Understanding Mental Toughness

Sustain, support and stretch your resilience
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Introduction

Public service organisations in Wales are constantly striving to deliver the highest quality services in the most effective ways, focusing on using all resources available in the best ways possible and by using tried and tested methods to make things happen: strategic planning, delivery, streamlining, service design and improvement, systems change and so on.

While all of these ‘hard’ systems support organisational development, there is a growing body of research that suggests a more inside-out approach to improving performance of individuals and organisations. This edition of Sowing Seeds introduces the concept of mental toughness, and offers some insight into why it is valuable to us as individuals in the workplace and in our everyday lives.

Why mental toughness matters now

As individuals, we are living and working in an ever increasingly complex and challenging world. Seeking to be our best, reach our potential, ‘show up’ well and sometimes just get by, in an environment of competing demands. As managers and leaders we are striving to ensure we deliver while also supporting and steering others across our organisations. Those organisations, teams and individuals are continuously adapting to meet the needs of citizens where their resources may be diminished, their roles ever expanding and the need for cross-boundary working more important than ever before.

For practitioners and academics working in the field of leadership and personal development, the understanding and practice of mental toughness and resilience has become an enabler for understanding personal performance and wellbeing.

It is in this climate that we ask our managers and leaders to do their best work, the ability to understand our mental toughness and resilience and how it serves to sustain, support and stretch us may be an important enabler of our future success.
Origins in the world of the academic and practitioner

If you ask a group of individuals ‘What do you think mental toughness is?’ the range of answers will be varied … strong, balanced, an ability to cope, assertiveness, being resilient. These are all words and phrases we associate with mental toughness, as well as many others. We derive meaning from words based on our experience and it is this experience that drives our behaviour. Our behaviour is how we show up every day, it is everything that is overt and observable, therefore we can share a great deal with others in a matter of moments without even realising we are doing it.

The meaning of mental toughness that a group may define is influenced by a range of experiences; these can include influencing factors such as, age, upbringing and family, circumstance and environment, access, understanding, knowledge and education, exposure and also behaviour itself. In all this difference and similarity of experience, we know that the idea of resilience appears as a common theme and it is often associated with the idea of mental toughness. More on that later.

In America

Sports Psychology is one area where mental toughness plays a big part in individual and team development and it is in this field that American research in mental toughness has developed. Researchers Graham Jones, Sheldon Hanton and Declan Connaughton focused their research on elite athletes, also working with elite-level coaches and sports psychologists, to define mental toughness as;

“… the natural or developed psychological edge that enables you to:

generally, cope better … specifically, be more consistent and better than your opponents in remaining determined, focused, confident and in control under pressure.”

Jones, Hanton and Connaughton, 2002

In 2007, as part of their continuing work, Jones, Hanton and Connaughton declared there are four dimensions or categories for mental toughness attributes based on their research and testing. The four are made up of:

• one general dimension – attitude or mind set (specifically focus and self-belief)
• three time-specific dimensions – training, competition and post-competition
Mental Toughness Framework, as produced by Jones, Hanton and Connaughton (2007)

The time specific dimensions include the consideration of how pressure, failure and drive to continue are handled by the individual. It is easy to connect these ideas with elite sports people who are trained to focus on particular elements, dependant on what training regime they are following to achieve their goal.

In Australia

Daniel Gucciadi, Sandy Gordon and James Dimmock focus their work on the sports field, specifically this time on Australian Football.

“Mental Toughness … is a collection of values, attitudes and behaviours that enable you to preserve and overcome any obstacle, adversity, or pressure experienced, but also to maintain concentration and motivation when things are going well to consistently achieve your goals.”

Gucciadi, Gordon and Dimmock, 2008

Key to their work is the suggestion that mental toughness can have both reactive and proactive qualities. This means that athletes can use mental toughness to endure and perform as well under pressure, as well as, using mental toughness when the game is going well.
In the United Kingdom

Peter Clough and colleagues have worked to propose a mental toughness model that is more a personality trait. In this model we see the origins and connections between resilience and mental toughness.

