

The psychology of resilience

French psychiatrist, Holocaust survivor and author **BORIS CYRULNIK** examines how periods of agony can lead to new strength. Brunswick's **OLIVIER JAY** reports

WHEN BORIS CYRULNIK WAS A CHILD in German-occupied France during World War II, Nazis murdered his parents. A foster family took him in to protect him. In 1943, he was captured along with others during a Nazi-led operation in Bordeaux. He escaped by hiding in a synagogue and later eluded Nazi searches by disguising himself as a farm boy, under an assumed name – where he stayed until the end of the war.

That survival story motivated what has become a star career in psychiatry. Cyrulnik is now 79, a French doctor, ethologist, neurologist and psychiatrist best known for developing and popularizing the concept of psychological resilience for a wide audience.

He published several books, including the popular titles *Talking of Love: How to Overcome Trauma and Remake Your Life Story*, and *Resilience: How Your Inner Strength Can Set You Free From the Past*, both published by Penguin.

In 2002, as member of a public commission for national reforms under then-President Nicolas Sarkozy, he worked with Emmanuel Macron, who was elected President himself this year. “I was fascinated by him,” Cyrulnik says of Macron. “He wants to triumph at anything. We saw him as a future leader.”

But it is his work on resilience – the quality of being able to recover successfully from injury or disaster – that is perhaps Cyrulnik’s greatest insight. Like people, companies can endure a crisis and emerge stronger, he says – but not unscathed. This kind of growth requires sustained commitment: a willingness to change and maintain solidarity with your team members.

How do people find the strength of resilience?

Resilience can be defined in an astonishingly simple way. It’s starting on a new development after a shock, or what’s known as a mental agony.

That goes for any living organism. The inner strength you find comes from around you. It seeps in from your surroundings. That’s the epigenetic theory in biology – our traits can be shaped to a degree by our environment.

And it’s true for psychology: a living body grows by becoming more complex through a process of imprinting. It begins very early, from what forms you. DNA is made up of only four bases but they can express themselves in thousands of different ways according to their surroundings. It’s sort of a rudimentary alphabet which would let you write thousands of different novels with only four letters.

Does this psychology apply to companies?

A company is a type of living entity. It never stops interacting between what’s in itself and what’s around it. It’s constantly in development. That’s why we can talk about resilience in relation to companies. Those constant interactions carry on throughout a company’s life.

When a company suffers a mishap – which happens a lot – it has to be able to recover, to have a new development, just like any living organism. If there is a serious issue – if a company has been

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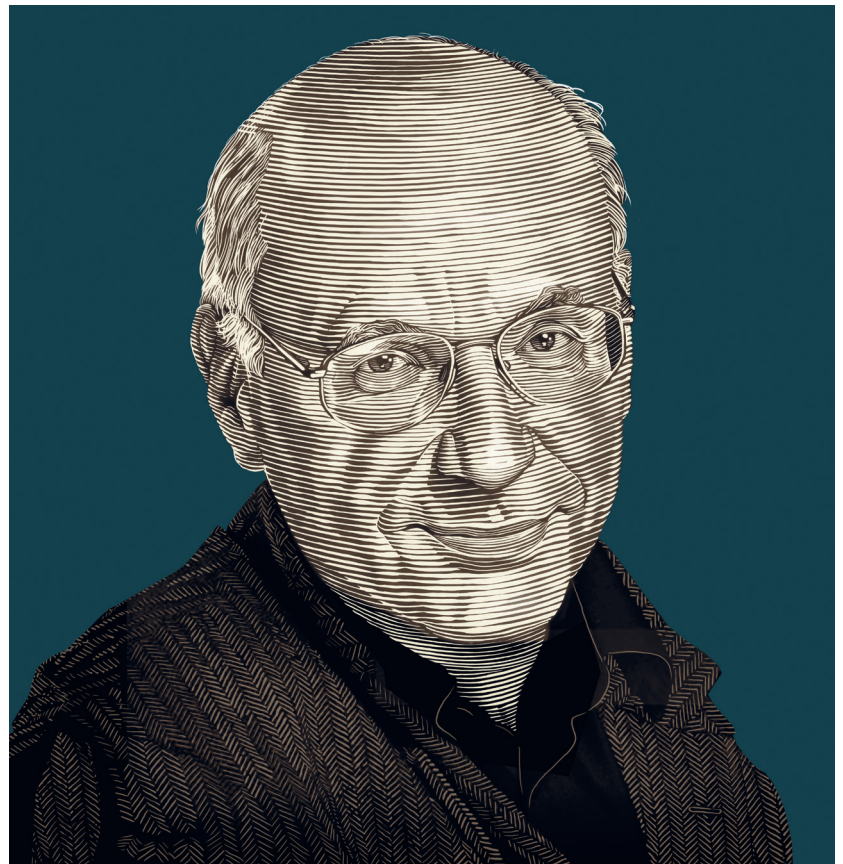


