression on a team the more team resilience can be facilitated. ECC in a connection is shown by the expression of more emotion and the expression of positive and negative emotions. Moreover, these emotions are demonstrated in a constructive manner, therefore the connections have the ability to tolerate emotions of varying kinds. ECC helps develop a supportive environment where individuals can be themselves and are not scared of making mistakes. Therefore, ECC influences team resilience as it can regenerate teams and help them learn to overcome adversity.

These team processes were examined to ascertain if they moderated the relationship between job demand-resources and team resilience. Findings revealed that *connectivity* was a significant moderator between autonomy and team resilience. The relationship between autonomy and team resilience is strengthened when connectivity is present. Research shows that when teams have resources such as autonomy, they feel healthier which helps increase a team's ability to be resilient. Furthermore, they suggest that being connected is important for healthy teams. Connectivity may strengthen the relationship between autonomy and team resilience as it enables team members to feel safe to exert control over adverse events. This finding adds to the limited research linking team autonomy and team resilience and further highlights the importance of connectivity in the workplace. Other hypothesised moderation effects of connectivity were not supported. Furthermore, ECC did not act as a moderator between job demands-resources and team resilience.

Organisational context may have been why these hypotheses were not supported as developing and maintaining high-quality connections at work depends on the organisational context and how employees engage in that context. For example, in a work environment that operates in a bureaucratic manner employees may be afraid to speak up as dissent can be discouraged which could affect relationships. Furthermore, the work context can play a role in how and to what degree factors impact connection quality. This is in line with the view that resilience is context specific. It has been suggested that not just context but also culture form the environment in which processes are linked to resilience therefore making some processes more important for adaptation than others. To add to this argument organisational contexts and sociocultural factors also hold important implications for resilience development.

In addition, almost half of those surveyed (N=47) were on their team for less than two

years and a significant portion (N=48) did not work in the same building as their team. This indicates that high-quality connections may not be developed as research shows that high-quality connections can take some time to develop in the workplace, which may affect how comfortable team members are with each other and their ability to adapt in a crisis together. This may explain why some hypotheses were not supported.

Considering the impact of context and culture may provide a valid reason for why the majority of moderator hypotheses were not supported. In general psychology literature, scholars have written widely about the requirement for a more contextually and culturally embedded comprehension of resilience. It is also argued that the amount of resilience that can be shown in a particular context is related to the degree to which that context has components that encourage resilience such as, working in a supportive environment. Furthermore, due to the nature of team resilience, contextual and temporal issues should be considered. Thus, further research is required that takes context, culture and temporal issues into account.

Phase Two

Phase two was required in order to explore antecedents further, give context and ultimately answer *how does team resilience emerge in the workplace?* Research on resilience in a higher educational context is limited. Therefore, this study helped close this gap by providing an understanding on how team resilience emerges in academic and administrative teams operating in a higher educational context. Conducting the qualitative study during Covid-19 provided the researcher the opportunity to study real time adversity and understand how teams positively adapted. Twenty-three semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve academic and eleven administrative staff from one university. The theoretical perspective of interest in this study was workplace job demands-resources and team processes that influence team resilience during a crisis.

Following interviews, a thematic analysis was completed which identified two overarching categories including resources and demands. Seven subcategories in total were identified which included four resources namely personal, work related, outside of work and resilience strategies and three demands including personal, work related and outside of work. Subcategories were further broken down into dimensions.

Findings highlighted that having self-efficacy, a positive attitude and being able to persist helped withstand adversity in a higher educational context during Covid-19. Individuals with these personal resources were more motivated in facing work stressors. Self-efficacy gave individuals confidence in their ability to overcome challenges which helped them accomplish tasks. This is in line with the idea that self-efficacy enables individuals to believe in themselves and work through stress. Individuals with low self-efficacy tend to give up more quickly, be discouraged easily by failure and get distracted. Thus, highlighting the importance for self-efficacy in order to positively adapt. Furthermore, findings show that when there is a lack of resources to deal with adversity this can hinder individual's self-efficacy as they begin to

question their ability to positively adapt thus lessening resilience. Therefore, drawing on the job demands-resources theory having available job resources helps self-efficacy and moreover helps resilience emerge.

The nuanced effects of work characteristics on teams are unique in a pandemic context. Interviews highlighted that available support and autonomy functioned as job resources which helped teams cope with remote working challenges. Indeed, the role support plays in academic and administrative teams became more pronounced throughout the pandemic. Findings show that support was noted by all participants as key which suggests that it was the most powerful work characteristic while working remotely. Having support positively impacted the well-being and performance of teams which enabled them to positively adapt throughout challenges. Furthermore, having available support was identified as a main resource as it gave participants comfort knowing that they could depend on others which lessened stress.

Interviewees noted that having communication, connectivity and being able to show emotion helped teams operating in a higher educational institute to withstand adversity during Covid-19. In order for academic and administrative teams to positively adapt having regular communication with team members was key so that information was shared and that they were not cut off from their colleagues while remote working. Having regular communication lowered ambiguity which is in line with the idea that active communication reduces high levels of uncertainty. Communication is a resilience promoting factor that gives teams that capability to effectively address adversity as having open communication on teams builds trust, positive attitudes and motivation. Results highlight the importance of informal communication with fellow co-workers. This is in line with research that found informal communication with co-workers in a high intensity telecommuting setting to be linked positively to job satisfaction. Indeed, poor communication does not only lessen performance but can also increase work stress and damage professional relationships. Therefore, in line with the high-quality connections theory communication enables team members to express their emotions and feel comfortable in being open with team members which lessens the stress of demands as issues can be shared among team members before they get out of hand. This is in line with the idea that one resilience factor may activate another resilience factor, in this case communication initiated expressing emotions and connectivity on teams.

Conclusion

Studies recently have made some attempt to theorise team resilience, however research that has investigated team resilience in an empirical setting is insufficient. There is only a handful of empirical studies focusing on team resilience. The current study aims to contribute to the workplace resilience field by filling this significant gap. The study draws attention to the factors that influence the emergence of team resilience and facilitates a better practical understanding of the experiences of workers. Therefore, this study is valuable in order to enrich our current understanding of team resilience. Furthermore, by focusing on a specific context in phase two

gives the thesis a more novel viewpoint on resilience and highlights that resilience is context specific.

In light of the current turbulent and stressful times, and drawing from previous research and literature, it is more important than ever to investigate team resilience. Findings from this thesis can be used by organisations to build human resource and organisational strategies to develop team resilience, for example, organisations could aim to encourage autonomy among teams and provide support to help build resilience. Findings can also help labour market policy makers identify key areas for approval. Therefore, the results found in this thesis are important and require further exploration given the centrality of team structures in almost every organisation across the world.

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Declaration of Interests

There is no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.