

FIRED UP, NOT BURNT OUT: AN EXPLORATION OF RESILIENCE BEHAVIOURS IN THIRD SECTOR LEADERSHIP

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This document is a summary of DBA research undertaken at Edinburgh Napier University from 2019 – 2022. The research was supported by ACOSVO, The Association of Chief Officers of Scottish Voluntary Organisations, and the Third Sector Unit of Scottish Government. This summary is written primarily with a third sector audience in mind. What follows is an outline of the approach taken, the key findings and recommendations, and the output of a reconceptualised model of resilience behaviours for third sector leaders. Many thanks to all those who participated in the research and supported me through the journey.

Overview

The aim of the research was to explore behaviours which may influence and improve resilience for third sector leadership.

To achieve this, the objectives were to:

1. Critically review the literature on resilience in leaders
2. Explore what resilience means to third sector leaders
3. Critically examine leadership behaviours which impact on resilience
4. Develop insights and recommendations which may improve resilience for third sector leaders

The research first considered what leaders identify as resilience, then explored which perceived behaviours impacted on resilience. The topic was explored using an interpretive approach and involved semi-structured interviews with 23 third sector leaders (i.e., those who hold the most senior position in their organisation). All organisations operated in Scotland, had a turnover over £500K and were registered as charities. The literature reviewed was from the fields of leadership and resilience with consideration of burnout and sustainability. The review concluded that most of the literature in this area focuses on the private sector and is primarily concerned with organisational resilience rather than leaders' personal resilience.

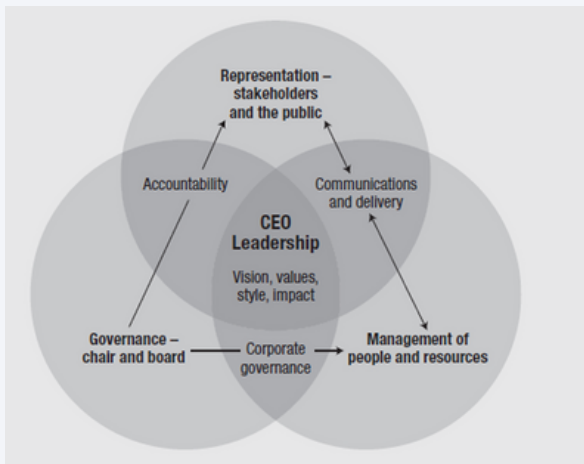
The analysis and discussion considered a conceptual framework identified from the literature review which details "coping dimensions" and behaviours of "high flyers" in the private sector (Casserley & Megginson, 2008), and explored whether this framework could be relevant for Third Sector leaders.

Although there are some similar areas, the reimagining of the holistic resilience behaviours found from the study would necessitate extension and reconceptualising of the framework to be more suited to the behaviours, mindsets, and factors of leaders from the Third Sector. The study concludes that behaviours cannot be considered in isolation and that mindsets and factors must be taken into account when considering resilience.

The findings from the research show that resilience is a holistic concept and that a reimagining of resilience and subsequent behaviours for leaders in the third sector is needed to incorporate the current context of our times. Interview responses show that leaders develop and practice resilience through a wide range of methods such as peer group support, engaging in activities outside of work, and maintaining a perceived "work-life balance". In current times this may be more accurately described as work-life integration and wellbeing.

Context

Chief Officers must deal with running complex organisations with multiple stakeholders, funders, and regulators. The three leadership spheres of a third sector CEO or Chief Officer (Kirchner, 2007) detailed below, show the complexity of the role and the multiple areas which third sector leaders have to work across.



The Complexity of third sector leadership (Kirchner, 2007)

Evidence of increasing pressure on the leaders in the sector due to increased demand, reduced funding, increased competition, and an environment of constant change pre-dates Covid-19 (do Adro & Leitão, 2020). Leaders must ensure that they continuously innovate, evidence impact, and stand up to the scrutiny of both stakeholders and the public. These challenges can lead to heightened risk of stress and burnout and ultimately individuals standing down as Chief Officer or even leaving the sector entirely. This was evidenced in a study, Path to Impact, which explored the capacity of 100 third sector Organisations and found that “succession planning” and “re-energising” were particularly problematic areas (RF Associates, 2018).

