Commentary: developing a deeper understanding of resilience in service contexts

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to comment on resilience research within the context of frontline employees in sales and services marketing.

Design/methodology/approach – This commentary is a reflection based on my research, extant academic and managerial literature and personal perspectives.

Findings – Research findings show resilience is associated with increased employee effort and reduced turnover intentions in customer-facing roles. In addition, resilience can change over time and is not just a trait the employee is born with (or not). Hence, managers can cultivate resilience in employees.

Practical implications – Resilience cannot be purchased. Instead, managers can inspire resilience in frontline employees by developing their feelings of self-efficacy on the job, a sense of belongingness to the organization and peers and a sense of purpose and relatedness to customers.

Social implications – Resilience is not merely perseverance or grit; it is overcoming adversity and bouncing back to become better in the process. Thus, resilience is an important construct to study, particularly in customer-facing roles.

Originality/value – This commentary offers a unique approach to understanding resilience, its outcomes and its antecedents in customer-facing roles.

Keywords Motivating resilience, Reducing turnover, Frontline employee adversity, Customer-facing sales roles, Service contexts

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

I was delighted to learn that an entire special issue of this journal is dedicated to studying resilience in organizational frontline contexts. A simple definition of resilience is an employee’s ability to overcome or bounce back from adversity. My interest in this phenomenon began as I was laying the foundation for my doctoral dissertation (e.g., Good, 2019), and I quickly discovered that resilience is understudied and not well understood, particularly in sales and service settings. This context matters significantly to organizations because the frontline lines are where value co-creation takes place and customer experiences occur. In their seminal article on the need for more research in services, Singh et al. (2017) emphasize that the organizational front lines include “the actions, communications, and processes that occur over the duration of the contact between the customer and organization” (p. 4). In short, the organizational front lines are where the rubber hits the road for many organizations. Undoubtedly, frontline employees are vital in the delivery of exceptional service for customer retention and loyalty (Al-Hawari et al., 2020). For example, restaurant waitstaff, airline stewards, hospitality employees, bank clerks, retail workers, B2B salespeople, nurses, grocery cashiers and other frontline personnel serve as the face of the organization for customers and profoundly impact customer experiences and therefore a company’s bottom line.

As sales and service employees are at the heart of customer experiences, added pressure naturally ensues in the tension associated with serving two masters – these employees must please not only their managers and the organization that employs them but also customers, who are touted as being “king” (e.g. Homburg et al., 2011) and demanding of service employees (e.g. Luu, 2021). Research emphasizes increasing adversity for frontline employees from abusive supervision (Al-Hawari et al., 2020), customer incivility and complaints (Yue et al., 2020), pressures to reach key performance indicators and sales goals (Dishop and Good, 2022) and lack of adequate staffing (Good et al., 2023b), among other sources of stress. The resulting effects include high burnout and increased turnover, which can lead to poor service performance, more customer complaints, lower customer satisfaction and lower overall sales performance. So, how can companies encourage their employees to overcome such adversity – i.e. demonstrate resilience – instead?

Hence, I became extremely interested in studying the antecedents and outcomes of resilience in this context. Specifically, what is resilience, why does it matter and how can managers motivate it in their customer-facing employees? The rest of this commentary is dedicated to sharing some insights discovered along the way.

Defining resilience in services contexts

Before moving forward, it is critically important to define resilience and distinguish it from other constructs in the literature. As my colleagues and I emphasize, a befuddled
nomological net can hinder research synthesis and stunt literature growth (Good et al., 2023a). So, what is resilience and how is it different from constructs such as persistence, perseverance or grit?

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2002) offers the following definitions of resilience: an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change; and the ability to become strong or successful again after something bad happens. Lussier and Hartmann (2017) describe it as a psychological capacity “to overcome or bounce back from adversity, conflict, failure, or other events that induce high levels of stress or pressure” (p. 161), whereas Bande et al. (2015) define resilience as the “ability to bounce back from hardship, recover, emerge stronger than before, and develop social, academic, and vocational skills despite having been subjected to severe physiological stress” (p. 142).

Constructs such as perseverance, persistence and grit though they may seem similar – truly fail to capture the full meaning of resilience. Perseverance is described as steadfastness and continued effort despite difficulties (Belschak et al., 2006). Likewise, frontline employee research has examined persistence, revealed as a combination of salesperson influence tactics (both nurture- and closure-related) to shape customer responses (Chaker et al., 2018). While perseverance and persistence are undoubtedly important, they fail to capture the full essence of resilience because they miss the notion of rebounding, bouncing back or emerging stronger than before, which is inherent in its definition. Accordingly, “perseverance can be an important part of being resilient but a person with good resilience knows when to try something different” (Good et al., 2021, p. 36). Perseverance is steadfastness or trying and trying again. Resilience is more strategic in not only trying again but doing so in a way that is more likely to be successful or learning from past mistakes. Accordingly, Agnihotri et al. (2014) note, “resilient employees are likely to develop new ways of doing things when facing difficulties, failures, and opportunities” (p. 58, emphasis mine). Finally, notice in the description of Bande et al. (2015) that the authors emphasize developing skills despite stress. Thus, resilience goes beyond simple perseverance or persistence.

