Resilience at Work: How the U.S. Department of State Applies Resilience Concepts

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Abstract

As U.S. diplomats and their families live and work in increasingly more dangerous environments, they need tools and skills that foster personal, familial, and community resilience. Senior leaders must actively foster the resilience of their teams, particularly during a crisis. Drawing from resilience research, the U.S. Department of State's Center of Excellence in Foreign Affairs Resilience (CEFAR) designed resilience models and tools that are practical and easy to use. CEFAR adapted resilience concepts for use in the workplace by combining the results of resilience studies with wisdom from senior leaders. It then created a training program that resonates with members of the foreign affairs community, teaching tools and skills that are easy for practitioners to use on a daily basis. CEFAR’s goal is to improve the performance of U.S. foreign affairs professionals by making them more resilient and therefore more flexible, adaptable, innovative and collaborative.

Key Words: Resilience, Leadership, Crisis, Community

1. Introduction

The U.S. Department of State oversees a global, multicultural work force that experiences high stress on a regular basis. For decades, the Department has prepared foreign affairs professionals from across the U.S. government for a life of change, challenge and, at times, trauma. The Department's new Center of Excellence in Foreign Affairs (CEFAR) adapted research studies on resilience and organizational development principles to develop new tools and skills that help U.S. diplomats thrive in high-stress environments. By focusing on practical applications of resilience research and combining it with leadership wisdom from senior State
Department leaders, CEFAR is promoting a culture of resilience across the foreign affairs community.

2. Background

While the U.S. Department of State has been teaching resilience concepts for decades, it became more focused on the subject after sending large numbers of personnel to Iraq and Afghanistan in the early 2000s. When some U.S. diplomats returning from dangerous postings struggled to reintegrate into their regular work environments and showed signs of psychiatric disorders, the Department created a de-briefing program to help these returning diplomats better adjust and encourage those who needed mental health care to reach out for support (Litz, 2014). It quickly became clear that addressing the needs of foreign affairs professionals after service in a dangerous assignment had limited impact because it was not preparing them to stay healthy despite stress and trauma. Diplomats needed skills and tools to help them better adapt in the face of adversity.

2.1 Personal Resilience

CEFAR’s first step was to focus on personal resilience. After exploring dozens of different definitions for resilience (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014), CEFAR defined personal resilience as “the capacity to adapt successfully in the presence of risk and adversity and to bounce back from setbacks, trauma and high stress.”

The foreign affairs community is very practical and wants concrete tools that have clear results. CEFAR therefore needed to translate resilience theory into practical tools and skills. Many diplomats will sacrifice their own well-being in order to achieve U.S. foreign policy objectives. This makes a focus on well-being less effective. There was also skepticism that
resilience was an excuse not to work hard or make sacrifices. CEFAR therefore had to translate resilience concepts into language that resonated with the community by connecting resilience with success.

CEFAR's inspiration for renaming concepts so they would resonate with the foreign affairs community came from Dr. Richard Miller who wanted to introduce Yoga Nidra to U.S. soldiers after confirming the benefits this meditation technique has for soldiers suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Miller, Shoomaker, & Shoomaker, 2015). He realized that most soldiers would not practice an activity with such an "odd" and "new age" sounding name so he changed the name to iRest and the practice is now accepted in the U.S. Army.

Research on personal resilience is constantly evolving. CEFAR found the work of Stephen Southwick and Dennis Charney (Southwick & Charney, 2012) (Southwick, Pietrazk, Tsai, Krystal, & Charney, 2015) and the Resilience Handbook (Reich, Zautra, & Hall, 2012), a compilation of resilience research, to be the most useful. CEFAR used their concepts to formulate a personal resilience model that highlights the following five resilience factors:

- Take Care of Yourself
- Maintain a Positive Outlook
- Meaning and Purpose
- Social Support
- Active Problem Solving

Instead of focusing on wellness as an end-state, CEFAR highlights how taking care of oneself produces better outcomes (Sianoja & Syrek, 2017). Instead of promoting meditation and mindfulness (Shapiro, Oman, Thoresen, Plante, & Flinders, 2008), CEFAR encourages people to "rest" their brain and spend time recovering. CEFAR teaches tools such as reframing (Lambert,
Fincham, & Stillman, 2012) to help people have a more positive outlook. For active problem solving, CEFAR teaches management principles such as setting appropriate boundaries, saying no, and using questions to get to the root of a problem. CEFAR applied research on gratitude (Emmons & McCullough, 2003) to the work environment shifting from recommending gratefulness journals to encouraging staff to write daily thank you notes to colleagues to whom they are grateful or start staff meetings by thanking specific members of the team.

2.2 Organizational Resilience

CEFAR soon recognized that having a group of resilient people does not automatically translate into a resilient embassy or consulate (Seville, 2017). CEFAR needed to develop a model of organizational resilience that would resonate with the foreign affairs community. Inspired by the work of organizational development consultants John Horne and John Orr in the 1990s, CEFAR adapted their Seven Streams of Resilient Behavior (Horne & Orr, 1998) to create the following 7Cs of Community Resilience:

- Community: dedication to a shared sense of purpose and value system.
- Competence: capacity and skills to meet demands.
- Connections: relationships and linkages that expand capacity and flexibility.
- Commitment: commitment to a group and the value system shared by the group.
- Communication: feeling well informed about what is going on.
- Coordination: being synchronized across the organization to ensure goals are well aligned.
- Consideration: attention to the human factor.
CEFAR elected to use “community resilience” instead of “organizational resilience” since foreign affairs professionals often view themselves as part of a larger community and not just an employee working in a single organization. CEFAR designed case studies to spark conversations about how and why each of the 7Cs contribute to the resilience of a team. CEFAR facilitates conversations within work units about their strongest and weakest of the 7Cs and helps them develop strategies for strengthening the areas that need improvement.