We can define resilience as an ability to successfully adapt in the face of disadvantages, much of the research focus sits in the world of health and social psychology and the likes of Dr Emmy Werner’s work, for example, focused specifically on resilience in children. The common misconception is that those who are resilient are free from negative emotions or thoughts, this isn’t the case. More so these individuals develop proper coping techniques, this is usually relative to interaction with the environment they are in and the process they follow. Understanding resilience and its related factors has led to significant interest in this area.

Dr Suzanne C. Kobasa introduced the pattern of personality characteristics that make up psychological hardiness in the 1970’s. Kobasa’s work is considered an important factor linking to resilience, and her subsequent work with Salvatore Maddi at the University of Chicago characterises hardiness as a combination of three attitudes – commitment, control and challenge.

Richard Dienstbier from the University of Nebraska has worked on another factor linked to mental toughness, physiological toughening and how this is connected to mood, emotions, wellbeing and motivation. Most recently he has defined a toughness model related to being resistance to stress and ageing (Dienstbier, 2015).

Dienstbier combines psychological research and neuroscience to suggest a range of toughening activities that sustains both our brains and bodies.
Mental toughness – introducing the ‘Four C’s’

Professor Peter Clough started his career in sports psychology as a Chartered Occupational and Sports and Exercise Psychologist. Having done much of his research in mental toughness at the University of Hull he is now Chair of Psychology at the Manchester Metropolitan University.

“The U.K. is recognised as the leader in mental toughness research and the work carried out at Hull leads the U.K. research activity. In particular, the research suggests mental toughness is related to performance enhancements, differing coping strategies and techniques, and psychological health and well-being.”

University of Hull, 2016

Clough has defined mental toughness in more detail, based in the work on resilience and hardiness, it adds in a fourth dimension, to create the four C’s of Clough’s model – Commitment, Control, Challenge and Confidence.

The 4 C’s Mental Toughness Model, Copyright AQR International
Understanding the Four C’s

So how does Clough’s model enable us to understand our mental toughness and how it impacts our behaviour? We all experience setbacks and changes in our lives at some time. Mental toughness teaches us that these setbacks are only temporary, local and changeable. Mentally tough people are able to get back up and try again.

Clough determines mental toughness as:

“A personality trait which determines in large part how people deal with challenge, stressors and pressure … irrespective of prevailing circumstances.”

Professor Peter Clough, 2012

In thinking about these four elements there are behaviours and beliefs that we might typically see displayed, dependant on whether we are high or low in relation to the particular relevant ‘C’.
### Great leadership through learning

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<th>Element</th>
<th>High level behaviours/beliefs</th>
<th>Low level behaviours/beliefs</th>
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<td>Commitment</td>
<td>Sometimes described as ‘stickability’. This is the ability of an individual to carry out tasks successfully, or deliver a goal, despite any difficulties or obstacles that may arise while working towards achieving their goal.</td>
<td>• Will avoid setting goals and targets • More likely to need to be free from delivery constraints • Can distract attention from the goal – ‘I would have done it but I did this other thing/ was asked to do something else etc’</td>
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<td>Control</td>
<td>This refers to your ‘can-do’, this is how much control individuals feel they have of their life and their emotions when doing it. There are two subscales for control:</td>
<td>• Can be ‘cup half empty’ • Can be fatalists and appear or feel that things happen to them • Focus may be what can’t be done, not what can</td>
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<td>Life Control</td>
<td>• Can be ‘cup half-full’, to them everything is possible • Able to handle lots of things at the same time, managing multiple tasks • Believe that they make a difference</td>
<td>• Don’t deal well with criticism or negative feedback • Easily reveal their emotional states to others – especially when provoked or annoyed</td>
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<td>Emotional Control</td>
<td>• Can maintain poised – sometimes masking anxiety • Can be good at managing their emotional response to situations</td>
<td>• Can be ‘cup half empty’ • Can be fatalists and appear or feel that things happen to them • Focus may be what can’t be done, not what can</td>
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**RESILIENCE** is often defined as a function of Control and Commitment.
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<td><strong>Challenge</strong></td>
<td>- Will actively seek out challenge and like problem solving. Will readily volunteer&lt;br&gt;- Can become easily bored and seek out change. May also provoke change</td>
<td>- Can perceive change and challenge as threats and/or problems&lt;br&gt;- May avoid effort&lt;br&gt;- Will try to minimise their exposure to change and the associated problems, preferring to operate in a more stable environment</td>
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<td><strong>Confidence</strong></td>
<td>- Don’t need others to tell them they can do it or to encourage them&lt;br&gt;- Have little or no need for external validation</td>
<td>- Can be reluctant to express a view in a discussion or debate&lt;br&gt;- Can be unsure whether they have grasped a subject or not more likely to feel unsettled and undermined by setbacks&lt;br&gt;- Can back down quickly when challenged&lt;br&gt;- Can allow others to dominate debates – even when they are more knowledgeable and more expert</td>
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|  | **Confidence in Abilities** | **Interpersonal Confidence** |
|  | - More assertive, less likely to be intimidated in social settings and more likely to push themselves forward in groups<br>- Can be better able to cope with difficult or challenging people | - More assertive, less likely to be intimidated in social settings and more likely to push themselves forward in groups<br>- Can be better able to cope with difficult or challenging people |

