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Resiliency for Entrepreneurs and Careerists

By Scott Hammond, Clinical Professor, Huntsman School of Business

Resilience is a choice. Almost every case we studied of people who survived being lost in the wilderness said they “decided” to survive. Even an eight-year-old boy lost overnight at 11,000 feet said, “I knew I wanted to live.”

The same is true for entrepreneurs and careerists who face what are seemingly insurmountable challenges. They make a choice. They say to themselves, “I want to get through this. I will do what it takes to survive until I can find a way to thrive.”

Of course making the choice to be resilient does not guarantee a positive outcome, but it does have two interesting effects on individuals in “survival” situations.

First, they report envisioning the ideal future. A good example of this is the famous canyoneering climber Aaron Rawlston who cut off his arm with his pocket knife when he was trapped in a narrow canyon. His story can be seen in the documentary “126 Hours.” Rawlston reports that while in a space between sleep and hallucination he saw his unborn son running towards him. He saw himself holding the young boy and laughing. He remembers a vivid sense of joy as he held his child. When he awoke he realized again his predicament, and also that he had no son, no wife and no future. But he did have a vision of the ideal that motivated him to action. Rarely do we realize the ideal in our lives, but visualizing the ideal creates hope and hope motivates resilience.

When an entrepreneur feels like their business is hitting a brick wall, impossible to see through and discouraging to look around, they must stick to the vision of the ever-promising future. Go back to the roots of why the business was started. And for the careerist, remember your dreams. Envision yourself working with the people who will get you to the top. Envision yourself accepting the promotion and how that will feel.

Second, making the decision to be resilient helps us see our situation differently. In my book *Lessons of the Lost: Finding Hope and Resilience in Work: Life, and the Wilderness*, I tell the story of Victoria Grover who was lost in the wilderness for five days with a broken leg. Victoria, who is a hero of mine, broke her leg at the base of a dry waterfall, 100 yards from water. She was in a place where she could not see or be seen, nor could she get to the needed water. Unable to climb up and over the rocks with her broken leg, she wondered what to do. “There has to be a way,” she told herself. Then she reported to me that she saw herself backwards, as if in a mirror. Backwards. Yes. Backwards. “I can turn around and go backwards over the rocks.” It took her 12 hours, but she got to water and warmth. The “backward” thinking saved her life.

Our creativity is sometimes the only differentiator we may have. As a careerist always look for the next best way to move ahead, stand out or do something that has never been done before in your field. Entrepreneurs have it in their blood to be different. Don’t be afraid to take the well-calculated risk. “Backward” thinking has made many entrepreneurs successful, such as Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple, or Billy Beane, general manager for the Oakland Athletics.

There are tragic tales in the wilderness of strong people who chose not to be resilient – who gave up. Four in five business startups fail. But four in five are not bad ideas that will not work in the market. Some portion of those failures come because the entrepreneur or careerist was not resilient enough. When it seems like your arm is caught in a rock or that resources are out of reach, remember to envision your dreams and don’t be afraid to go where no one has before.

Dr. Hammond’s work on resiliency was recently [quoted in Fast Company](#).