More recently leaders have had to consider the balance of having to look after their staff's wellbeing (during covid), which often conflicts with organisational need and thus the needs of the beneficiaries. This conflict can add to the stresses of leadership and also adds to the challenge of considering their own leadership support needs and resilience.

This study explored behaviours which may influence and improve resilience for third sector leaders. As a sector with such importance both economically and socially for the wellbeing of our nation, the issues of resilience and risk of burnout from its leaders is crucially important.

The third sector's lack of capacity and resources can

exacerbate the “normal” challenges of leadership. A 2019 study found that third sector leaders work 3 months of the year for free, doing an average of 10 hours per week over and above their paid role (ACEVO, 2019). This style of habitually working beyond capacity is clearly unsustainable, with previous research demonstrating that overloading the brain can have negative impacts, including causing anxiety (Gruszka & Nęcka, 2017; Kirsh, 2000).

Allcock Tyler, (2017) suggests that third sector leadership is a vocation, not a profession. This widely held perception can make the leadership role even more complex to navigate, adding a more personal and emotional element to leaders' “obligations” alongside the expected drive for excellence, growth, and high performance as well as value for money and evidence of impact.

Survey results from Charity Works Impact Research (Jones, 2019) demonstrated that Chief Executives working in the charity sector in England are experiencing high levels of stress. 72% of Chief Executives reported feeling stressed in their role at present, with 18% of respondents saying they felt ‘very stressed’ and 54% saying they felt ‘quite stressed’. There was no correlation found between levels of stress and length of time that a Chief Executive had been in their current role. Similarly, 87% of respondents reported experiencing one or more symptoms of burnout. The most common symptoms were difficulty concentrating and suffering from insomnia, with 64% of respondents reporting these symptoms. A further 61% of respondents reported they were suffering from anxiety and 55% said they were experiencing reduced performance. Studies have demonstrated that individuals experiencing burnout reduce their job involvement and organizational commitment (Lee & Ashforth, 1996) which can negatively affect performance (Maslach et al., 2001). Consequently, CEO burnout is not only detrimental to the CEO's wellbeing but can adversely affect the performance of the organisation.

These unique factors affecting leadership in the third sector all mean that corporate styles of leadership often do not work as intended. It is therefore pertinent to exercise caution when applying much of the existing academic literature, which focuses almost exclusively on the public and private sectors, to this context.

The sector also has the added complexity of closeness to identity and passion for a cause. Burnout is more likely if leaders have a blurred line between their work and personal self-identity (Bagi, 2013; Casserley & Megginson, 2009) so it could be argued that this may be more prevalent in the third sector. Portnoy (2011) suggests that burnout is not dissimilar to compassion fatigue: a term often used in reference to healthcare workers, but which

could be used for third sector leaders who see their role as caring for their beneficiaries, their colleagues, and their organisation.

Resilience is often seen as the way to mitigate burnout. The Oxford dictionary defines resilience as: “the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness”.

The Research

Academic research into resilience started about 40 years ago with pioneering studies by Garmezy (1991) who looked at why some children suffered more than others when going through difficult childhood experiences. He concluded that resilience played a greater part in good mental health than previously thought. Vanderpol (2002), found that many of the healthy survivors of concentration camps had what he calls a “plastic shield.” The shield was comprised of several factors, including a sense of humour. Other core characteristics that helped included the ability to form attachments to others and the possession of an inner psychological space that protected the survivors from the intrusions of abusive others.

Many of the early theories about resilience stressed the role of genetics and considered whether some people are just born resilient but there is now increasing evidence that it can be learned. Holyoke & Vaillant (1978), observe that within various groups studied during a 60-year period, some people became more resilient over their lifetimes.

In “Learning from Burnout; Developing sustainable leaders and avoiding career derailment”, Casserley & Megginson (2008) interviewed 100 leaders and used some of their stories as a way to explain the challenges and explore what worked and what did not in terms of building resilience. They analysed in-depth interviews with 100 “high-flyers” and considered whether burnout is no longer an unusual event but has become part of a normal lifecycle. They explored 25 years of research which mainly considered burnout as being a work-related phenomenon which is most likely to affect those early in their career. Their work explored the paradigm of leadership development and considered a new paradigm of leadership learning.

