

# THE IMPACT OF OBSTACLES AND DEVELOPMENTAL EXPERIENCES ON RESILIENCE IN LEADERSHIP FORMATION

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The focus of this paper is to report findings from research conducted that links the role of obstacles and developmental experiences to the level of resilience within a leader. The research provides evidence that the types of developmental experiences and the level of self-differentiation in the leader relates to the levels of resiliency within a leader. The study reflects responses from 167 participants and utilizes leadership antecedents categories, the Differentiation of Self Inventory, Short Form (DSI-SF) and the Connor Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC). The results demonstrate that resiliency is positively correlated with both the leadership antecedents and differentiation of self. In light of the research findings, the authors will (a) highlight the relationship between resiliency and the leadership antecedents (including developmental assignments, developmental relationships, developmental experiences, and developmental training), (b) highlight the relationship between resiliency and differentiation of self, and (c) provide rationale for the absence of a relationship between differentiation of self and the leadership antecedents. Based on these findings, the authors intend to provide an argument for why obstacles and developmental experiences are a logical and necessary part of the formation process for leaders and suggest the importance of emerging leaders attending to this dimension of their own leadership formation journey. The presentation will also highlight other identifiable leadership competencies, which the authors believe exist within the leadership formation process. If demonstrated, implications exist for new forms of leadership training.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In looking at the research on leadership formation, theorists have recognized that obstacles play a role within the leadership process. Both House (1996) and Kotter (1996) assert that a leader needs to remove obstacles for followers. While this removal of obstacles is perhaps appropriate when looking at effective leadership behaviors and follower's productivity, this study looks at the role that obstacles have made in the personal development of a leader within the formation process. As is identified in *The Center of Creative Leadership Handbook of Leadership Development* (McCauley and Van Velsor, 2004) many varieties of obstacles exist. In order to understand the possible relationship between these obstacles and the development of resilience in a leader, it is necessary to categorize them in significant groupings. For this study, obstacles are categorized into possible leadership antecedents in the following groupings: (a) developmental assignments, (b) developmental relationships, (c) developmental experiences, and (d) developmental training.

Using these groupings, the literature provides a broader foundation as it relates to hardships building certain characteristics in leaders. Researchers have demonstrated that having hardships early in life and overcoming them increases effectiveness within leaders (Burns, 1978; McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988; Conger, 2004). Other theorists have demonstrated a possible link between hardships and the development of resilience (Masten & Reed, 2002; Kersting, 2003). While the link is argued within this study, the area of personal formation illustrates the significance of this relationship. Zaleznik (2004) makes the argument that leaders often are developed from twice-born individuals. The theory illustrates that these twice-born individuals, whom are more likely to become leaders, are formed in the obstacles and hardships of life circumstances. For this study, the level of personal formation is measured through the differentiation of self inventory (DSI-SF).

According to several studies, resilience is a positive coping trait that is attributed to an individual's ability to overcome hardships (Gupton & Slick, 1996; Janas, 2002; Richardson, 2002; Werner & Smith, 1982; Whatley, 1999). Grotberg (2003) takes this definition a step further by arguing that individuals who are presently dealing with hardships are more likely to persevere through if they have developed this coping trait of resilience. Another study argues that having a family with strong traditions promotes resiliency (Montgomery, Miville, Winterowd, Jefferies, & Baysden, 2000). In addition to hardships being linked to resiliency, the literature also demonstrates that resiliency among leadership has a relationship with the development of self-awareness and identity (Ackerman & Maslon-Ostrowski, 2002; Christman & McClellan, 2008; McClellan & Christman, 2008; Komives, 2005). Therefore, this study will argue that both hardships and personal formation or self-differentiation have direct relationships on the development of resiliency within leaders. The study utilizes the Connor Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC) to measure the levels of resiliency among participants.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A significant portion of the leadership research on obstacles or hardships has centered around the role of a leader being able to remove obstacles for followers. House's (1996) work is arguably the most recognized. However, Kotter (1996), in his development of how to lead change, identifies this step of removing obstacles as well. Similar studies have reflected how a leader can overcome their current obstacles, including school reform (Glickman, 2002), women in leadership (Coronel, Moreno, & Carrasco, 2010; Gherardi, 1995; Evetts, 2000; Rutherford, 2001), and career goal attainment (Burke & Nelson, 2002; Perrewe & Nelson, 2004; Lyness & Brumit, 2005). While the removal of obstacles might be important for leadership effectiveness, this study aims to look at the link between hardships and leadership formation. In a study about leadership formation, Conger (2004) identifies hardships as a factor that might shape this process. This point is noted in other studies about business leaders who state that their overcoming of intense hardships in childhood is directly correlated to their success as a leader (McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988). Burns (1978) also gives credence to the frequency of hardships in the lives of historical leaders.

