Strengthening RESILIENCE in Tough Times
The November/December 2006 issue of *Principal* describes the stressful life of today’s 24-hour principal. I’m sure many readers identified with the central theme of the issue and concluded that the 24-7, relentlessly demanding job of a principal is a huge problem. I respectfully challenge this conclusion.

Nonstop adversity is not a problem; it is the reality of the principal’s job. The real problem is much more complex: What does the principal *do* in response to these demands? Some principals, with the best of intentions, get beaten up and eventually beaten down by adversity. Other principals find ways to bounce back and become even stronger in the face of job demands.

In recent years, I have conducted research and led workshops across the United States and internationally in the areas of school resilience (Patterson, Patterson, and Collins 2002) and school leader resilience (Patterson and Kelleher 2005). Drawing upon these experiences, I’m prepared to respond to two questions frequently posed to me by principals.

What is a resilient Principal?

What separates resilient from less resilient principals begins with how leaders interpret adversity when it strikes. The dimension of interpretation is like a master filter in your brain that all adversity passes through. How you choose to interpret bad things that happen directly affects not only your outlook, but also is an expression of your overall level of optimism (or pessimism) about life’s circumstances. Our
research identified four basic profiles of how leaders respond to adversity (Figure 1).

**Unrealistic pessimists** have a pervasive, rather permanent negative interpretation of adversity and no confidence that anything positive will come out of it. They see the glass but they don’t see any water in it. In our experience, people who fit this profile rarely succeed as principals. **Realistic pessimists** have a reasonably accurate interpretation of reality, but they often have a bleak view of the future and don’t think their effort can make much difference. They see the glass as half full and fixate on the empty part. **Unrealistic optimists** are quick to make judgments about the realities they face without taking the necessary time to absorb what is truly happening. Principals who fit this profile typically

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Unrealistic Pessimists</th>
<th>Realistic Pessimists</th>
<th>Realistic Optimists</th>
<th>Unrealistic Optimists</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation of reality</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumptions</td>
<td>Deny that assumptions are true.</td>
<td>Acknowledge that assumptions are true, magnify their negative impact, and see them as barriers.</td>
<td>Acknowledge that assumptions are true but refuse to accept them as barriers.</td>
<td>Dismiss the assumptions as insignificant to progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causes of current reality</td>
<td>Find other people and forces totally at fault.</td>
<td>Accept some responsibility, but feels others are primary cause.</td>
<td>Accept responsibility for contributing to the current reality.</td>
<td>Assume they know the causes, but don’t invest the time to accurately assess them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risks posed by current reality</td>
<td>Greatly overestimate the risks.</td>
<td>Understand the risks and place undue weight on the negative.</td>
<td>Accurately assess the risks by striving to have enough data.</td>
<td>Discount the risks and refuse to see how they may jeopardize the future.</td>
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**Source:** Patterson and Kelleher, 2005.
underestimate or downplay the risks that adversity poses. They convince themselves, and try to convince others, that anything less than perfection is unacceptable. They see the glass as eternally overflowing. Then, when life’s circumstances don’t unfold as they expect, they feel their resilience start to drain.

Realistic optimists interpret reality in a way that allows them to fully understand what is really going on, including how they might have contributed to the adversity. In fact, principals who are realistic optimists want to hear all of the bad news, although they don’t dwell on it. They focus on possibilities. They see the glass as half full and try to find ways to add water to the glass. They also accept the reality that, while they may not be completely successful in their efforts, they will celebrate the small wins along the way. Time after time, our research has found that principals who most closely reflect the profile of a realistic optimist tend to be the most resilient leaders.

How Do You Become a Resilient Leader?

In our research on resilient leaders, my colleagues and I interviewed leaders at all levels, including principals, central office administrators, superintendents, and state commissioners of education. Through analysis of the data, we identified several strengths that help leaders move ahead in the face of life’s storms.

**Accurately assess past and current reality.** When adversity strikes, resilient leaders want to know as thoroughly as possible what is truly going on—the bad news as well as the good news. The stakes are high when a crisis happens, and you need to make the most informed decision possible. So don’t protect yourself from hearing the negative side of things. The bad news allows you to anticipate possible worst-case outcomes of the situation and prepare contingency plans to help avoid them.

One way to help get the full picture is to seek multiple perspectives, not just the perspective of people who see reality through your lens. It may be painful at first to seek out the gloomy side of the situation that you face, but it will help you prepare a more resilient response. Also, you need to develop a high tolerance for ambiguity and complexity.

