

REPORT ON HENLEY BUSINESS SCHOOL'S
RESEARCH PROJECT WITH HEADS TOGETHER AND ROW

**Developing personal
and team resilience in
challenging environments**



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Study scope and objectives

This study provides insights into the nature of resilience based on the experiences and reflections of four professionals who took part in the Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenge 2018.

We shed light on:

- the development of resilience levels during challenging times and influencing factors
- self-management behaviours that support and enhance emotional, cognitive and physical capacity for effective performance during extreme challenges
- key components of team resilience

With the findings we support:

- further learning on how professionals can develop personal resilience strategies during challenging times in organisational contexts
- further insights into key aspects and mechanisms of team resilience that organisations should support





*Four minds, one ocean:
50 days, 22 hours and 38 minutes*



Dr Caroline Rook
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Dr Rook's research relates to creating healthy and productive workplaces through exploring the links between leadership and well-being in organisations.

Dr Rook investigates in particular how to manage executive stress, how to maintain authentic functioning at work and the role of coaching in creating resilience for positive leadership. She has been involved in research and practice related to the topics of leadership, well-being, authenticity and coaching for some years.

Methodology

An e-diary study with a team of four ocean rowers with follow-up interviews:

- individual video recording on average once per week, featuring reflections on individual and team challenges, including personal resilience levels and team dynamics
- follow-up interviews focusing on key learning points for building and maintaining resilience as an individual and a team

Henley also supported the team in laboratory sessions leading up to the race, working with a nutritionist and a sports psychologist to make recommendations for their training.

The study context

Heads Together and Row are a mixed-four crew who took part in the 3,000-mile Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenge 2018. They rowed the Atlantic Ocean from the Canary Islands to Antigua in a time of 50 days, 22 hours and 38 minutes.

Team members Toby Gould, Jeremy Reynolds, Alison Wannell and Justin Coleman were raising money for mental health charities Mind and Combat Stress as part of the Heads Together campaign, a mental health initiative spearheaded by The Royal Foundation of The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and The Duke and Duchess of Sussex. They also raised money for the Marine Conservation Society.



Toby Gould



Jeremy Reynolds



Alison Wannell



Justin Coleman

A total of 27 teams completed the race, which began on December 12, 2018 and was organised by Atlantic Campaigns. It is said to be the world's toughest ocean row.

What is resilience?

Whether in life, business or a fierce mid-Atlantic storm, resilience enables us to deal with stress and overcome adversity. Generally, **personal resilience** is defined as the **ability to cope with adversity and the ability to bounce back to high performance levels** (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014).

There are two perspectives on resilience:

Being resilient

Building our capacity to cope with and bounce back from adversity through developing coping strategies and building and maintaining supportive resources.

Demonstrating resilience

Your ability to cope with adversity in a specific situation and to bounce back from it.

Generally, team resilience is defined as:

- **the ability of a team to cope with and learn from adversity-induced effective team process loss** (West, Patera & Carsten, 2009)
- team processes that allow the team to **absorb the strain** to be able to keep on performing (e.g. Barton & Kahn, 2018)
- team processes that allow the team to **bounce back** from adversity (e.g. Stoverink et al, 2018)