In related literature, several studies on charismatic leadership posit that leaders who have learned to overcome hardships early in life have a greater ability to shift a follower's focus from self to collective interests (Bass, 1985; House & Howell, 1992; Shamir, et al, 1993). Along these lines, Luthans et al (2007) argues that perseverance towards goals is directly related to positive psychology. Kersting (2003) agrees by noting that positive psychology is developed along with resilience through a pattern of overcoming obstacles. Similar studies mention this link between obstacles and resiliency building (Masten & Reed, 2002; Wagnild & Young, 1993). The notion that resiliency can be developed or formed is confirmed by each of these studies on positive psychology. Resilience is characterized as positive coping or adapting to situations with the

positive psychology literature (Masten, 2001; Masten and Reed, 2002); whereas, in organizational settings, it is defined as the ability to bounce back from hardships (Luthans, 2002a). Resilience has the ability to grow in an individual once they have bounced back from an adverse event (Richardson, 2002). Fredrickson and Joiner (2002) concur by arguing that resilience grows each time an individual bounces back effectively from these adverse events. This relationship between bouncing back from adverse events and leadership formation is at the heart of what this study is aiming to demonstrate. Along these lines, Bandura (1998, p. 62) notes that, “success usually comes through renewed effort after failed attempts.” Luthans et al (2007) adds to the argument by positing that resiliency combined with hope assists an individual in bouncing back by building self-efficacy levels to handle future hardships. This ability to overcome hardships enables a leader to sacrifice for their followers. According to Conger and Kanungo (1987), one of the most critical elements of leadership is the ability to sacrifice for followers.

These hardships or obstacles, which often manifest themselves in difficulty, struggle, and pain, impart a shaping influence on any life (Howard & Irving, 2012). The multiple textures of life include stories of both joy and hardship that, and all of these stories contribute to personal formation. As Taylor notes, “The point is not to tell only Pollyanna tales about one’s beginnings. It is to see tales of pain in the context of a larger whole. We should marvel as much that pain coexists with and even stimulates good as we lament pain’s destructive consequences” (2001, p. 62). As noted above, Zaleznik (2004) argues that twice-born individuals—those more likely to become leaders—are formed in the obstacles and hardships of life circumstances. Zaleznik argues that the lives of these twice-born individuals are often marked by continual struggle that breeds a sense of separateness from people and organizations around them. Zaleznik puts it this way: “They may work in organizations, but they never belong to them. Their sense of who they are does not depend upon membership, work roles, or other social indicators of identity” (79).

Along this same point, Christman and McClellan (2012) assert that self awareness and identity are developed from resiliency. While studies have focused on resiliency contribution to identity development, little has explored how it contributes to leadership formation (Christman and McClellan, 2012). If leadership is contingent upon the development of self-awareness and identity (Ackerman & Maslon-Ostrowski, 2002) then resiliency is a key step within the formation process of a leader. One stream in the personal formation literature highlights the concept of Friedman (2007). At a basic level, self-differentiation is a concept that describes a person’s emotional capacity to function in a manner that is not overly-dependent on the opinions of others, and therefore the self-differentiated person is able to maintain a non-anxious presence in the face of differing opinions or realities external to themselves. Friedman argues that without self-differentiation, leaders are held captive to reactive models of leadership that are characterized by a core failure of nerve. Developed through adversity, we would argue that twice-born leaders have developmental experiences that uniquely lead to non-anxious, self-differentiated, and resilient individuals and leaders. The present study seeks to confirm the relationship between formative antecedents, self-differentiation, and resiliency in these leaders.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In this study, a convenience sample of 167 leaders provided responses to a series of questions focused on leadership formation and resiliency. Participants qualified for the study if they were an adult who had at least one year of supervisory experience leading at least one other individual. Participants provided responses to relevant demographic questions and a self-assessment of their leadership antecedents, differentiation of self, and resiliency. Participants had an average age of 45.86 and were 69% male and 31% female. The educational level among participants was 6% some college, 26% bachelor’s degree, 49% master’s degree, and 19% doctoral degree. Participants reported an average of 19 years of leadership experience. Participants represented the

following organizational sectors: (a) 17% business, (b) 24% education, (c) 6% government, (d) 43% nonprofit, and (e) 11% other.

