

# TURNING POINT NETWORK

## IDEAS ON CONCEPTUALISING RESILIENCE

JULY 2010

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## CONCEPTUALISING RESILIENCE

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### Defining resilience

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The concept of resilience has two linked histories:

- **Systems theory.** Resilience is the ability of a system to reach a state of equilibrium following an external disturbance.
- **Developmental psychology.** Positive psychology and asset based approaches to social work look at why some children from disadvantaged backgrounds manage to overcome initial disadvantages to become fully functioning adults.

The concept of resilience has come over to management theory relatively recently (early 2000s). There is little good empirical research and what there is has a narrow focus (e.g. disaster management, long surviving organisations). This paper draws on empirical work but is mainly about giving a theoretical framework to stimulate thought about resilience.

Definitions of resilience raise these issues:

- **The end result.** Some definitions in management theory assume that the adjustment following disturbance retains the structure, functioning and controls of the organisation. This seems overly restrictive. In the arts it is more helpful to see resilience as retaining the public and artistic benefit, but not necessarily keeping the same structure or products.
- **Whether resilience is about anticipating future disturbances or about identifying and managing disturbances rapidly once they have occurred.** I suggest that it is more consistent with the nature of the arts to focus on responsiveness rather than prediction. Work from resilience engineering, which tends to focus on defense systems, is less useful.
- **The nature of the external disturbance.** The literature on risk management, which is a related concept to resilience, provides detailed classifications of risks. I have chosen not to explore this subject since the work is not conceptually based and tends to narrow rather than widen discussion.
- **Whether resilience is an asset or a process.** Some definitions view resilience as a kind of super material that can absorb strain and still maintain its shape. Other definitions see resilience as developmental, built partly by interaction with challenges.
- **Whether resilience is common or rare.**

I consider resilience as an outcome that can be seen in specific capabilities and assets, and fostered over time by relatively ordinary adaptive processes. Resilience is context specific, although broad competencies are transferable.

There is very little literature looking at resilience at a group or sectoral level. I will use the concepts I identify to consider possible processes associated with resilience at the group or sectoral level. I suggest that it is more relevant and empowering for Arts Council England to consider resilience at the group or sectoral level: more relevant because maintaining functioning, including the role of artists and creativity, is more important than the retention of specific structures; more empowering because working at the group or sector level presents more options and opportunities and therefore potentially greater resilience.

### Capabilities associated with resilience

The capabilities associated with resilience are:

- The ability to identify and understanding unexpected threats before they escalate out of control.
- The ability to view challenges clearly and positively without being overwhelmed.
- The ability to recombine fragments of past experience into novel responses.
- The ability to respond to threats rapidly, often before the full picture is clear.
- A wide framework of learning (including evaluation data, learning from mistakes, and vicarious learning) and the ability to absorb, apply and document that learning.
- The ability to review information dispassionately, without being blinded by expectations, preconceptions or emotions (mindfulness).
- A structure that can deploy those with the greatest expertise relevant to a specific problems.
- Bricolage (the ability to take available resources, seemingly unconnected, and make something new from them).
- The ability to adopt new ways of working while still staying on mission.

These capabilities represent intermediate indicators or criteria for understanding processes that support resilience.

### Conflicting tensions

Is it helpful to see resilience as a hybrid concept. Resilient organisations balance two conflicting imperatives:

- **Integrative tendencies.** Performance and growth requires consistency, efficiency, eliminating waste, and maximising short-term results. Performance driven organisations tend to have clear boundaries, goals and performance measures, clear relationships between individuals, teams and organisations, strong systems that ensure consistent repetition, and a task oriented culture.

- **Disintegrative tendencies.** Adaptation requires foresight, innovation, experimentation, and improvisation. Adaptive organisations tend to have strong learning and knowledge management systems, flexible structure and an idea oriented culture.

