

# Building resilience



**Zahra Pabani** *partner, Irwin Mitchell LLP*  
**Marcie Shaoul** *Rolling Stone Coaching*



---

*From paralegal to partner – why you need resilience and how to find it*

We are writing this piece because, for different reasons, we have heard from clients and colleagues about moments of difficulty in their career journey: how they are burnt out; how, no matter what they are doing, they are not reaching their goals; or they are reaching their goals and then not realising their full potential because they've not had the correct training for the soft skills on the way.

These are common complaints and they are tough things to experience in your career journey. But it doesn't have to be that way. We know that there is a way to reach your goals, deal with the tricky bits and be at the top of your game, and we want to share it with you. It's all about resilience.

## Why do we need resilience?

We all need resilience. Some of us have more of it than others, but without it we would not function effectively in all areas of our lives. Psychological resilience is the ability to deal with a crisis in an emotionally sound way, or to be able to return to a pre-crisis state quickly. We know we are resilient when we can use techniques to help us cope with difficult situations and protect ourselves from the potentially negative impact of stress.

Having, or being, a resilient leader does not mean you are emotionally shut off, nor does it mean you bulldoze everything around you to get your way. It just means that you are able to think clearly in difficult situations, react appropriately when there are high levels of stress, and be able to switch off when you go home at night. If that sounds like something you're lacking, then you're not alone. At some point in our lives, all of us will find ourselves lacking resilience. When we don't have enough of it, we may respond inappropriately at work because we are close to burn out. Or, we may make bad decisions because we aren't quite able to get a grip on different perspectives. Usually, other people notice before we do that we are lacking in resilience. When outside factors start affecting how we feel on the inside, we need to be able to step back and take stock.

## What happens when we don't have resilience?

One of Marcie's coaching clients, Tom (names have been changed), was a new partner in a law firm. Tom was a young partner and had worked really hard to get to that position, and was delighted with his achievement. When he signed up to coaching it was because being a partner wasn't going according to plan. He didn't have the respect of his peers, he didn't have the respect of the associates reporting to him, he felt frayed around the edges, and what was worse for him was he was taking it out on his young family at home by being grumpy. "I'm not enjoying my life" was the opening line on our chemistry call.

It can take a couple of sessions for a client to understand that the external things that are going on for them aren't what is causing the struggle. When the penny drops it becomes clear that it's the way we are responding to things that is causing our own unhappiness and exacerbating a situation, and only then is there a resolve to make changes in our actions. For Tom, he was decision making in a silo, forging ahead without consulting others around him, not listening to what others had to say as he was desperate to show that he was a viable asset to the partnership team. Because he had worked so tirelessly to get to where he was – long hours, lots of weekend work – he wasn't able to step back and remind himself that there were others on his journey that were part of that journey. The coaching enabled Tom to understand, take responsibility for, and modify his own behaviour. Some simple changes enabled him to see clearly what was needed to move forward collaboratively. Tom now has a happy and successful team of people and a much better work/life balance.

Medically speaking, not having resilience can be likened to the cushions of spinal fluid that sit between our vertebrae leaking away. The springy flexibility that we once had lessens over time. We become brittle and snappy. We don't have as much flexibility or resistance. We feel things much more acutely than we would usually. We respond from a place of impatience and our leadership style becomes more singular rather than collaborative. If we don't take care of the

cushions – the softer side, the self-nourishment – then over a period of time we lose out. And so do those around us.

## Why is it necessary in the legal sector?

Zahra can say from personal experience that the journey from paralegal to partner is not an easy one. The legal industry as a whole has always been and continues to be tough – it's a vocation, not a job – and whilst we all continue to strive for that elusive work life balance, it can be harder to find in law and specifically in family law. Family practice can be 24/7, clients need you when they need you, and it's as simple as that. And in this current environment we're even more accessible and we're switched on the whole time. The line between work and home is blurred at best and lacking at worst. The pressure we feel and we are under is enormous, and this is not just at the leadership level but at all levels. We're asking a lot of our teams, and our expectations from leadership are high. The pressure to perform is there, it's real and it's hard.

But you can make a difference, not only to yourself but to those around you. Many don't realise this when they start out, just thinking you work all the hours you can, take whatever pain there is to get promoted and then it all gets better. This was Zahra's perspective and she will happily acknowledge she was wrong. "It's only really at partner level that I was introduced to coaching and boy has it made a difference to me, my team and my family. The only regret I have is that I didn't know about it sooner." Historically it was all about legal skills and black letter law. Soft skills have only come into focus in more recent years. Now many firms do look at soft skills and believe in and understand their importance at all levels. The key to success in terms of resilience is taking time out for you!