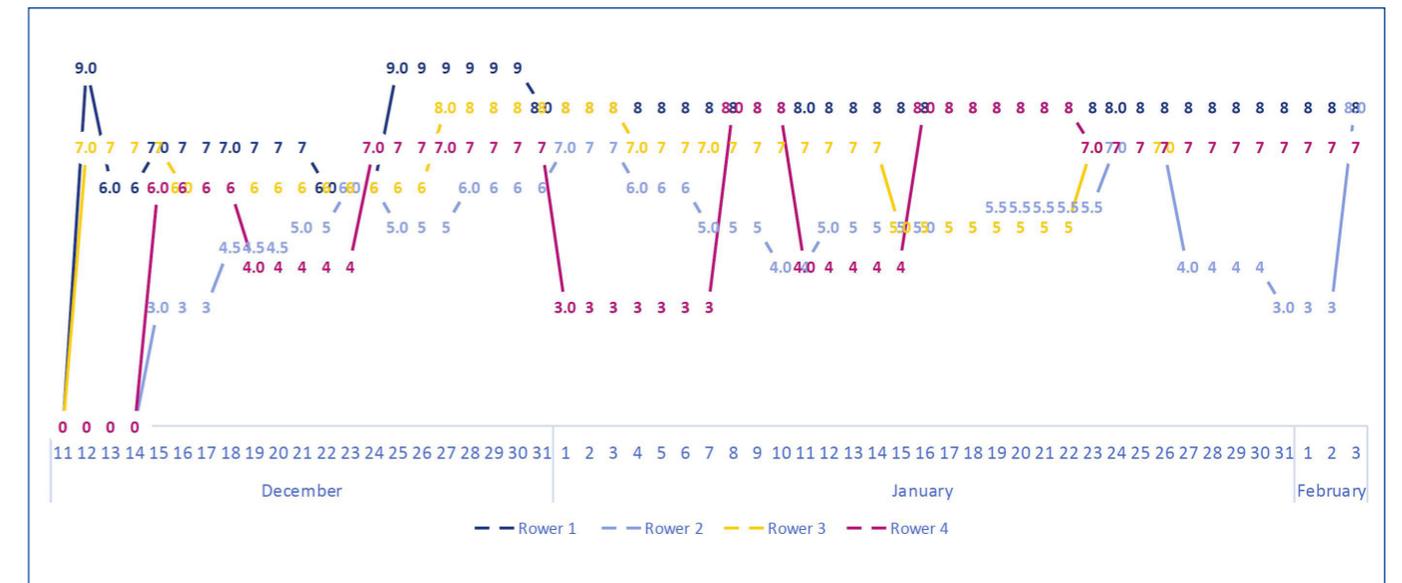


The dynamics of personal resilience

The team's resilience during the challenge

Personal resilience levels differed between the individual rowers and oscillated up and down for each rower throughout the race.

Each time they recorded an e-diary the team were asked to score their personal resilience level out of 10. For display purposes a score is shown for each day, although the rowers reported these in their e-diaries at different time points throughout the race.



(All reported resilience levels are shown with one-digit decimals.)

What caused low levels of personal resilience?



Sleep

Lack of sleep due to sleeping arrangements and comforts on the boat and not sticking to sleep routines had a significant impact on experienced levels of personal resilience.

“ My resilience, I'd probably put it lower, I think, to be honest. I'm getting a bit snappy with people. I'm so tired. ” (Rower 2)

“ Then you have to deal with having conversations with people who aren't there, and thinking you're holding things that don't exist. I've never experienced it before, but it's like a crossover between dreaming when you're in your sleep, and being awake. Yes, that's a challenge. ” (Rower 1)

Relationships

Relationship pressures were experienced by the team from two sources: tensions with the rest of the team, and feeling responsible for, but separated from, those at home.



“ I'm missing home tremendously, but also I think I have very erratic feelings at the moment between joy, and despair, and driving myself on, and desperately wanting to get off the boat and being home. So yes, and these tend to come and go every five or ten minutes, so I think the feelings are very erratic. ” (Rower 4)

Illness (seasickness)

Despite having prepared for the side effects of being an ocean rower, the symptoms of seasickness were surprising and overwhelming in their strength for some of the team.



“ A couple of our members are still suffering from seasickness. We're not making as much progress as I would like to, and I think we're all slightly finding our feet. But yes, I think that's not surprising given it's only day four, so we'll see where we are in a couple of days' time. ” (Rower 3)



Uncertainty

Uncertainty of what challenges lay ahead, and the changing feelings around the actual duration of the race were named as key aspects affecting each rower's felt resilience levels.



“ I think a lot of it comes down to the uncertainty of not knowing where we are, really, in comparison to the weather and things like that. ” (Rower 1)

“ I've been struggling more with the mental side and realising how long this challenge is going to take... Time seems to be going slowly and the prospect of the length of time still to go is really really tough! ” (Rower 4)

“ I think... we need to get over the fear of having to foot steer the rest of the way. It's going to happen, whether it happens today, or tomorrow. ” (Rower 1)

What caused high levels of personal resilience?

External factors

Experiences of success or prepared rewards had an impact on the reported felt resilience levels of the team.