Beyond demographic questions, participants were asked to report the degree to which diverse developmental assignments, relationships, experiences, and training contributed to their leadership development. The overall alpha coefficient for the leadership antecedent instrument, focused on measuring the contribution of developmental experience in the leadership development process, was .858. Subscale alpha coefficients were: (a) .63 for development assignments, (b) .67 for developmental relationships, (c) .83 for developmental experiences, and (d) .69 for developmental training. Participants were also asked to provide a self-assessment of their resiliency using the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale 25 (CD-RISC-25) and a self-assessment of their self-differentiation using The Differentiation of Self Inventory—Short Form (DSI-SF). In this study, the CD-RISC-25 had an alpha coefficient of .857 and the DSI-SF had an alpha coefficient of .877.

**FINDINGS**

When analyzing the data for a relationship between resiliency and the other scales, several statistically significant findings were identified. Utilizing guidelines offered by Guilford (1956) and Kerlinger and Lee (2000), a Pearson *r* correlation value of  $\geq .20$  was set as a minimum level for rejecting the null hypothesis and a significance level of .01 (2-tailed) was set for establishing statistical significance. As noted in Table 1, the Pearson *r* correlation for the relationship between leader self-differentiation and leader resiliency was .433 ( $p = .000$ ). The Pearson *r* for the relationship between overall leadership antecedents and leader resiliency was .365 ( $p = .000$ ).

Table 1  
*Key Correlations with Resiliency*

| Independent Variable                 | Pearson <i>r</i> | Significance |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|--------------|
| Leader Self-Differentiation (DSI-SF) | $r = .433$       | $p = .000$   |
| Overall Leadership Antecedents       | $r = .365$       | $p = .000$   |
| Developmental Assignments            | $r = .428$       | $p = .000$   |
| Developmental Experiences            | $r = .256$       | $p = .001$   |
| Developmental Training               | $r = .256$       | $p = .001$   |

Beyond these primary findings, the relationship between resiliency and developmental antecedents were analyzed. Categorically, resiliency correlated with the categorical developmental antecedents in the following manner (also, see Table 1): (a) developmental assignments [ $r = .428$ ;  $p = .000$ ], (b) developmental relationships [ $r = .185$ ;  $p = .017$ ], (c) developmental experiences [ $r = .256$ ;  $p = .001$ ], and (d) developmental training [ $r = .256$ ;  $p = .001$ ]. The following table provides an overview of individual developmental antecedents, which are individual items related to the categorical developmental antecedents noted above (see Table 2).

Table 2  
*Correlations of Resiliency and Individual Developmental Antecedents*

| Developmental Antecedent  | Pearson <i>r</i> | Significance |
|---|------------------|--------------|
| Increased Responsibility  | $r = .353$       | $p = .000$   |
| Project Requiring Change Implementation                         | $r = .345$       | $p = .000$   |
| Persevering through Perceived Personal or Professional Barriers | $r = .281$       | $p = .000$   |

|   |            |            |
|---|------------|------------|
| Training or Individual Courses                                | $r = .266$ | $p = .001$ |
| Working in a Different Culture                                | $r = .260$ | $p = .001$ |
| Job Transition or Rotation                                    | $r = .250$ | $p = .001$ |
| Overcoming Traumatic or Emotionally-Laden Life Experiences    | $r = .249$ | $p = .001$ |
| Engagement with Organizational Stakeholders                   | $r = .246$ | $p = .001$ |
| Influence of Parents or Significant Mentors                   | $r = .244$ | $p = .001$ |
| Internship, Apprenticeship, or Intentional Mentoring/Coaching | $r = .244$ | $p = .003$ |
| Experiencing Challenging Childhood Experiences                | $r = .219$ | $p = .005$ |
| Personal Mistakes   | $r = .214$ | $p = .005$ |

**DISCUSSION**

In looking at the results of the study, several determinations can be made. The findings demonstrate that a relationship exists between leader self-differentiation and leader resiliency. As mentioned previously, self-differentiation represents a person’s emotional capacity to function in a manner that is not overly-dependent on the opinions of others and thus is related to identity and self-awareness. Those who are more self-aware and have developed their own identity demonstrate higher levels of resiliency. The question then becomes, where does this self-awareness and identity development come from? The authors argue that among other factors self-awareness and identity are shaped in hardships and obstacles early on in an individual’s life. Zaleznick (2004) illustrates this relationship by arguing that individuals who experience certain levels of hardships and obstacles are more likely to become leaders. While self-differentiation isn’t a prerequisite for becoming a leader, it might prove valuable when looking at factors that form more effective leaders. It is this leadership formation process, individuals whom lead in an optimal manner, which is at the heart of this study. If certain markers in a certain order exist among effective leaders, perhaps training programs can develop future leaders or this understanding can lead to identifying potential leaders earlier.

