



## How Leaders Get Through Tough Times: Six Strategies for Building Resilience

Tough times are no stranger to higher education—financial challenges, enrollment declines, mental health issues, and the erosion of tenure to name just a few. If these issues have become the more “anticipated” tough times, dealing with COVID-19 has been a time beyond comparison. The ambiguity, severity, and duration of this pandemic have amplified the pressure. The [Stress in America survey](#) of adults report that the average stress level due to the pandemic is significantly higher than in 2019. And as we transition back to “normal”, many of these same stressors persist and will likely only compound existing levels of anxiety for those across the higher education sector.

So what have institutional leaders learned that can be applied to managing the latter phase of this crisis as well as future crises that we’re likely to face? The answer is building resilience, the ability to cope, adapt, and persevere during challenging and stressful times. Based on our own experiences and the observations of others, we offer six resilience-building strategies for direct and indirect leadership in higher education:

### 1. Adopt a resourcefulness mindset.

Problems, even of crisis proportions, can be handled with imagination and the ability to partition a large problem into more manageable parts. Having this mindset also allows for agility and inventive responses for even the most mundane problems. During remote working, one of us was on a very important call with the boss when unexpected noise from mowing outside made it impossible to hear anything. Without hesitation, a quick move was

made to the only quiet room in the house—the bathroom! In quickly pivoting to remote learning, one of our colleagues shared that he was overwhelmed by new classroom technologies. He decided to initially focus on becoming proficient in Zoom and finding ways to keep his students engaged. This semester, he has become an expert in lecture capture and is planning to continue to use this technology post-pandemic.

In addition to resourcefulness and adaptability, effective problem-solving fundamentals include a respect for differences and a willingness to brainstorm with others to reach creative solutions. For example, as we worked through the enormous issue of COVID-19 testing protocols for students and employees, it helped to treat each type of testing as bite-size pieces of the larger testing problem. Brainstorming with members of our Covid response teams about the logistics and potential obstacles produced innovative solutions concerning locations, timing, and requirements.

## **2. You've got this!**

Focusing on positive thoughts is an effective way for resilient leaders to manage stress that can impair decision-making and how we approach new challenges. Build your confidence by recognizing your accomplishments and strengths. It's also important to find energizers that can lighten your perspective and create hope. Our colleagues increasingly credit faculty-student interactions as powerful energizers that boost morale and renew a sense of purpose in the classroom. A popular starting point is introducing play into the classroom. Play is widely accepted as an integral part of learning with mutual benefits for faculty and students alike. For starters, you may want to begin with icebreakers before moving on to more advanced techniques. If you've been doing this for some time and are looking for new ideas, try connecting with others and find out what works for them.

## **3. It takes a village.**

When COVID-19 halted normal business operations across the globe, many college leaders expected that such a disruption to shared governance and innovation inside higher education would set colleges back decades. But many institutions benefited from the unifying experience as it served as a catalyst for strengthening relationships and building trust between faculty and administration. In fact, our colleagues have expressed that shared governance on campus has gotten stronger, not weaker as a result of

increased collaborations on COVID-19 issues. As we enter the next phase and look towards returning to more normalized campus activities, it will be important to sustain this collaboration.

#### **4. It *is* a big deal.**

It's easy to forget to take the time to celebrate wins, especially the small ones during tough times. A consequence of not recognizing small achievements is that we miss opportunities to reinforce what accomplishment feels like. Many of us vividly remember the anxiety we felt just a few months ago as we reluctantly pushed our grocery carts down the aisle of paper products in search of toilet paper—any toilet paper. It seems trivial now but finding toilet paper during the shortage was indeed a win worth celebrating because it meant we had succeeded in accomplishing a basic goal and gave us hope that the availability of “essential” products was improving. Celebrating the “small” wins of your colleagues and team members recognizes their accomplishments. When a staff member had a five-year anniversary with the university, we celebrated. When a colleague managed her first zoom meeting with breakout sessions, we celebrated. If you have trouble thinking of things to celebrate, ask what others are grateful for and celebrate gratitude!

#### **5. It's okay to take a timeout.**

During tough times, the realities of academic and administrative life can weigh heavily on physical and psychological well-being. The pandemic has disrupted routines and forced many to work longer and atypical hours just to keep heads above water. Think about how you can develop a plan that establishes boundaries to help you unplug and recharge. Begin by targeting specific areas of self-care that are important to you and incorporate these activities into your calendar until you develop a routine. A good starting point for improving physical self-care includes focusing on sleep, diet, and exercise. Psychological self-care examples include finding an outlet such as art or DIY projects, taking time outs from social media, and taking some time away to observe a mental health day (or part of a day) every now and then. Resilient leaders who take time outs are modeling the importance of doing so to those around them and can reassure others that this is allowed.

## **6. Communicate! Communicate! Communicate!**

We don't do well when there is too much ambiguity. We want answers and certainty—even when we don't know what we don't know yet. Resilient leaders use communication to convey what is known at the time. And as more information becomes available, they provide updates so that others can feel some sense of clarity. They ask questions and listen carefully. Resilient leaders do not amplify rumors and readily admit when they don't know something.

During the pandemic, we saw leaders embrace this strategy. Student government leaders developed and promoted effective health and safety campaigns. Town halls were organized to provide information about the pandemic, testing, vaccines, academic changes for students, faculty, and staff. Websites posted Covid plans and updates. Apps were quickly developed for reporting health symptoms and mental health.

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