“ I've just had the best meal, one of those freeze-dried meals, just a really nice one that I'd been hoping would be good for Christmas Day, and it was. Things are going well. Ask me again tomorrow when there have been a couple more challenges, and we'll see. ” (Rower 1)

“ Today's a good day, because we're making good mileage, so obviously being more resilient. It's a bit hot, but not too bad. ” (Rower 2)



Being a team

Feeling that the team is functioning and positive social experiences were associated in reported levels of felt personal resilience.

“ We did Christmas early, which was great and probably the first time I've felt we've all come together as a team, if only because the usual rowing routine means that only two, maybe three of us, are together at any time usually. Went swimming too, which was lovely. This 'off' time really instilled some 'fun' on board... ” (Rower 4)

“ ...really, really strong support from everyone in the team for everyone else in the team whenever they need. ” (Rower 1)

Having completed a challenging patch

Successfully managing adversity had a positive impact on experienced resilience levels.

“ We were in a cracking storm overnight. There were about three storms around us and they converged with us in the middle. At one point the boat just glowed as lightning went off directly above us. [Rower] and I rowed through a torrential downpour – rain like I've never been in before. It was so bad it was almost funny and we both helped each other through it. Feel really good for having got through that so resilience up at about 8. Just want the sun to come out now! ” (Rower 4)

Coping mechanisms

The team members engaged in several, personally quite specific, coping mechanisms to deal with the stress of the race and with adverse events:

Getting into a routine

“ It was a really nice night last night, really calm, quiet, the moon was up. So very different to previous nights. No one was seasick. I wasn't falling asleep on the oars. It was more you'd got into the routine and [were] able to cope with it. ” (Rower 1)

“ [My resilience] is gradually getting higher as I get into a routine on the boat and I can see us making progress, but it can dip alarmingly at any minute without any warning... ” (Rower 2)

Taking time out in your happy place

“ I have these sorts of wild things of missing home. I've been in my happy place most of the time. I'm not sure I'm embracing the experience of the ocean adventure quite as much as I ought to be, but that may come later on. ” (Rower 2)

Focus on the goal

(positively: achievement orientation;
negatively: completion orientation –
no alternative way to reach the goal)

“ I'm into this now, it's happening, it's a thing, I've got to get through it... The only way of getting through this is getting the rowing done. So I could lie in bed, but I certainly wouldn't get home faster; I'd get home a lot slower, which is how I've had to cope with it... ” (Rower 2)

“ While I'm struggling, I've never considered getting off as [I] keep thinking about how much I wanted to do this, what we've gone through to get here and how proud I will be if we do manage it; that's keeping me on board! ” (Rower 4)

Boat as a protected space/ sense of controlled environment

“ ...finding out just exactly where we are geographically, in the middle of an ocean rather than my little self-contained boat as I thought. So I'm not thinking about that too much, because that just freaks me out... I am currently coping by ignoring it, basically, and returning to my little boat, which is where I'm happiest for the time being. My little safe space. ” (Rower 2)

Finding support from others

“ Everyone is doing great things, helping and [being] supportive of each other and that sort of thing. If this is the worst weather we're going to get, then great, we'll take that. ” (Rower 3)

KEY LEARNING POINTS

Successful coping mechanisms to be resilient

- 1 Get into a routine to get a sense of control and achievement.
- 2 Take time out in your happy place to recharge.
- 3 Focus on the goal to be able to push through.
- 4 Create a sense of control so as not to feel overwhelmed.
- 5 Seek support from others to work things through.