The resulting coping dimensions are shown below. Sharing with others was the most frequently reported behaviour of high-flyers who do not burn out. The importance of coming together, peer support and the opportunity to learn from each other will all be factors more closely examined in this research.

COPING DIMENSION	BEHAVIOUR
SHARING A willingness to share work experiences with others during high-stress periods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does not sit and stew on things – talks to people they need to directly to resolve things Talks situations over with family and friends to get advice from those with more experience; uses this advice to put situation in perspective
PROACTIVITY Takes urgent action to resolve existing or anticipated situations that will result in severe stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comes up with alternative solutions to problems to stop high stress from happening Focuses on controlling what is in their power of control, including own behaviour
BOUNDARY – SETTING Has a mature and realistic understanding of own capability; accurately accesses workload capability of delivering; sets clear boundaries around this; only flexes these boundaries on the basis of increased time or resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sets clear boundaries- faces down those who try to usurp these Assesses the importance of deadlines they are given. Recognises that some are unrealistic or unnecessary Ask for more time or assistance
WORKING SMARTER Well-developed organisational skills, including the ability to prioritise, delegate and work towards a clear end point rather than working long hours and sacrificing personal and social activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prioritising and goal setting: sets small goals to the next destination and then reviews from there Takes the approach that 80% right is OK; perfection is fantasy
HOPE Visualising how things might be beyond the immediate, harsh reality of the situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sees the opportunity in the situation more than the challenge
RENEWING Engaging in activities outside work that are personally renewing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does exercise and sport Learns what helps them switch off completely Understands they need time to process what is happening

Behaviour of high flyers who did not burn out

Key Findings

The findings from this research led to a reconceptualising of this framework being examined. The following diagram shows the holistic areas which need to be incorporated for resilient, sustainable leaders in the third sector. It shows that under each coping dimension of; sharing, proactivity, boundary setting, working smarter, hope and renewing, that as well as the coping dimension and behaviour, there is also a corresponding mindset and factor to take into account.

This reconceptualised framework interprets and brings together the findings from this research. It adds a contribution both to knowledge and practice and could lead to an adaptation of a range of tools with practical use.

It may be helpful to show this more simplistically, by using a “practitioner shorthand” of:

$$HR = B + M + F$$

Where “HR” is holistic resilience, “B” is behaviour, “M” is mindsets and “F” is Factors. Thus, holistic resilience can be seen as an outcome of bringing together perceived behaviours with mindsets and factors. The coping dimension could be seen as the element of resilience and thus is not incorporated in the practitioner shorthand.

The research has shown that resilience is more “holistic” than explained in the literature. Although the literature recognises that key relationships and support have a big part to play, the concept that all elements of life impact on resilience and that resilience at work and resilience as a leader do not stand alone from resilience in wider life, is not strongly ascertained.

The other key finding is that exploring behaviours alone is not enough to get an in depth understanding of resilience. Although the questions asked were on perceived behaviours, some of the answers given could be characterised as factor and mindsets and that all three aspects have a part to play.

Behaviours, Mindsets and Factors which keep third sector leaders resilient			
Coping Dimension	Behaviour	Mindset	Factors
SHARING			
A willingness to support and learn from each other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offers support Finds your tribe(s) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Open to sharing Open to listening 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gains support from wide network Holistic: non work
PROACTIVITY			
Considers wellbeing and actively puts support mechanisms in place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seeks out support Understands what works for you 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reflects and learns Considers instinct and passion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understands the wider environment Is aware of trigger points
BOUNDARY SETTING			
Be aware of the holistic nature of resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensures balance in all areas of life Asks for help 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Balances Adaptability with stability Is honest about boundaries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is aware of the changing world of work Engages governance and team
WORKING SMARTER			
Focus on mission and impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accepts non perfection Is authentic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has confidence Plans ahead 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Address issues Draw on information and experience
HOPE			
Building on passion and vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Celebrates success Is persistent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is optimistic Accepts positive feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Holds the vision Understands the context
RENEWING			
A holistic approach to wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledges Non work activities Knows when to stop 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is self-aware Is honest about what you need 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understands what can be controlled Engages with team / family

During the research, it became apparent that the speed of change and the ways of working have evolved so much over the last few years, even without taking the pandemic into account, that much of the literature is based on a different concept of work-life balance. The fact that a large proportion of leaders work virtually now, and that the working day is no longer bound by traditional working hours, means that a reconceptualising of both the concept of resilience and the behaviours, factors and mindsets involved need to be considered in a more holistic manner to gain both a wider and deeper understanding of the concepts.