These four elements can determine how we feel, act and behave. The Four C’s can be tested against, using a psychometric assessment that produces an overall measure of an individual’s mental toughness.
We will all have an awareness of our own strengths and weaknesses in these areas and having an increased awareness of our 'blind spots' helps us with our own development. This individual knowledge can be used as the basis for our development whether that is related to our performance aspirations or the management of our own wellbeing. This is however dependant on choice, whether we choose to increase our awareness and seek out our development.

“Our potential is one thing, what we do with it is quite another.”

*Professor Angela Duckworth, 2016*
Why it is valuable to you and what does it mean for public service leaders?

Professor Sharon Turnbull and Rob Noble (2014) talk in some detail about leadership and what’s required in their work on 21st century organisations to deliver and build resilient organisations. Authenticity, responsibility and adaptability all feature in this research on key leadership qualities. How we behave with authenticity, responsibility and adaptability takes some knowledge and self-awareness. In an on-going commentary by The Guardians Public Leaders Network (2012) good interpersonal skills, the ability to facilitate and empathise were all mentioned as skills and behaviours that successful leaders of the future would be expected to bring to their roles.

We know the first step in any development journey is to raise awareness, taking the opportunity to understand your own mental toughness can be a valuable experience. Understanding how your mental toughness underpins what you do is important and useful, assisting you when work and life becomes challenging.

It is also valuable to understand where our mental toughness might get in our way. A strength that we rely on to be our best or keep us going, may at excess, undermine our credibility or negatively affect our relationships.

Perhaps most importantly, understanding and assessing our mental toughness can help us think about the balance of our behaviour. It is a fallacy that everyone should be mentally tough at the extreme, or that mentally tough individuals are purely uncaring and individualistic.

At its best, understanding and then developing your mental toughness can provide you with a psychological ladder i.e. giving you something to stand on, helping you to be the best of your whole-self when you need to be.
Over to you…

Ultimately, this publication is a starting point for you in understanding ideas on mental toughness and resilience. It may help you understand better what areas of mental toughness support your wellbeing. It may also determine where you might need to stretch your development on your leadership journey to impact your performance. It is a basis for a better understanding of you which relies in no small part on effort.

“Be mindful of the link between present action and desired future outcome. Ask yourself; if I repeat today’s actions 365 times, will I be where I want to in a year.”

Roz Savage MBE, 2016
References


Clough P and Strycharczyk D, (2015), Developing Mental Toughness: Coaching Strategies to Improve Performance, Resilience and Wellbeing, Kogan Page


Written by Zoë Sweet, Director of Organisational Development, Academi Wales.

Zoë is currently researching a PhD on the Social Construction of Mental Toughness in Public Service Leadership and has contributed to papers and published book chapters.

Mae’r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg. This document is also available in Welsh.