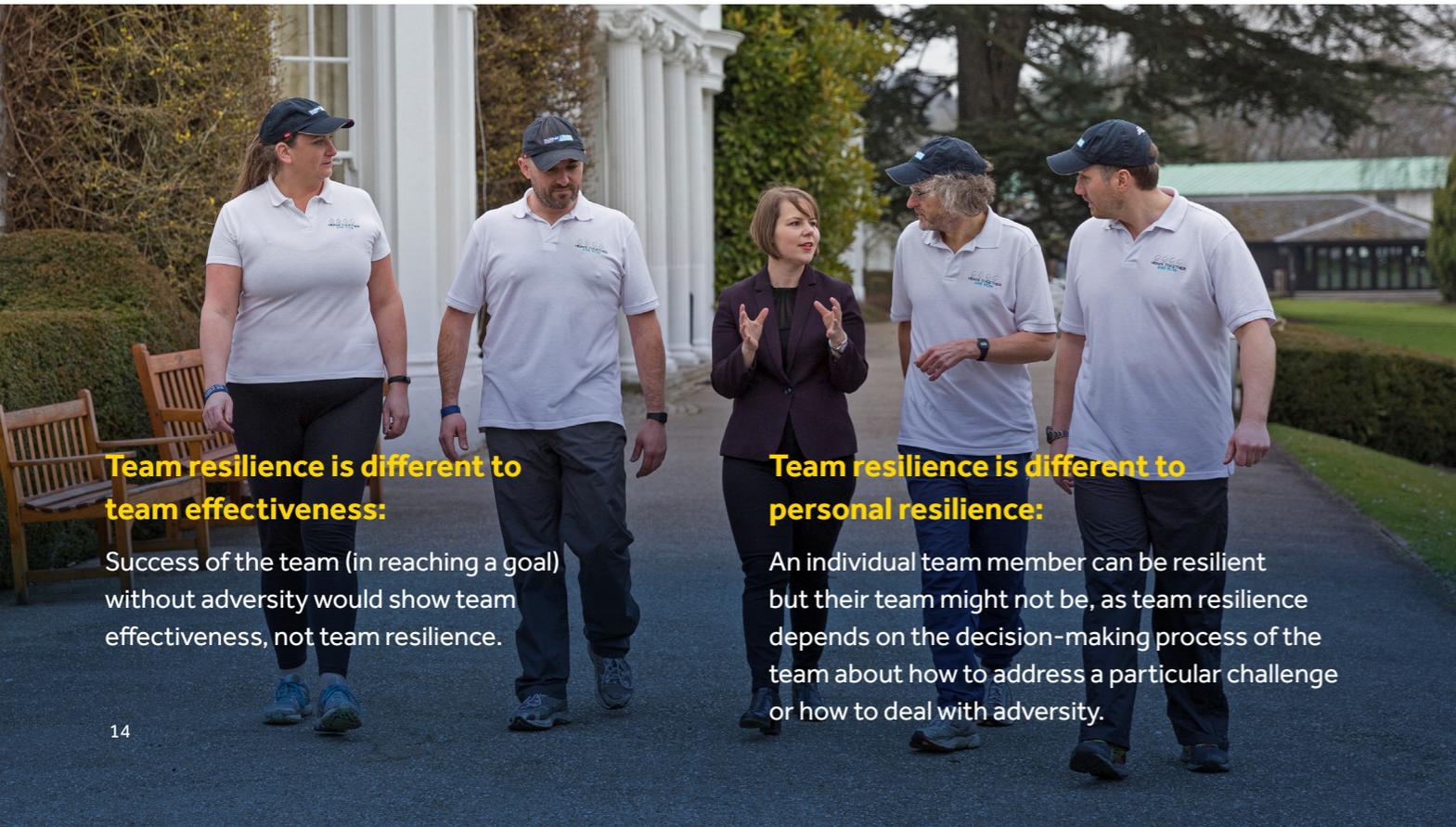


The dynamics of team resilience

What is team resilience?

In today's turbulent business world teams frequently face uncertainty and challenges and consequently are prone to impaired performance. There is a lot of research on team effectiveness in a business context and some resilience research on elite sports teams (see Morgan, Fletcher & Sarkar, 2017; Morgan, Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013) but we know little about what constitutes team resilience and how to develop it (see Stoverink et al, 2018).

“ [Team resilience is] a positive team level capacity that aids in the repair and rebound of teams when facing potentially stressful situations. Teams which display the ability to either thrive under high liability situations, improvise, and adapt to significant change or stress, or simply recover from a negative experience are less likely to experience the potentially damaging effects of threatening situations. ” (West et al, 2009, p254)



Team resilience is different to team effectiveness:

Success of the team (in reaching a goal) without adversity would show team effectiveness, not team resilience.