At a more junior level, the level of resilience you need is massive as you feel the pressure from above in so many ways. If your leader or your team are under pressure then it always lands on your shoulders. Clients heap all their problems and worries on you and even though as a paralegal, the buck doesn't normally stop with you, you feel it does. If you want to get that training contract and work your way up the ladder, any error or any red pen on your work feels like the end of the world. But please try to remember it's not about the mistakes you make, it's how you deal with them and how you learn from them that matters.

At a more senior level you feel absolutely everything: you need to win cases, feed your team, think about their development, account to the senior leadership time in terms of chargeable hours, revenue, aged debt, and first and foremost you need to deliver an excellent service to clients. It's not just about the law – far from it – you need to be able to run a business without all the training that is required to do that – sound familiar? Read on....

## Increasing our resilience

So how do we increase our resilience? There are lots of ways. We may feel that things are the fault of other

people, or that our quickness to react angrily to a situation is because of other people's actions. But as with many things the first thing we need to do is to take a good look at ourselves. We can't change other people, we can only change ourselves. That we all know. What you might not know is that when you decide to change the way you interact with others, they have to respond differently to you in return. A good coach will work with their clients to get them to a place where they can do this, and the results can be astounding. When you choose your response and your behaviour, you are being consistent and coming at it from a place that is true to you. Those things fuel your resilience because it is energising not having to react negatively.

Self-care is another way to build resilience. Exercise, sleep, eating well – it's not rocket science, but it does work. Equally important is having fun, letting off steam, being with friends and taking time out for you. Without paying attention to the non-work bits you become one dimensional and less appealing as a manager, person or indeed potential employee.

Resilience needs work and time; it also needs boundaries. If you don't know your own boundaries and your own values (both of which should be identified in the early stages of coaching), then it will be a lot harder to be able to say no to people. If you are saying yes all the time you will be like a leaking bucket. Eventually all the good stuff will disappear and you'll be left with an empty shell. This might sound harsh, but it's true.

Surrounding yourself with good people, colleagues, coaches, mentors, friends who will support you and tell you the truth, is an invaluable thing to do. Hearing the truth in a safe way is vital for growth. Growing is not always easy, but it's crucial.

## Resilience in leadership

Leadership is an art, not a science. We're not taught it as lawyers and to some it comes naturally and to others it doesn't. Even a great lawyer may not necessarily be a great leader, but they can learn how to be a better one. Leadership should be a part of your journey from day one in law – clients want to hear, see and feel leadership from every part of their team.

A positive mental attitude is so incredibly important, now more than ever. People need to feel good, feel strong, and feel valued. As a leader, but also as a team member, you can add to this and be a part of it – it gives us all a much-needed feel good factor. It doesn't matter what level you're at, you need to reach out to your boss, to your juniors, give feedback, say thank you, say well done and sometimes just say something.

The key to leadership in law is communication. Communicate with your clients, with your team, your peers, those above you and those who report to you. Be visible, be honest, listen and learn – you are never too old to learn! It is also important as a leader for others to see you at your worst as well as your best. This doesn't mean shouting the odds or falling in a heap – it means being vulnerable and open about



a difficult situation or how you're feeling. In this current environment it is easy to hide away and sometimes we don't know if colleagues are struggling, but if you show it when you are, then others might follow, which can be invaluable.

## Top tips

1. Be honest with yourself. Brutally honest. If you're honest you expose all the things you are afraid of and then they are not so frightening anymore. This is a powerful place to be and enables huge resilience building.
2. Take care of yourself. If you take care of yourself, you will be a better leader and colleague. And then you'll climb the ladder more quickly and easily.

3. Get a mentor. Having a colleague or a senior from your industry who can advise you on the sector specifics can be really helpful in increasing your knowledge and understanding and therefore your resilience.
4. Invest in a coach. It may be expensive, but it's a short-term investment for a rest-of-your-life gain. The skills and tools you will learn from ten sessions of coaching will serve you for the rest of your career.

If you take anything from this article remember to give yourself a break and give yourself a time out. Yes, it's a tough job you have, but you can build your resilience and your career. Sometimes we all just need a little help. Not being afraid to seek it out and ask for it is in itself a sign of a true leader.

*marcie@rollingstonecoaching.com*

*zahra.pabani@irwinmitchell.com*