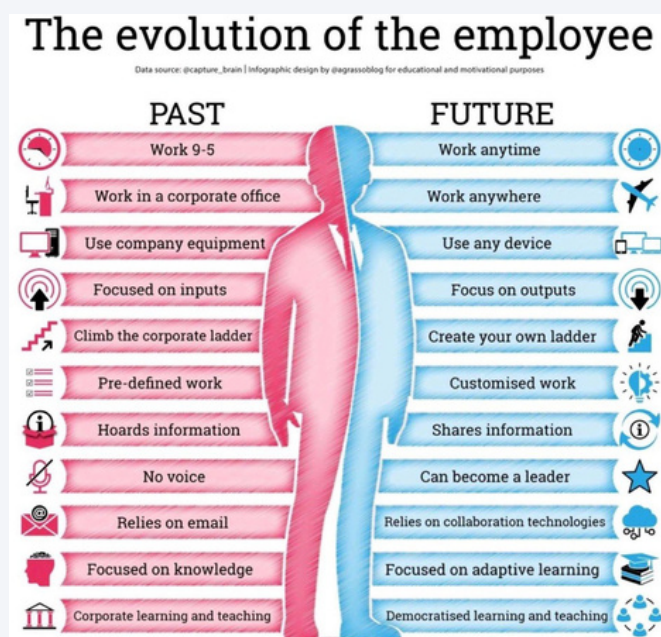
Holistic Life Resilience

The first question of the study explored what resilience meant to participants as third sector leaders. The expectation was that because the question was asked in the context of their role, the answer would be work based and related to their role as a leader. The findings highlighted a range of themes which implied that resilience was seen as an element which was important across all aspects of life and was not only discussed from a work perspective.

The importance of knowing where to find support and to build networks across all areas of life came through strongly. The human aspects of resilience were also prevalent and evidenced through the importance of values, trust, impact, and kindness which were all seen as key to resilience. Adapting to change and continuing to evolve was a further theme. The theme of “self” had a wide range of aspects, from knowing oneself, acknowledging and understanding energy levels and being aware of limitations, and not taking things personally.

Participants gave examples of what resilience meant to them from all areas of life, discussing who they were as a person, what works for them to keep them resilient and what support networks need to be in place to support them when needed.

The role of the leader and the stresses involved were acknowledged, but the understanding of resilience and the way it was discussed was across a much wider scope than purely within a work setting.



Holistic Resilience Behaviours, Mindsets and Factors

The three key behaviour themes that influence and improve resilience were identified from this research as: holistic, acceptance of non-perfection and peer support.

Holistic leadership behaviours were identified as non-work activities, work/life balance, family/friends, and being human. This holistic way of behaving, of not seeing only work behaviours as those that influence and improve resilience has been a key finding from this research which could have implications on both future research and on current thinking on the topic.

The behaviour of acceptance of non-perfection, being able to try new things, not be afraid to fail and to learn from the experience and not always having to get things right first time, could be seen as vital in today's changing and evolving world of work.

The behaviours that incorporate and encourage peer support were also seen as essential as a way to influence and improve resilience in third sector leaders who often feel lonely in the role.

Each of these behaviours are explored in more detail in the findings and conclusions chapters of the thesis, but the understanding that across all the questions asked, was that these were the key behaviours that came out most strongly and give a clear picture of what the more holistic behaviours are that influence and improve resilience in third sector leadership.

Alongside behaviours, the responses from this research identified that mindsets and factors also had a part to play in influencing and improving the resilience of third sector leaders.

The most prevalent **mindset** identified incorporated elements of “self”. This included being self-aware, having self-belief, practicing self-reflection, considering selfcare, knowing yourself and benefiting from positive feedback. Other key elements that were identified included having a learning mindset, having confidence and being optimistic. This has shown that leaders have to have a much wider view of what influences and improves their resilience than previously understood. Much of the literature explored did not include mindsets as an element of resilient leadership, or if it did so did not connect it to the bigger picture alongside behaviours and factors as a concept of holistic resilience.