Team resilience is different to personal resilience:

An individual team member can be resilient but their team might not be, as team resilience depends on the decision-making process of the team about how to address a particular challenge or how to deal with adversity.

Stress and resilience in extreme environments

(Driskell, Salas & Driskell, 2018)

The consequences of stress become more pronounced in extreme environments:

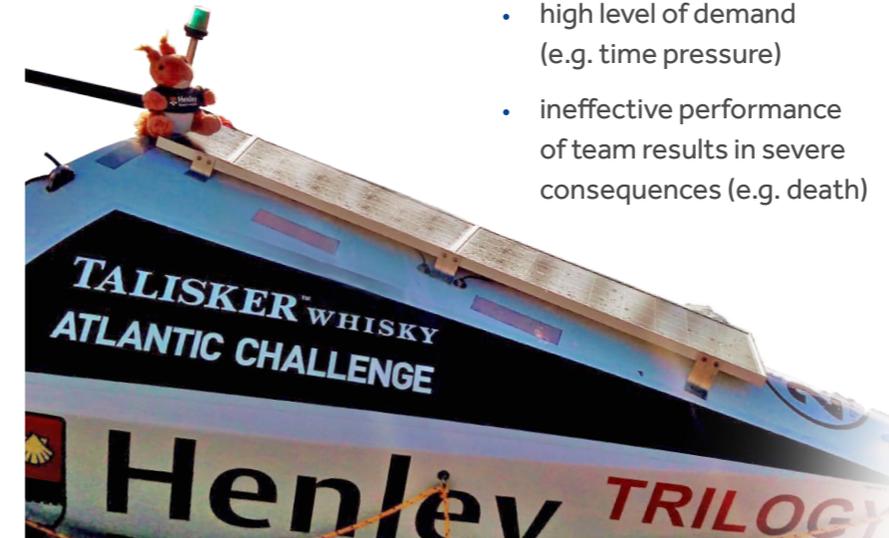
- Trivial issues can be exaggerated.
- High task demands heighten the tensions.
- Difficult to use social withdrawal to reflect and defuse due to confinement, therefore maintaining motivation is then difficult.

Extreme environments constitute:

- hostile environmental demands (e.g. extreme weather conditions)
- danger and physical risk (e.g. physical injury likely)
- restricted living and/or working conditions (e.g. close confinement of all team members)
- high levels of social demands (e.g. isolation)
- high level of demand (e.g. time pressure)
- ineffective performance of team results in severe consequences (e.g. death)

Extreme environments coupled with performance pressure lead to stress. Stress has consequences for individual and team processes as it is distracting:

- Stress decreases attentional focus: it creates tunnel vision, which makes solving complex tasks difficult.
- Stress increases cognitive load, which makes multitasking difficult.
- Stress increases negative emotions (e.g. fear and anxiety) and frustrations, which leads to impairment of personal performance and to relational strain among the team.
- Stress leads to social withdrawal, which for example leads to less communication among team members and therefore decreases team performance capacity.



The process of team resilience

(based on Stoverink et al, 2018; Barton & Kahn, 2018; Driskell, Salas & Driskell, 2018)



Personal aspects

- Achievement orientation
- Not wanting to let the team down
- Personal resilience capacity

Team resilience – capacity (preparing and minimising for adversity)

- Commitment to goal
- Team potency
- Team mental model
- Capacity to improvise
- Team psychological safety
- Sense-making and strategising

Team resilience – coping (managing adversity)

- Monitoring and detecting
- Sense-making and strategising
- Restoring broken processes (through team mental models and relational dynamics)

Team resilience – bouncing back (mending after adversity)

- Analysis
- Learning
- Recovery

Personal aspects of resilience

(based on Stoverink et al, 2018; Driskell, Salas & Driskell, 2018)

Achievement orientation

Personal commitment to the goals of the team is key for the individual to perform well.

“ As a team, I think we’re all very focused on getting across ASAP, which helps. ” (Rower 2)

Not wanting to let the team down

Even when the struggles become hard for the individual, the commitment to the team allows them to tap into their resilience resources.

“ I just want to get the hell out of here... We’ve just [got] to get this done and get out of here. But yes, I just want to get it done. ” (Rower 2)

Personal resilience capacity

Each individual has their own resilience resources and coping strategies, which cross over to the other team members.

