

To survive in a volatile world businesses must build in resilience

By Wayne Visser

In a changing world it is not the fittest who will survive; it is the most adaptable.

If you have landed on this page wearing your superhero outfit – and I admit, I may be partly to blame – I'm going to have to ask you to remove your mask, cape and tights now. Don't get me wrong, when the world needs saving and I'm done paying off my mortgage and carrying out the trash, I'll be the first one to dial-a-superhero. But in the meantime ...

You see, the world has this nasty habit of changing without our permission; in fact, without us having so much as poked it in the eye. And so we – as individuals, organisations or whole nations – often find that we are no longer the agents of change, but rather its victims. Change happens! And we are left somewhere between mildly irritated and battling for our very survival.

According to [Business Week](#), the average life expectancy of a Fortune 500 company is between 40 and 50 years. One-third of the Fortune 500 companies in existence in 1970 had vanished by 1983 – acquired, merged, or broken to pieces. Looking across the full spectrum of companies, large and small, the average life of companies may be as low as 12.5 years.

Can we really afford to talk about long-term sustainability, when short-term survival is so hard to achieve? The sobering fact is that we face a future in which saving the world may have to wait, while we save ourselves first. Chances are, we will even have to give up the smooth and swanky practice of sustainability, while we get down and dirty in the trenches of rough, rude resilience.

The bad news is that our silky green spandex outfits are probably not going to survive the trip. The good news is that resilience can be learned and planned for in advance. In a world of increasingly volatile sustainability challenges, there are five strategies for resilience that can dramatically increase our chances of survival when the waves of disruptive change come crashing in. They are to: defend, diversify, decentralise, dematerialise and define.

A defensive strategy can take on many forms, the most obvious of which is to insure against catastrophe, whatever form that may take. This only works if the crash is not systemic, but it is a good start. Other tactics include having a crack-squad of trouble-shooters trained to respond in times of crisis, and building up reserves for the proverbial rainy day, which may turn out to be a tsunami.

A diversification strategy applies to people, products and markets. For example, if you bet your corporate life on being a fossil fuel company, rather than an energy company, or if you are locked into a local market without any global investments, you are highly vulnerable. Likewise, if you hire an army of clones, your lack of diversity will leave you brittle in the face of change.

A decentralisation strategy is based on the same rationale that inspired the Internet. By decentralising information and building in redundancy on local servers, the internet is far less vulnerable to being taken out in a single hit. In the same way, by decentralising operations, infrastructure and solutions – as with decentralised energy for example – we can be better prepared to cope with disruption.

A dematerialisation strategy means moving to an industrial model that reduces dependency on resources. The only viable way to do this in the long term is to shift to renewable energy and to optimise the circular economy. Hence, anything we can do to decouple economic growth from environmental impacts is a step in the direction of greater resilience.

A defining strategy is about giving people a purpose to believe in. Victor Frankl, survivor of four Nazi concentration camps and psychiatric author of *Man's Search for Meaning*, gives compelling evidence that our resilience under extreme circumstances often comes down to having an existential belief about something worth living for. Can sustainability offer us this compelling cause?

By pursuing these five resilience strategies, individuals, organisations and even countries will be much better placed to endure the creative destruction to come. However, preparing for change is not the same thing as surviving it. Resilience is not a strategy, but an ability – one which is shaped and tempered in the fire of extreme experience.

At its heart, this ability to be resilient is about adapting when everything around us is changing – like an aspen tree. Aspen forests are able to survive frequent avalanches that literally flatten them. The trees survive and spring back up because they have an interconnected network of underground roots and their trunks and branches are highly pliable.

This brings us back full circle to the message of my first article on unlocking change, namely that the secret to transformational change in the world is connectivity – to which we can now add that dexterity is also absolutely critical. After all, Darwin never claimed that the fittest would survive, only the most adaptable.

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