A second clear relationship can be found between leader resiliency and developmental antecedents. When looking at all developmental antecedents, which represent potential hardship or obstacle areas for a leader, the study demonstrates that these developmental antecedents act as dependent variables for leader resiliency. However, the findings also show evidence that not all developmental antecedents have a level of significance that show that they correlate with resiliency. Those antecedents that did show significance include (1) increased responsibility, (2) project requiring change implementation, (3) persevering through perceived personal or professional barriers, (4) training or individual courses, (5) working in a different culture, (6) job transition or rotation, (7) overcoming traumatic or emotionally-laden life experiences, (8) engagement with organizational stakeholders, (9) influence of parents or significant mentors, (10) internship, apprenticeship, or intentional mentoring/coaching, (11) experiencing challenging childhood experiences, and (12) personal mistakes. On the other hand, constructive bosses or supervisors, working with difficult people, working with healthy colleagues and quality teams, facing a crisis or scandal, experiencing career setbacks, facing ethical dilemma, engaging interpersonal or substantive conflict, and obtaining formal degrees did not have levels of significance to be identified as correlated with resiliency.

There are several potential reasons for why some developmental antecedents had more significance than others. One possible rationale is that participants in the study don’t see the connection between these antecedents and their leadership competencies. In other words, participants are being asked to assess the level that these antecedents have had on their leadership capacity. Perhaps many of them do not possess the levels of self-awareness to see these connections. Another potential reason is that these antecedents are not independent of each other, but rather have interrelated action that then creates resiliency. Meaning, two or more antecedents might together act as a significant variable for resiliency, but not individually. One final argument

for the varying levels of significance among antecedents might be attributed to terminology or definition. One participant might interpret working in a different culture as working with a diverse workforce that possesses a different cultural background than the one they witnessed in their formidable years. On the other hand, another participant might see this antecedent as spending at least a year working in a foreign country. These varying definitions can have an effect on the findings. Another interesting outcome of the findings is that three of the top five developmental antecedents fell under the category of developmental assignments. Along with this point, all five developmental assignment antecedents demonstrated significance as a predictor of resiliency. Therefore, respondents in the study must have all seen a clear connection between developmental assignments and the levels of resiliency they have built.

A final area of discussion centers around the lack of relationship that developmental antecedents have with self-differentiation. While both self-differentiation and developmental antecedents demonstrated levels of significance as correlated with resiliency, the two independent variables showed no significant relationship with each other in the study's findings. While this lack of relationship might seem odd, it actually illustrates the authors' assertions about the suggested leadership formation markers. While several variables may work independently to form resiliency, each of them do not represent another step in the process. In addition, other variables may also exist that act as independent variables in the formation of resiliency, such as self-efficacy or identity. However, these variables cannot be looked at as a linear process for building resiliency. Rather, the combination and degree to which these variables are present in the process of a leader's formation determine the level of resiliency built.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The results of the study provide several recommendations for future research. First, the findings demonstrate that there is a relationship between developmental antecedents and leader resiliency. Also, the study does not demonstrate how these developmental antecedents might work in combination with one another to develop resiliency. Therefore, one recommendation would be to further verify the interrelationship of developmental antecedents and the nature of their relationship with leader resiliency. Second, the authors assert that the leadership formation process, while unique to every individual, contains certain similarities or markers that are clearly identifiable. Howard and Irving (2012) posited that hardships led to resiliency, which then in turn led to character. Thus, another recommendation for future research would be to demonstrate how resiliency is linked to character development. In looking at this relationship, it would also be important to identify any other possible relationships to the building of character development within individuals. Therefore, a final recommendation would be to study what other factors contribute to character development, potentially showing the further link between developmental antecedents and self-differentiation with character development.

### **CONCLUSION**

In this paper, the researchers have provided an overview of the literature related to resiliency, self-differentiation, and antecedents to leadership formation, and based upon this literature, provided a report of their research with 167 leaders. Statistically significant relationships were identified between leader resiliency and the following independent variables: (a) leader self-differentiation, (b) overall leadership development antecedents, (c) developmental assignments, (d) developmental experiences, and (e) developmental training. Additional individual developmental antecedents were also identified as related to leader resiliency. In light of the importance of leader resiliency in the literature, identify associated independent variables and potential developmental predictors is significant for the study of leadership formation and leadership develop. The researchers hope this study will encourage additional work in this area.

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