Likewise, the concept of grit has been gaining popularity in popular press and scholarly journals (e.g. Duckworth et al., 2007; Crede et al., 2017; Dugan et al., 2019). In their seminal work on grit, Duckworth et al. (2007) define this construct as perseverance and passion for long-term goals: “a gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon,” with the advantage being stamina and maintaining interest over time (Duckworth et al., 2007). Thus, grit and resilience are inherently different. Grit is described as maintaining the same trajectory, whereas resilience may require altering plans to achieve desired results. For example, a salesperson with grit may keep knocking on the same doors day after day to achieve sales, even after they have experienced rejection. While resilient salespeople will likewise keep trying, they are more likely to learn from their mistakes and alter their strategy for success – perhaps trying a new neighborhood or varying their opening when initially meeting customers. Grit focuses on consistency of the same actions rather than trying again but perhaps with a new strategic focus. In addition, Dugan et al. (2019) both empirically and verbally showed the difference between grit and resilience, emphasizing, “While resilience emphasizes overcoming challenges and obstacles, it does not have the same goal focus as grit.”

A meta-analysis on grit notes that it is “[...] not just resilience in the face of failure but having deep commitments that you remain loyal to over many years” (Crede et al., 2017, emphasis added). On the other hand, by definition, resilience requires a negative event, adversity, failure or obstacles (Good et al., 2021). Notice that in each of the definitions above, resilience includes the notion of adversity – “misfortune,” “something bad happens,” “conflict,” “hardship,” and “physiological stress.” Friend et al. (2016) confirm that resilience enables individuals to bounce back quickly and effectively from adverse events, emphasis added. By definition, resilience is becoming successful again, bouncing back and emerging stronger than before.

Hence, I settled on the following definition for its simplicity: resilience is an employee’s ability to overcome or bounce back from adversity (Good et al., 2023b). So, why does resilience matter, particularly in organizational frontline contexts?

The important outcomes of resilience in service contexts

Media coverage of frontline worker trauma and rising pressures spiked in the early 2020s with headlines ranging from hailing service workers as “heroes” to lamenting record-breaking levels of turnover, which became known as “the Great Resignation” globally. Turnover led to increased hiring costs and gaps in service for many organizations, with “help wanted” signs plastered on store fronts and the request for greater patience from customers as organizations grappled with missing service employees. Turnover and the resulting demands on organizations captured the attention of managers worldwide (De Smet et al., 2021). For example, De Smet et al. (2021) emphasized that over 15 million service workers quit their jobs in early 2021, which “disrupted businesses everywhere.”

Hence, the first reason resilience matters is because it is associated with less turnover. Studies demonstrate that resilience has a negative relationship with both salesperson anxiety (Krush et al., 2013) and propensity to leave (Bande et al., 2015). Likewise, in their conceptual paper on psychological capital, Friend et al. (2016) emphasize, “Resilience makes the difference between those who recover from adversity and those devastated by adversity.” My coauthors and I also empirically demonstrate that resilience is associated with a reduction in frontline employee turnover intentions (e.g. Good et al., 2023b).

Furthermore, my research shows that resilience is not only associated with reduced turnover but also greater effort and overall employee performance (Good et al., 2021; Good et al., 2023b). According to Friend et al. (2016), individuals become more resilient to an adverse situation each time they effectively recuperate from a previous setback, initiating an upward spiraling effect. Resilient employees are more likely to be adaptive (e.g. Krush et al., 2013) and work harder to help customers when difficulties arise. Other research shows resilient employees receive higher performance ratings from their managers and are more likely to actively support the organization (Shin, Taylor and Seo, 2012). Given these
important outcomes of resilience, a natural next question is what leads to resilience in customer-facing roles? Can managers do more to encourage resilience in their employees?

Motivating resilience in service contexts

Early literature explicitly suggested resilience may be a trait or implied so based on statistical methods chosen (i.e. cross-sectional research designs). However, more recent studies advocate that resilience can change over time within employees and is more of a learned behavior or malleable force within individuals (Hartmann et al., 2020; Kalisch et al., 2019). This nature vs nurture argument has sparked much debate recently. Hence, my coauthors and I designed a longitudinal study to show that resilience is a complex concept that is driven both by internal factors and external influencers (Good et al., 2023b). By showing that resilience can indeed change over time (and is not merely a personality trait), our results demonstrate that studying how to best motivate employee resilience remains a critical endeavor.

Unfortunately, many managers believe that all employees are money motivated and thus assume that they can essentially buy resilience with increased financial incentives or “hero pay.” While these steps may have merit for other reasons, my coauthors and I predicted and empirically demonstrated that frontline workers do not demonstrate resilience simply for the pay (see Good et al., 2023b). We echo claims that employers have become too fixated on financially incentivizing employees who have other unmet needs. As de Smet et al. (2021) emphasize, “If your only response to attrition is to raise compensation, you’re unwittingly telling your people that your relationship with them is transactional and that their only reason to stay with you is a paycheck. Your very best people will always have a better cash offer somewhere else. You want to solve the problems of the whole person (not just their bank accounts).”