The most prevalent **factors** identified were governance, context, trigger points and exhaustion. The part the governing board has to play, the context leaders are

working in, the trigger points they need to be aware of and the exhaustion they were suffering from at the time of interviews all contributed to influencing and improving resilience. It was also interesting that responses to how leaders understood resilience also resulted in factors being mentioned. These included the information they had available, the experience they brought to the role, and what sort of control they had of the situation. Much of the literature explored did not identify the factors that influenced and improved resilience alongside the behaviours and mindsets and thus did not consider the more holistic resilience thinking that has resulted from this research.

When previously it may have been seen solely as a “work” issue, this study has contributed to the understanding of the role that those other areas of life have to play, both in terms of adding to stressors, but also as a way of influencing, improving and thus building more holistic resilience.

The finding that participants understood resilience from all areas of life means a better understanding of where both threats to resilience and ways to build resilience can be found. This means that when developing support for leaders, the wider, more holistic ways they live their lives should be taken into account. Building good support networks may start to be seen as not something that only needs to be considered in a work environment, but that social support networks are also important. It could also mean that more support could be considered for leaders going through difficult times in family life as it will impact on their role as a leader. This understanding could lead to support being developed which would take all aspects of the leader into account, and not just the elements seen as related to their working life. This could have implications on how leaders are recruited, how they are supported, how their working lives are “balanced”, and subsequently how they lead both their people and their organisations. It could also have implications for how they support and mentor aspiring leaders through the succession pipeline.

As mentioned in the previous section, the three key behavioural themes that influence and improve resilience were identified from this research as; holistic, acceptance non-perfection and peer support. From a practice perspective, the increased understanding of wider life behaviours means that a much more holistic approach can be taken to practice. Tools and frameworks that support leadership resilience will no longer only take into account behaviours and ways of doing things at work but can incorporate all aspects of life. An example would be the “coaching wheel of life” which could be used to consider levels of resilience in all aspects of life.

The understanding of acceptance of non-perfection as a resilience behaviour could be developed into training for

both new and established leaders and manager. This would mean that the ability to try new things, adapt and change to circumstance and the development of a culture which doesn't apportion blame onto failure but sees it as a way to learn and innovate will all be taken into account.

The importance of peer support to improving resilience could be nurtured and developed and more widely recognised. Developing relationships can sometimes be seen as a luxury when the focus is internal for leaders in difficult times. Knowing that it is important to develop a wide range of peer support networks to thrive gives credibility to the need to focus time and energy to building these networks.

The identification of mindsets as an influencing factor on improving resilience will bring a contribution to practice of an enhanced understanding of this concept and the potential for the development of both emotional intelligence and cultural intelligence as being key to improving resilience. How leaders think in addition to how they act will be incorporated into thinking and consequently to how tools and models are developed and used in support and training of third sector leaders.

The identification of wider factors and context that leaders operate within, and the impact they have on resilience may also add a to this understanding. Leaders will not only look inwards at what is impacting on their resilience but will have gained a better understanding of the external factors which are impacting their resilience. There may then be a better understanding of the impact of considering what is and what is not within their control.

Summary of Contributions to Knowledge and Practice

The study incorporates the changing world we live and work in and what this may mean in relation to studies and learning from previous periods. It tells us something new about leaders and the support they need to improve and influence their resilience and fills a gap in both knowledge and practice. This work is potentially applicable and transferrable across countries and jurisdictions with like governing systems, and possibly more widely across geographies. It could also have implications for cross sector collaborative leadership by improving understanding of what influences and improves resilience across different sectors, thus potentially aiding leaders understanding of how best to work together and support each other in their leadership roles.

A further aspect for potential future research would be to consider how senior managers, funders, and governing bodies view the resilience of their Chief Officers. For senior managers, whether they recognise potential for burnout in their leaders, whether tools could be developed to help this identification and what this might mean for themselves as aspiring leaders as they consider moving into the roles. From the study mentioned previously which identified that almost 50% of leaders plan to leave their role

within the next 5 years, how to support new leaders, aspiring or early career leaders in their role could be an important aspect for further consideration. For governing bodies or boards of trustees, a deeper understanding of resilience behaviours and how best to support their Chief Officer would also be a valuable resource.

