

# Don't stress out: how to build long-term resilience

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*December 10, 2018* - Imagine that you're about to present to the executive board on the progress of a large-scale transformation. Although you've worked for many long nights to develop a compelling presentation, your stomach starts churning as soon as you enter the boardroom. Once in front of the board, you accidentally tip over a glass of water. Then, a few minutes in, the CFO asks you how much money this transformation will save the company. You have already had a few difficult conversations with this CFO, so his question causes you to freeze momentarily.

This is definitely not how you envisioned things unfolding. But when stress and anxiety mount, they can combine to undercut performance.

As organizations seek to build a resilient workforce, one goal is to ensure that employees can handle stress, insecurity and uncertainty without becoming overwhelmed. While we often turn to quick external solutions—[adding capacity or introducing a new project management tool](#)—building long-term resilience to stress starts from within.

## “You must acknowledge insecurities about capabilities and contextual challenges and deal with them in an action-oriented and skillful way.”

Resilience requires *authentic confidence* through *emotional flexibility*. You must acknowledge insecurities about capabilities and contextual challenges and deal with them in an action-oriented and skillful way. Six interconnected elements can help individuals build and maintain authentic confidence:

1. **Purpose and values.** A strong sense of purpose—having a reason to get out of bed, setting a clear direction and knowing what is important to you—can act as an anchor when you experience challenging times. Behind this purpose are values or guiding principles. These can serve as a foundation of authentic confidence.
2. **Mindfulness.** This means being fully present and aware of our emotions and surroundings or immersing ourselves completely during daily activities. Just a few minutes a day of exercise, meditation or listening to music builds the mental muscle needed for focus and peak performance.
3. **Acceptance.** We often avoid challenges because we fear making mistakes or failing. To become authentically confident, we must face our fears and emotions, consciously [step out of our comfort zone](#), move toward what is important to us, and learn from experiences. When you encounter challenges, accepting and acknowledging fear and observing it in a nonjudgmental way reduces its negative impact dramatically.

4. **Defusion.** This relates to an awareness of factors and thoughts that trigger anxiety—such as an angry board member, a dissatisfied client or a nasty email from a colleague. Defusion is observing our thoughts for what they are and learning how to keep the potential impact of those thoughts at a distance.
5. **Self-in-context.** The ability to look at challenges and yourself from a distance and in context, instead of ignoring them, is an essential skill in developing authentic confidence. Zooming out helps us understand the causes of our feelings and see ourselves in the broader context of who we are. Renowned educator Ronald Heifetz refers to this perspective as being on the dance floor and the balcony at the same time.
6. **Committed action.** Developing authentic confidence requires us to think through the changes we want to make in our daily lives. This process is not about defining intentions but about creating and integrating a very clear plan with an operating model that supports the behavior change we want to achieve. This is where you bring all the other elements together and embrace challenges.

Mastering authentic confidence through emotional flexibility can serve as a critical part of pursuing our professional goals, purpose and values while dealing with fears and anxieties along the journey. By developing this attribute, employees can manage stress in a sustainable way while being freed to achieve better performance and well-being.

Since organizations stand to benefit from a workforce that is better able to handle stress, investing in a culture that emphasizes authentic confidence and promotes emotional flexibility is critical. Modeling supportive behavior in interactions with employees can also help to set the right tone.