Hence, using self-determination theory (SDT) as a theoretical lens, I began researching how to cultivate resilience in employees whose primary job focus centers on customers. Much literature on motivation within the sales and service domain emphasizes extrinsic motivators – or carrots and sticks – such as contests, incentives and pay-for-performance (see the meta-analysis by Good et al., 2022a). However, what about those employees experiencing adversity? Boichuk et al. (2019) highlights that motivating sales “laggards” with contests and quota-bonus plans can be difficult. When salespeople have been experiencing failure, they may assume that all contest prizes will go to the “rainmakers” in the company, and thus the very programs designed to entice these employees to better performance can actually be demotivating (Good et al., 2021).

On the other hand, according to SDT, intrinsic motivation results when people feel that they have control over the activities they perform (autonomy), feel competent performing them (self-efficacy) and feel a sense of belonging as they perform them (relatedness) (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Good et al., 2022a). In an extensive literature on resilience, Connor and Davidson (2003) listed characteristics associated with resilient people that were discovered in various studies. Among others, these characteristics included a realistic sense of control or having choices (e.g. autonomy), self-efficacy (e.g. competence), a close secure attachment to others (e.g. relatedness) and personal or collective goals (e.g. purpose) (Connor and Davidson, 2003). Thus, some initial evidence exists that intrinsic motivation should matter more than extrinsic motivation for resilience.

My research also shows that rather than being motivated by a desire for monetary compensation, frontline employee resilience is driven by a sense of competence and relatedness to not only coworkers but also customers (Good et al., 2023b). Rather than projecting customers as another problem to deal with, results show that customers may be a resource in times of stress for frontline employees. In addition, autonomy – or freedom on the job – was surprisingly related negatively to resilience when customer orientation was low. This finding suggests that service employees may appreciate more direction from their managers during times of stress. Overall, findings from my research offer managers guidance on how to cultivate resilience to improve frontline employee effort and reduce turnover intentions in the face of adversity.

Future research opportunities

Future research may wish to expand on these findings to explore how much autonomy is too much or too little. Are there boundary conditions to these findings? Do certain industries or positions impact the relationship between autonomy, resilience and performance? There are likely to be differences in the resilience required by hospitality employees, nurses, bank clerks, salespeople and airline cabin crew, for example. Future research may tease apart these nuances in industries or even in locations. Are there cultural drivers of resilience in frontline employees, for example, that have yet to be explored? When thinking of resources for overcoming adversity, my research focuses on need satisfaction based on SDT. Additional resources may exist such as values, faith and meaningfulness (e.g. Gunnestad, 2006) – impacted by culture – that deserve further exploration. Moreover, while my research centers on antecedents and outcomes of resilience, a fruitful avenue for future research may be moderators or boundary conditions.

In addition, resilience by definition involves adapting to bounce back and emerge stronger than before when overcoming adversity. Future research should consider the dynamism required to overcome challenges. An interesting future study may wish to examine the process of adaptation and how it may work – either through self-determination or managerial intervention. As resilience is dynamic, more longitudinal research on the process by which it is strengthened and demonstrated would be useful.

Considering that changes to the sales- and service-scape have persisted beyond the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Good et al., 2022b; Swazan and Youn, 2023), examining resilience and how frontline employees continue to adapt would be beneficial. Additional research may wish to explore how to create a sense of relatedness or belongingness among employees who work remotely and/or provide services virtually to customers online. How important is relatedness to resilience in virtual environments, for example?

Frontline employees provide essential services that literally feed and care for a country’s population, and the service context requires separate study beyond what has been
established in organizational behavior or psychology literature. More research on resilience in service settings will benefit scholars and practitioners alike.

**Conclusion**

Following years of economic uncertainty and seemingly constant flux, many companies worldwide felt the pains of an ongoing labor shortage, particularly in customer-facing roles. Across a range of service contexts, employers struggled to overcome the ongoing labor shortage, particularly in customer-facing roles. Moreover, managers grappled with where to start and discovered that financial incentives were not having the expected return on investment.

My research suggests that resilience – an employee’s ability to overcome or bounce back from adversity – matters for reducing turnover, increasing effort and improving performance. In addition, SDT with its emphasis on employee need satisfaction can help managers navigate how to cultivate resilience in service employees. Specifically, self-efficacy or feelings of competence – that is, “I’m good at my job,” encourages resilience in overcoming obstacles. Moreover, encouraging a sense of relatedness or belonging within the company and with customers in particular will help encourage resilience when employees are experiencing adversity. Nonetheless, more research on resilience in customer-facing roles is needed to continue to understand this important phenomenon.

**References**


Further reading


About the author

Dr Valerie Good is an assistant professor of marketing at the Seidman College of Business, Grand Valley State University. She has published research in Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Harvard Business Review, International Journal of Research in Marketing and Journal of Service Research, among others. Her research focuses on marketing strategy in personal selling and sales management and organizational front lines. Valerie Good can be contacted at: goodv@gvsu.edu

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