“ [Rower] continues to be great emotional support and I know he’s struggling with some of the same issues as me. ” (Rower 4)



“ I’ve been listening to a couple of the other team on the oars talking about their fears and stuff, which probably is helpful for them, [but] not so much for me... I wasn’t too concerned about their fears until they raised them. Worry is contagious, I think. ” (Rower 3)

“ We do a lot of rowing and it causes me quite a lot of frustration, which I like to do good things with, within my prison cell, or whatever, a lot of the time. Sometimes it’s just bottling it up. On the odd occasion, something snaps and you just can’t deal with it. You can hear it, you can see it, and you just live that frustration, minute after minute, hour after hour in the dark and rain at night... Yes, I don’t think it’s something that will ever keep me awake at night again, but it has been at times on this trip. ” (Rower 1)

Team resilience capacity

(based on Stoverink et al, 2018)

Commitment to the goal

The whole team has to be committed to the goal in order for team processes to work well.

“ ...little niggles that have built up and built up and built up, and then eventually one of us has a bit of a vent... and then getting on with it and remembering the bigger picture. ” (Rower 1)

Team potency

The team's shared belief that it can be effective is key for it to be resilient.

“ And the team, I think, is in pretty good shape, by and large. We're getting on remarkably well, actually. So far, 21 days in, there hasn't been a single serious spat between the four of us, which is quite impressive given the space we're living in, and the tiredness and the stress we are under the whole time... We rely on [Rower] very heavily for this sort of stuff. We would be absolutely stuffed without him. Yes, I think we do rely heavily on [Rower], but the three of us when he's not on, and he's not around when he's asleep, we do cope well with day-to-day stuff. ” (Rower 2)

Team mental model

A clear understanding of each other's roles and overarching roles of the team is key for effective teamwork, and becomes particularly important when challenges become chaotic and fast reactions are needed.

“ The team is getting along pretty well. Dealing with challenges tends to follow a pretty clear format now. There's no deviation from [Rower] being skipper, so he's the final decision-maker, but other people are contributing to resolving issues, which is really good. [Rower] has started motivating people, or really expressing motivation with regards to getting the miles done, which is really pleasing. ” (Rower 3)

“ This scoring scale [team roles and leadership] is nonsense. It just changes depending on what's going on and who's in what role. ” (Rower 1)

Capacity to improvise

The ability to come up with new solutions and keep on adapting is key to keeping team performance high.

“ We ended up spending a couple of days foot steering, which is very challenging, for us at least. It involves twisting your leg. It involves staring at a compass, and/or flags, or stars, or some sort of reference point all the time you're rowing, and twisting your leg at the same time as rowing, which causes, for me and others, knee inflammation and soreness and a sore back and fatigue, just trying to do that... At night, I am the only crew member who can read the compass from the foot steering position. So we have some relay – I'm going to say farce, because it's just not adequate... we still do not want to have to do this using foot steering, particularly at night. It's hard and you use a lot of concentration foot steering to try and keep it remotely in the right direction. All the time you're doing it, you know it's not as accurate as the autohelm was, and you're losing miles and wasting energy on a daily basis as you zigzag along. ” (Rower 1)

Team psychological safety

Admitting to mistakes, voicing concerns and raising divergent opinions are important to keep personal relationships functioning and to effectively deal with challenges.

“ I've been niggling people with regards to time on the oars. Well, not time on the oars, but putting the effort in and stuff. Conversely, they've probably been niggling me that I take too many breaks when I'm on the oars. I think we're all trying to get the best out of each other, and changing that negative talk, which I don't necessarily think is a bad thing, but mixing [it] up with a bit of positive reinforcement as well. ” (Rower 3)

Sense-making and strategising capacity

The team needs to have the ability and processes in place to analyse challenges and come up with solutions.

“ [With] the water maker situation yesterday, we didn't panic. We just went through it logically. Frustrating, because obviously whenever you're trying to sort these things out, it means that you're not getting as much rest. ” (Rower 3)

Team resilience – coping

(based on Stoverink et al, 2018; Barton & Kahn, 2018)

Monitoring and detecting

The team needs to have vigilance for adverse events, mental models of normal teamwork, and have the ability to detect discrepancies in team processes and the task completion processes in order to determine how to best react to challenges.

