Learning How to Not Be a Snowflake

Resilience, a crucial emotional attribute for a happy and successful life, is in decline across college campuses and workplaces.

The head of counseling at one major university recently observed "a decrease in the ability of many young people to manage the everyday bumps in the road of life." In a memo, which was shared by *Psychology Today*, he wrote: "The lack of resilience is…thwarting the emotional and personal development of students."

These "less resilient" students are shaping and lowering "academic standards" because faculty have become afraid to "challenge students too much." Among the themes the head of counseling observed was this:

> *"Students are afraid to fail; they do not take risks; they need to be certain about things. For many of them, failure is seen as catastrophic and unacceptable. External measures of success are more important than learning and autonomous development…. Students are very uncomfortable in not being right. They want to re-do papers to undo their earlier mistakes."*

You don't have to go to a college campus to encounter individuals who fear making mistakes. You likely know someone who is unwilling to learn from errors. At one time or another, we've all avoided a personal growth opportunity, not wanting to take the risk.

A 2017 global report also found that with a decline of employee resilience in the workplace, "the ensuing absenteeism and presenteeism is costing the economy billions."

Presenteeism refers to employees showing up but disengaging from as much work as possible. Disengaged employees have a corrosive influence on organizational cultures; in extreme cases, the disengaged actively sabotage work.

Gallup's recent global survey found an astonishing 85 percent of employees suffer from engagement issues: "Eighteen percent are actively disengaged in their work and workplace, while 67% are 'not engaged.'"

Lack of engagement costs "$7 trillion in lost productivity," not to mention the human misery that accompanies an unfulfilling work life. A survey of over 1 million employees found 75 percent "experienced moderate to high stress levels."

Disengaged students and disengaged employees have culprits to blame for their lack of resilience: poor professors, bad managers, and the "system." Poor managers and poor professors are too common, but some people demonstrate resilience despite adverse circumstances. Those who don't blame can access a resilient mindset.

Disengaged employees might be outraged to be compared to "snowflake" college students, but both suffer from the same mindset. And what about faculty and administrators who acquiesce to student demands, are they not snowflakes too?

An administrative assistant working for a large federal agency spent years on the job in charge of time cards. When the time cards were replaced by computerized records, she refused to learn any new skills. Her managers didn't push the issue, enabling her lack of resiliency. Years later, a new manager arrived. The employee was offered multiple pathways to learn new skills. All offers were refused. Finally, the manager, concerned about the well-being of the employee said, "Tell me what assignment you want, and within reason, I will do everything to make that possible." The employee responded, "I don't want to learn anything." The new manager began the

dismissal process, and the employee retired from the agency.

The more we find our mind burdened by thoughts of the past, the less able we are to take responsible actions in the present.

Blaming chokes off resilience. We lose access to the only source of meaningful change—actions powered by our own insights.

In an article for *The New Yorker*, Maria Konnikova reports on "How People Learn to Become Resilient." When we don't blame, we have what psychologists call an internal locus of control. Konnikova writes, "Not only is a more internal locus tied to perceiving less stress and performing better but changing your locus from external to internal leads to positive changes in both psychological well-being and objective work performance."

Here is the good news: Resilience can be learned. Increasing our personal resilience begins with a simple idea: Our resilience depends not only on what happens to us but how we interpret what happens to us.

Looking through the research lens of Columbia University psychology professor George Bonanno, Konnikova writes, "Perception is a key to resilience: Do you conceptualize an event as traumatic, or as an opportunity to learn and grow?"

Bonanno points out, "We can create or exaggerate stressors very easily in our own minds. That's the danger of the human condition." Konnikova explains the power of our own choices in increasing our resilience:

> *"Human beings are capable of worry and rumination: we can take a minor thing, blow it up in our heads, run through it over and over, and drive ourselves crazy until we feel like that minor thing is the biggest thing that ever happened. In a sense, it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. Frame adversity as a challenge, and you become more flexible and able to deal*

> *with it, move on, learn from it, and grow. Focus on it, frame it as a threat, and a potentially traumatic event becomes an enduring problem; you become more inflexible, and more likely to be negatively affected."*

When we justify and even enable the poor behavior of students or disengaged employees, we are helping to set them up for a miserable life. Snowflakes are focused on seeking temporary and illusory good feelings. Their mental bandwidth is continually hijacked by the question of who or what is to blame for how they feel. If they believe the "world" is to blame for their misery, they will never set out on the journey to learn the cognitive skills that can help lead a more resilient life. A resilient life can be a happier and more successful life.