### Processes that build resilience

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The literature is full of papers promoting individual ideas or techniques as necessary for resilience. Many of these are simply aspects of general good management (or attempts to sell specific software). I wanted to identify the essence of resilience: the aspects which are different to general good management. Systems theory gives archetypal structures that help with this conceptualisation. In ecological systems resilience is achieved through:

- **Redundancy.** This means having slack or overlapping in the system so that damaged or threatened parts or functions can be substituted by others. Redundancy does not need to be in terms of duplication, it can be through flexibility. Redundancy is a useful concept because organisational problems tend to result in pressure to eliminate slack or ‘waste’.
- **Requisite variety.** The principle of requisite variety states that in order to survive a system must be as or more complex than its environment. Complexity refers to heterogeneity of sub-systems. An organisational with different ways of thinking and ways of working will be able to generate more choices in its problem solving. Requisite variety is a useful concept because research suggests that a common reaction to challenge is for organisations to narrow their thinking and tighten control, so reducing the number of options.
- **Creating, retaining or reconfiguring resources.** This means being able to adapt to different types and combinations of resources. Resources can be cognitive, emotional, relational, knowledge based, social, technical or financial. Creating or retaining resources is a useful, somewhat contrary concept, because lack of resources is a major stressor. The concept gives a proactive view of resource creation.

These concepts give some practical guidance on the processes that build resilience. Some items could fit into more than one category but, for the sake of simplicity, I have placed them in one.

**Figure 1: Processes that build organisational resilience**

Redundancy	Technical	Process maps and procedure manuals Technology maintenance Contingency planning
	Social	Cross-skilling of employees Succession planning for key roles Matrix management Networked communications
	Economic	Working capital Reasonable gearing Financial reserves
Requisite variety	Technical	Product diversity Customer diversity

		Supplier diversity Market diversity
	Social	Conceptual slack (diversity in analytical perspectives) Employee diversity Learning that resists simplification Multiple sources of information on internal processes and the external environment Employee empowerment Holographic management Flexible work practices Flat, non hierarchical structure Crowdsourcing (engaging people externally in problem solving)
	Economic	Portfolio of different funders Board diversity Appropriate levels of stock
Creating or retaining resources	Technical	Information on different ways of working Flexible contracts Flexible processes
	Social	Recruitment of skilled people Multi-skilling of the staff Culture that allows improvisation Ad hoc problem solving networks
	Economic	Assets, tangible and intangible, that can be exploited Access to funding Resource targeting Non restrictive constitution

These systems concepts only go so far. They tend to underestimate the human component: after all, much of systems theory focuses on engineering or ecology. My work takes a Scientific Realist perspective, which emphasises the important of human motivation as a prime mover in project or programme activity. Thinking about motivation adds the following subjects to the list above:

- Inspirational leaders.
- A shared vision, set of purpose and values (which provide coherence when structures or processes are changing).
- High employee morale.
- Role placement for mastery (putting people in jobs where they can experience success).
- The ability to acknowledge, openly discuss and manage the emotions associated with change (anxiety and loss) rather than denying or suppressing uncomfortable feelings.
- Social networks among employees (to provide support during times of change).

- Strong relationships with suppliers, customers, partners and funders.

### Group or network resilience

The concepts of redundancy, requisite variety and creating or retaining resources can be applied to groups or sectors. This table uses my conceptualisation of synergies found in the Turning Point Network progress report to apply the three concepts to group or sectoral resilience:

**Figure 2: Processes that build group or sectoral resilience**

Redundancy	Joint programming Joint marketing Joint strategic planning Joint advocacy Co-commissioning Joint consultation Joint research
Requisite variety	Joint learning events Ideas skills exchange Critical debate Promoting important ideas Joint research visits
Creating or retaining resources	Sharing resources (staff, space, systems etc) Joint purchasing

In each case, Turning Point Network synergies seem to provide many different benefits. For example, joint activities provide increased capacity and flexibility (redundancy), new ways of thinking and working (requisite variety) and the ability to bid for or make the best of resources.

### Conclusion

Resilience relies to some extent on processes that are general good management. However, resilience also benefits from processes that are counter to common organisational reactions to external pressure: redundancy, requisite variety and creating or reconfiguring resources. These are creative processes and therefore more natural to the arts than recommendations about more elaborate defense routines or risk planning systems. Working at the network or sector level, as with Turning Point Network, provides more possibilities than at the organisational level, and therefore potentially greater resilience.