ILLUSTRATION: ROLAND SÁRKÁNY

ruined by a mistake, by a bankruptcy or by any business issue – this development must be truly new, not something the company has done before; that’s the definition of resilience.

How can a company clear a path to resilience?

A company has to implement factors that allow it to start on a new development. Firstly, biological factors: companies that have numerous, diversified roots before a traumatic event can start on a new development more easily. They are its protection for when a serious mishap happens.

In the event of a serious tragedy, a company can invest in other roots and start on a positive new development. Companies that aren’t resilient are the ones that only had one root originally. When a traumatic event cuts off that root, the company is lost. Indeed, you also need support, whether financial, humanitarian or collective.

Are there things companies can do to move past a crisis, to create stronger potential for a new development?

No living entity goes through life without being tested or having a mishap. But in the case of tragedy, the meaning we give to things transforms the way in which we feel them. If we don’t understand what has happened, we get confused. And so we don’t develop any resilient processes, which is an interaction between what we are and what’s around us.

Employees need the tools to make sense of what has happened. Otherwise they get confused and cannot start on a new development. They need to be supported by the group’s solidarity – solidarity between employers and employees, between employees themselves – the feeling of being part of a team. If we don’t feel like we are part of a team, it reduces resilience. Solidarity is a keyword.

Companies also need to work on their story – constantly – and strengthen the things that can protect them from a crisis. That way when something serious happens, they can start on a new development.

Have companies been paying enough attention to solidarity over the last few years?

That depends on the company. Some companies pay very little attention to it and then develop little capacity for resilience after a serious issue. In contrast, others have put a lot of emphasis on solidarity and meaning.

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A renowned neuropsychiatrist and psychoanalyst, Boris Cyrulnik is Director of Teaching at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the Université du Sud, Toulon-Var, France. He is a Holocaust survivor and the author of many books, including the best-selling *Resilience: How Your Inner Strength Can Set You Free From the Past*.

Companies who have the least solidarity are the routine ones, often public services. You can see it through signs of uneasiness: burnout, feeling exhausted and so on.

Dynamic companies experience fewer cases of depression, while routine ones have a lot more. So, in general, the real concern isn’t being overworked, but rather how useful the employees think they are.

In the medical world and in hospitals, the highest rates of depression aren’t found in the hardest jobs, but in the most everyday, routine ones: in services for frail dependents, for example, where there isn’t as much excitement or as much demand for creativity.

Friedrich Nietzsche is credited with the popular saying: “That which does not kill us, makes us stronger.” Does the severity of an issue relate to the opportunity for a company?

Nietzsche was wrong: when we have been hurt, it leaves marks. We stay sensitive to what has happened for the rest of our lives.

Sometimes, after a serious illness, some people will go too far. They will want to “go for broke” with an almost hopeless idea. But I have noticed that injured people develop a greater sense of solidarity with others. Studies show that we are likely to become more compassionate, more altruistic after an injury.

Between the injuries that happen in personal and professional life, there is really no difference: a worker is a person. I have the same reasoning, the same approach for both: what are the habits we acquire to protect ourselves before a serious mishap? If an executive employee was secure during their childhood, they can cope better. And they will be even more resilient if, after a serious mishap, they try to understand what happened.

We can all see brilliant professional trajectories, people who overinvest in their companies; sometimes they are only happy when they are working as a way of coping with neurotic tendencies. But when those people break down, they go to pieces completely.

Overall, it’s better to develop a sense of solidarity within the company and to help people to find pleasure in their work.

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