Insights and Recommendations

The recommendations which arise from this research can be split into three areas; the literature which pertains to the sector, the conceptual frameworks which are used, and the learning both within and across sectors. In addition to being separate recommendations, consideration should also be given to the collective recommendation that sits across all three; that the literature, conceptual frameworks and practical learning and application, all need further attention in relation to third sector leadership. Finally, the importance of taking into account the changing world of work in relation to all of these recommendations is necessary for the desired outcome of influencing and improving resilience in third sector leadership to be fulfilled.

There is also a call for more research from the third sector to be recognised. A recent guide offers a framework to building trustworthiness into sector research (Bonetree et al., 2022). It is also a recommendation that more cross-sector work could be developed in this area. Work across private, public, third sector and the academic world could lead to a better understanding of resilience for all leaders across sectors.

When considering conceptual frameworks to support and develop practice, similar caution should be taken. Rather than being adapted to suit the sector, there is a recommendation that the sector could develop conceptual frameworks specifically for their needs and which take their specific context into account. Only by developing frameworks specific to the needs of third sector leaders can the insights and understanding of what resilience means to them and how to improve it be properly understood.

Once developed, these third sector specific frameworks could then be considered for suitability and adaptation for use in other sectors with similar motivations. This shared understanding could also aid collaborative working between sectors as we move towards a more holistic future.

These frameworks could also lead to the development of relevant tools and models, which could subsequently influence how leaders are trained and supported. This would then enable them to incorporate and consider what may influence and improve their resilience in their leadership role.

Learning Within and Across Sectors

As the way of the world is changing and all sectors move towards the triple bottom line approach (Hacking & Guthrie, 2008) the third sector could be seen as leading the way in this exploration of resilience. Developing this work and exchanging knowledge across and between sectors is recommended as an approach to take forward. There are examples of good practice and models and tools which could be examined to support this approach. The importance of building cross sector relationships is key to the success of this recommendation.

This study examined a conceptual framework developed from research carried out with “high-flyers” in the corporate world. Although the findings of the research necessitated the development of a reconceptualised model to incorporate the insights from third sector leaders, it is interesting to consider that although there were many differences, there were also many similarities. To go back to the work of Middleton (2014) on Cultural Intelligence, the ability to cross the divides and thrive in multiple cultures is increasingly needed by leaders to succeed in our current times, and is thus essential for being a resilient leader in any sector.

Final Thoughts

The influence of this thinking on the leader means that they have to lead in a different way to incorporate the employee's more holistic approach to work and life, but they must also consider what this means to them for their own resilience and how they sustain it. Their resilience could be further strained by the "always on" expectation and thus the lack of time and space to access the holistic activities that their resilience relies upon.

In today's world, how we view resilience has changed. It is much more something that impacts across all areas of life. The support needed to improve resilience and thus minimise risk of burnout therefore needs to be more holistic. Support frameworks, models and writing should no longer be separate entities dependant on context, or whether risk of burnout is at work, due to personal issues, or is related to other external factors. If the behaviours needed to improve resilience occur across all parts of life, then the support, including the frameworks, the models, and the literature, must be holistic and work through a whole person approach rather than only on a single part of how a leader lives their life.

The term "fix the roof while sun is shining", which could be thought of as "proactive resilience", is an area to consider.

Most leaders interviewed didn't wait until they were at the bottom of the curve before they started to think about resilience behaviours. Instead, they were considered on a daily basis to ensure that the "resilience reservoir" was always topped up and ready to be drawn on. With a current focus on wellbeing (Kotera et al., 2022), at an individual level, at a global level and at an economic level, this proactive resilience could be thought of as part of this picture. It sits much more aligned to how we think of wellbeing than the traditional definition of "bouncing back after a setback". Leaders are considering in advance what will make the depth of bounce shallower and the comeback quicker. It could be argued that thinking around wellbeing as a leader, including programmes like active leadership (networking and peer support while being active), are in the early stages of their development and this work on resilience could be developed in alignment with this theme going forward.

A story quoted in Obama's, (2020) book, told how his daughters were holding him to account about an oil spill. He used this as an example of how sometimes as a leader, the weight all sits on your shoulders, and that weight can come from all aspects of life, so it makes sense to think that the answers to being resilient come from all parts of life – and not just work.

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