

# SPOTLIGHT

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# The Way We're Working Isn't Working

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EVERYONE KNOWS HOW to be healthier and happier. Yet across all industries, the increasing pace and demand at work has led to the normalisation of a working culture that shunts our wellbeing to the very back of the queue (Schwarz, 2019). Nowhere is this more apparent than in education. Caring for and educating our young people in a rapidly changing world within an increasingly political educational sector creates high intensity and high demand workplaces. Though it may be highly rewarding and driven by vocation, the work is also having an enormous toll on school leaders' physical, mental and relational wellbeing (Riley, 2017). In this work climate lip service is paid to wellbeing while demands and deadlines simultaneously increase. The onus is left to an often

exhausted individual leader to straddle this contradiction, manage their staff and remain resilient in the face of a 60 hour plus work week. Could a collective, rather than individual approach to our renewal create a work culture that truly values our wellbeing in practice?

## **Wellbeing Isn't The Icing On The Cake, It Is The Cake**

It's time to reframe wellbeing as the foundation of performance. The conditions that create physical and mental wellbeing are the exact same conditions that enable creative thought, optimal workplace performance and relationships, engagement and innovation (Koch & Adler, 2018). A well exercised, oxygenated, well slept, safe, socially connected and relaxed brain with a sense of purpose thinks

and responds to situations well. On the contrary, the elevated cortisol levels that define chronic stress not only corrode our cardiovascular, immune and mental health, but also redirect blood flow to the survival centres of the brain and undermine our capacity to access the prefrontal cortex's higher-order skills of analysis, creativity and decision making (Bonuedie, 2019). Anyone in a chronically stressed state is compromising their productivity and creativity in exchange for more rigid, fixed thinking. Ironically while we seek to be more competitive in international educational rankings through innovative and quality leadership, the daily demands and intensity of work can undermine this goal.

Stress itself isn't the culprit. Physiologically we are designed to manage any challenge (from a sabre-toothed tiger to a vigilant parent) with a short-term stress arousal response followed by periods of rest and recuperation. This renewal period is key to recovery from acute stressors and imperative for our physical recovery and mental wellbeing. Unfortunately, renewal is hard to come by in the school context where the average teacher alone makes over 1500 decisions in a working day (Darling-Hammond, 2009). While each act as a school leader may not necessarily be stressful, the constant demand, unpredictability of humans, the potential repercussions of decisions and the sheer amount of daily emotional labour co-regulating with staff, teachers,

students and parents/carers is energy draining. In many cases the unique stressors in schools are considered a part of the job and many have normalised aching shoulders, sleeplessness, weight gain and Week 8 fatigue, and just a little bit too much wine. As one Tasmanian principal put it, 'Survival has become my daily routine'.

### The Resilient and Thriving School Leader

Some school leaders thrive in the face of constant demand. Is it genetic, location-based or behavioural? What

makes some of us more resilient than others?

Broadly, resilience is defined as our capacity to bounce back from adversity or productively adapt to challenges (Luthar et al., 2000). While there may be some genetic inheritance, resilience is considered neither innate nor stable and can be nurtured, sustained or eroded through interactions with individuals and the work context itself (Luthar, Sawyer & Brown, 2007). In their extensive longitudinal research into educator resilience, Gu and Day (2013) suggest an



Figure 1: The Resilience Equation™.

Resilience	Elements
Context	The characteristics of the environment in which we work (micro and macro), impacted by levels of social capital and collective efficacy, psychological and physical safety, recognising and addressing toxicity, and by our perception of support.
Three Brains	The degree to which our personal wellbeing needs have been met across the dimensions of the physical, emotional and mental.
Coping Skills	Our capacity to cope: maladaptive or adaptive, active, passive or avoidant.
Challenge	Nature of the challenge, consistency and intensity, internal and self-produced or external and imposed. Can be accumulative.

Table 1: The Resilience Equation™.

education-specific definition of resilience which takes into account the unique high-demand school context, suggesting that educator resilience is not primarily the capacity to bounce back but rather ‘the capacity to maintain equilibrium and a sense of commitment and agency’ in the school context. In a resilient state we have greater stress tolerance, enhanced capacity to access the prefrontal cortex’s problem-solving skills to better cope and greater potential for longevity in the industry (Feder et al., 2009). The Resilience Equation™ (see Figure 1 and Table 1) outlines the core elements key to boosting personal and collective resilience.

The Resilience Equation™ lets us break down the key elements and supports us to address them concretely. Clearly, though we are all fundamentally responsible for our wellbeing, resilience is not the task of the individual alone. A collective approach that creates the expectation and norms of personal

renewal and recuperation values the role of school leaders. And any practical investment in leadership wellbeing is by extension an investment in improved performance and outcomes in the long-

term. The false divide between wellbeing and performance can only be straddled when we acknowledge that the way we are working is not sustainably working.



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