**Be positive about future possibilities.** Now that you have a solid picture of what is happening in the midst of the storm, you must choose what you

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are going to do. Don’t forget that inaction is a choice, too. Resilient principals refuse to be deterred by the obstacles, so acknowledge them and shift your focus to the positive possibilities. In other words, when bad things happen to you, expect that good things have a chance of coming out of the bad, and that you can influence this prospect.

Finally, keep your eyes on the prize. Too often, principals let adversity take them out of their long-term game plan because they feel compelled to concentrate all of their energy on the immediate crisis. Even though you may not feel very resilient in the heat of the battle, remember that resilience is not a short-term phenomenon and that you are in this profession for the long haul. As Paul Houston, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, told us: “If you have a short-term view, it is very hard to be resilient, because in the short term things are going to happen that aren’t good. A long-term view makes it almost impossible not to be resilient, because this too shall pass.”

**Remain true to your personal values.** Among the numerous pieces of advice and experience we documented in our research, one bit of advice stood out: Stay focused on being a value-driven, not an event-driven, leader in tough times. Resilient leaders are clear about what matters most to them, personally and professionally. When you lead from this clarity of purpose, you typically make decisions that align with your values. And when your actions align with your values, you strengthen your resilience and the resilience of others.

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Maintain a strong sense of personal efficacy. Your efficacy is made up of two components: your sense of competence and your sense of confidence. Some principals are competent but don’t have the confidence to do what it takes during adverse conditions. Other principals are confident (even overly confident) that they can lead through the storm to safe harbor. But they don’t have the competence to accomplish the mission. Their subsequent failure drains their resilience and the resilience of their followers. So, believe in yourself. Build your sense of personal efficacy by recognizing and celebrating the small wins along the way. Don’t postpone celebration until you get to your final destination, or you may become discouraged by the setbacks you encounter.

Finally, continue to sustain your base of caring and support during tough times. You don’t need anybody to remind you that the life of the principal, particularly during stressful times, is a lonely place to be. All of the resilient leaders we interviewed strongly advocated surrounding yourself with trusted confidants whom you can turn to in troubled times.

Invest your personal energy wisely. Think of your resilience capacity as a fuel tank that contains your energy to confront adversity. In that fuel tank are four resources: your physical energy, emotional energy, mental energy, and spiritual energy. In the thick of adversity, you must take steps to conserve these vital sources of energy because you burn your fuel rapidly and the gauge on your tank moves quickly toward empty. For instance, you can replenish your physical energy through periodic recovery time. One principal said she carves out an hour each day to retreat to her office, dim the lights and pull the shades, put on soft music, hold phone calls, and prop her feet up. This ritual helps restore a bit of the physical fuel she will need to handle the stress that awaits when she emerges.

Act on the courage of your convictions. The concept of resilience is comprised of three dimensions: interpretation, capacity, and actions. Even though you may have an accurate interpretation of reality in the face of adversity, and even though you may have a resilience fuel tank that is relatively full, these will not help if you fail to act on the courage of your convictions. In other words, the best of intentions does not make you a resilient principal.

As one leader told us: “When it comes to acting on the courage of your convictions, I would argue that those who don’t act don’t have convictions. They only have assertions.” Other resilient leaders we interviewed said it is particularly important to remain courageous in the face of strong opposition.

Vincent Ferrandino, the executive director of NAESP, recalled a major storm during his tenure as education commissioner in Connecticut. It cen-

“When adversity strikes, resilient principals want to know...what is truly going on—the bad news as well as the good news.”
entered on his role in developing a plan to desegregate the public schools. As he led the charge, Ferrandino received threats that warranted police surveillance of his home. But in the face of these threats, Ferrandino didn’t flinch. “I had a strong belief in what I was doing...in providing equal education. It was at the core of my belief system,” he said.

To strengthen your resilience as a principal, you need to be clear about what is most central to your belief system and then act decisively, despite the risks, when your deepest values are at stake.

In closing, I want to affirm what school leaders have told us throughout our research on resilient schools and resilient leadership. Life as a principal isn’t going to get any easier in the future. If history is any predictor, the job may become even tougher. But that is not the problem; that is the reality. The problem is figuring out what you are going to do to work within the reality of adversity so you can become more resilient in the process. I hope that this article helps you discover the added fuel and added strength to successfully navigate your perilous journey.

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References

WEB RESOURCES
Resiliency in Action offers a resiliency quiz, articles, and publications, including The Comprehensive Resiliency Handbook, www.resiliency.com

Project Resilience provides resilience materials, products, and publications. www.projectresilience.com

The American Psychological Association has a number of documents related to resiliency. www.apa.org

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