“ I think we had a cargo ship coming over the hill and we had to react to that, getting on the radio and making sure they weren't going to run us over. Then we had a water leak alarm going off. There wasn't a water leak, but the alarm was going off, and I had to dig that out, and that sort of thing. Then we were having problems [for] the third time... with the autohelm, and the guys out on the oars kept getting spun around by the wind. ” (Rower 3)

Sense-making and strategising

When dealing with the challenges, the team invests resources to come up with the right strategy to resolve the challenge (adapting ways of working or persisting).

“ At the back of our minds is the autohelm and the rudder, but we kind of have plans to work [those] out should they go wrong, so fingers crossed. ” (Rower 2)

Restoring broken processes (through team mental models and relational dynamics)

Team processes deteriorate when the team has to deal with a challenge, but resilient teams invest resources so that they stay on track towards goal attainment. Particularly, team potency and team psychological safety support learning and motivation.

“ ...we had a mutual moan together, which made me feel a bit better! We are so close to the finish now that as long as I feel I'm doing all that I can, then I'll get through it. ” (Rower 4)

“ There are just other little irritations that I've got as well. The resilience really is at the moment just dealing with those death by a thousand cuts and just getting on with it despite those frustrations. ” (Rower 3)

“ Sometimes I want to kill him, sometimes I want to hug him, so what can you do?... But yes, I think we're all getting a little bit... because we're all getting really tired and a little bit snappy and short-tempered with each other, but by and large, we're doing alright, I think... in a small boat... there's a lot of humour involved when we get covered in water. There's a lot of humour involved... ” (Rower 2)

Team resilience – bouncing back

(based on Stoverink et al, 2018)



Analysis

The team needs to engage in situation analysis in order to enable learning.

Learning

Through learning, the team can engage in procedural modification for future teamwork, therefore creating a resource gain spiral through learning.

Recovery

The team gains confidence through knowing what helped to overcome adversity.

After the race, Rower 3 summarised their learning as follows:

“ My big aspect for resilience has got to be mindset... mindset of pragmatic optimism – being positive, believing you will complete/achieve/ be okay, but tempered [by] the pragmatism of knowing, or at least anticipating, that it may be hard and will take hard work. ”

“ Life is short, go out and pursue the things you really want. But also be aware of the sacrifice – every yes is a no to something else. Also be aware that with a big project your reasons for doing it can change along the way, and so can what you get out of it (what you gain, and what you lose, can be unexpected). I guess that's the nature of an adventure! ”

Importance of team mental models and relational dynamics for resilience in extreme environments

KEY LEARNING POINTS

Successful mental models and relational dynamics

- 1 Prepare the whole team together to build clear roles and team processes, including psychological safety.
- 2 During challenging times, provide sense-making of the challenge, encourage open dialogue and reframe adversity as an opportunity to learn.
- 3 After the challenge has subsided, give the team time to recover and capacity to learn to increase their resilience capacity.

Resilient teams struggle well together; they face adversity, which enables working through rather than avoiding difficulties (Coutu, 2002).

Mental models of the team help with co-ordinating inter-dependent action during difficulties (Stoverink et al, 2018):

- Mental models are a clear understanding of each other's roles and overarching roles of the team.
- This virtual system is important as formal roles can break down in chaos and the team then uses these mental models to predict team members' behaviours and own actions.

Relational dynamics (Barton & Khan, 2017):

- Brittle trajectory: Moving away from anxiety created through adversity and creating defensive patterns, which creates tensions in group.
- Resilience trajectory: Moving towards anxiety created through adversity and engaging in dynamics that allow team members to deal with difficult personal and team emotional issues.



Developing personal and team resilience in organisations for challenging times

- 1 Build a secure "boat" (organisational culture and vision) and remind people of it amidst the scary "ocean" (constant change within and outside organisations).
- 2 Support individuals to be resilient by supporting them in creating personal coping and resilience strategies.
- 3 Support your teams by creating psychological safety and clear roles and responsibilities that build on individuals' strengths.

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