2.3 Resilience Leadership

CEFAR also soon realized that encouraging senior leaders to be personally resilient was important but not enough. Instead leaders needed to be inspired to take a more active role in fostering the resilience of their teams. CEFAR created the following three-part model for Resilience Leadership:

- Modeling the 5 Resilience Factors
- Mentoring others on how to be resilient
- Fostering the resilience of their teams

By conducting case studies of U.S. Embassies and Consulates around the world, CEFAR demonstrated how U.S. Ambassadors who followed this resilience model were more likely to achieve U.S. foreign policy goals. CEFAR identified senior leaders who could serve as "Resilience Champions" and persuade their fellow leaders the value of focusing on resilience. CEFAR designed training for senior leaders that applied these principles to real-life case studies they would face in their leadership positions.

CEFAR also created a consulting service for senior leaders wanting to foster the resilience of their teams. CEFAR starts by evaluating the level of personal and community resilience in the
embassy or consulate, using surveys, group conversations and one-on-one discussions to identify key issues and characteristics of low resilience. CEFAR then designs a transportable training program that specifically meets the mission’s needs. The evaluation results are confidential and shared only with the senior leader. This prevents leaders from being reactive about the results since the findings are not shared with others and the goal is to improve the overall productivity of their mission.

3. Lessons Learned

The most important lesson CEFAR has learned to date is not to try to force the concepts of resilience training on the foreign affairs community. Resilience has become popular in mainstream media creating a risk that resilience training will be viewed as a fad. Skeptics can become active opponents if pushed too hard. To gain credibility, CEFAR focuses on the science of resilience and relevant case studies showing how putting resilience concepts into practice has led to success. A remarkable number of prior opponents have become supporters by seeing for themselves the value of resilience training at work rather than being coerced into cooperating with a program they didn’t really believe in.

Since many foreign affairs professionals like to take a test and receive concrete results to measure their resilience, CEFAR sought permission to give them access to the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC) (Connor & Davidson, 2003). CEFAR chose the CD-RISC scale because it appears to be the most valid of a wide range of instruments (Windle, Bennett, & Noyes, 2011) and has been translated into multiple languages and used in many different cultures. While this scale has been useful as a tool that people can access privately if they want to measure their resilience, using the scale in a classroom setting presented some problems since
participants focused too much on the meaning of individual questions rather than seeing it as a tool. Since this would often derail the training, CEFAR minimizes use of this tool in the classroom and instead focuses on common behavioral characteristics of low resilience such as irritability, sleeplessness, poor memory, and lack of hope.

CEFAR promotes resilience training as a way to go from good to great and avoids giving the perception that resilience training is “fixing” something that is “broken.” When CEFAR provides customized resilience training for a specific mission, some participants are concerned that CEFAR is involved because their team has problems. This irrational fear that something is wrong can limit the benefits of the training. Instead, CEFAR keeps its focus positive and shows how resilience training will improve what individuals and teams are already good at doing.

CEFAR learned to clearly define what resilience training can and cannot do, reminding leadership that resilience training itself will not fix every problem or resolve management challenges. Resilience training will have little impact on a toxic work environment and cannot substitute for performance management when an employee is underperforming. Resilience also will not prevent all mental health disorders or substitute for mental health care when someone may have an emotional disorder.

4. Future Challenges

Resilience as a concept has widely different definitions and applications, making it difficult to apply some of the current research results and lessons learned. To gain greater understanding of how to measure and improve resilience, it is important to have more common language and uniformity in the concept of resilience.
We have found, as have others, that measuring the impact of resilience training is difficult. While CEFAR has anecdotal evidence showing the link between resilience training and the ability to achieve foreign policy goals, it is more challenging to gather data demonstrating a direct link between resilience training and performance. Members of the foreign affairs community strongly dislike surveys, making it hard to collect data. And, it is extremely difficult to evaluate foreign policy successes given the dynamic nature of international diplomacy. To continue to obtain resources for the program, CEFAR must to find ways to demonstrate its positive impact on the achievement of U.S. foreign policy goals.

When budgets are reduced, it is tempting to cut training. Unfortunately, this approach can have a negative effect and reduce the resilience of the team resulting in lower productivity and less capability in a crisis. CEFAR needs to constantly promote resilience training as an investment in future productivity that should never be cut even when one has limited resources.

Resilience training is really about culture change and changing a culture takes time. CEFAR must focus on small successes and invest time and effort changing one foreign affairs professional at a time.

4. Conclusions

Resilience training has proven to be essential for the foreign affairs community in a rapidly changing and unpredictable world. The U.S. Department of State is in the midst of a multi-decade effort to infuse a culture of resilience across the foreign affairs community by adapting resilience research and practices to the practicalities of developing and implementing foreign policy. By linking resilience with foreign policy success, CEFAR gained support and resources. CEFAR will hopefully soon be able to demonstrate with hard data that resilience
education and training improves U.S. foreign policy outcomes by ensuring that foreign affairs professionals are flexible, adaptable, innovative and collaborative.
References


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