The resilience of habit

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Introduction

I recently talked to a head of department at a Danish university. She told me that she and the rest of management at the University were required to attend a series of resilience courses arranged by HR. The head of department was a bit baffled as she didn't know if these courses were aimed at building the personal resilience of her or her employees. What she did know was that the university was experiencing cut backs and that academics were expected to spend more time in the classroom, to publish more and to increase their funding activities. As to why 'resilience' was considered the solution to these strategic and managerial challenges, however, she had no idea. She is not alone with this confusion.

Around the fall of 2015 'resilience' replaced 'mindfulness' as Danish HR's go to concept. The very notion of being a resilient employee – or a 'robust employee' as it is often called in Denmark – figured prominently within recruitment advertisements. Likewise, keynotes on resilience dominated the HR conference circuit. And the opinion pages started booming with discussions for and against such developments.

That resilience is big business isn't just a Danish story. International self-help books such as *The power of resilience* (Brooks and Goldstein, 2004) and *Resilience at work* (Maddi and Khosbaba, 2005) started populating the bestseller lists over a decade ago. One of the most cited pieces on resilient employees was published even earlier (Coutu, 2002). More recently, in the *Harvard Business Review,* Rosabeth Moss Kanter (2013) has proclaimed that, in a world where surprises are the new normal, resilience is the new skill which managers and employees must have. Even Cary L. Cooper – the grand old man of organizational stress-

management – has recently declared that 'HRM practices can play a crucial role in cultivating an organizational environment to facilitate resilience-building for individuals' (Cooper et al., 2014: 2467). When it comes to HR fashion, then, it seems that resilience is the new black. So, what is resilience?

The scientific study of resilience leads us into child psychology, where it describes the process of 'positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity' (Luthar et al., 2002) and to ecology, where it describes how eco-systems persevere through harsh circumstances (Folke et al., 2002). As Evans and Reid (2014) have pointed out, a common feature in this scientific literature is that they share a common language about instability and insecurity as environmental features. Life is harsh, hostile and something we have to learn how to survive in. Indeed, it is perhaps this very notion of environmental instability as 'the new normal' (Evans and Reid, 2014: 3) that has made the concept of resilience so attuned to the world of business. If the world of work is best understood as 'complex and dynamic systems which offer no prospect of control' (*Ibid.*: 3), then resilience can be said to describe the desirable characteristic of employees. Indeed, as Cooper et al. suggest, being resilient is perhaps *the* important human capital as it is 'the skill and the capacity to be robust under conditions of enormous stress and change' (2014: 2466). Resilient employees are those rare individuals who can cope with change and failure, those rare individuals who can even turn the strains of adversity into an opportunity for personal development and productivity enhancement.

A resilient employee, then, is also a compliant and complicit employee (Evans and Reid, 2014). Not only can they cope with whatever organisational life throws at them (Maddi and Koshaba, 2005). They can do so without complaining about what might seem problematic, poor and unfair about the organisational environment (Evans and Reid, 2014). The resilient employee gives all they have to the organisation, without expecting anything in return. These stress-fit employees might fail time and again, but quickly bounces back. They seem to be the super-human individuals that embody the old proverb that what doesn't kill you make you stronger. To be resilient, then, is both essential and rare, within an increasingly hostile working atmosphere.

From resilience to habits

The problem with stress-management fads, such as resilience now, just like mindfulness before it, is that they are disconnected from the daily life of the individuals whom they address and the deep-seated habits which they have built up over the course of a life time. By thinking about the role habits plays in how we react to change, we quickly realise that resilience is not a character trait of

individuals but a complex dynamic process. So, if HR gurus preaching resilience want any of their suggestions to be taken seriously, I'll suggest, they should begin amidst the mundane habits of the everyday world.

Towards this end, I suggest three features of habits which practitioners should take their bearings from. A common trait in all of these features is that they stress the dynamic nature of habit. Often our common sense understanding of habit might reduce habit to the opposite of something dynamic, namely something stable. Nonetheless, recently, in diverse field such as philosophy (Grosz, 2013; Carlisle, 2014), sociology (Bennett et al., 2013), neurology (Barandiaran and Di Paolo, 2014), and organizational routine literature (Styhre, 2017) there has been an renewed interest in the dynamic nature of habit. Especially how habit in such a view is not so much established by individuals, as individuals themselves are constituted through habits as these emerge as particular responses to conditions in the environment of the individual (*Ibid.*).With this habit renaissance in mind I suggest that any HR focus on employee resilience should embrace three important lessons about habits: firstly, habits are dispositions, not automatic reactions; secondly, habits demonstrate our plasticity, through them resistance to change and receptivity to change are combined; finally, habits are not individualistic but socially informed.

Habits are dispositions

Habits involve repetition: there is no doubt about it. Repetition is one of the defining features of a habit. When we talk about habits we often talk about the mere repetition of the same when faced with a familiar situation: same thoughts-patterns, same kind of coffee we order, same breakfast we eat, same kind of movies we see on Netflix etc. Viewed as such, habits can be seen as that which makes the world familiar to us. To habituate something is to make it seem as home. It is to install a sense of sameness and belonging.

But the repetition of habit is not just the return of the same. It is also what makes a difference through its repetition. Is not taking on a habit in itself a process that changes us? This is what the French Philosopher Felix Ravaisson (2008) suggested in his thesis on habit. As he argued, the repetition that habit brings with it, intervene into our very potential to act, feel and think (*Ibid.*). Through constant repetition, Ravaisson declared that habits alter the disposition 'in which a change occurs' (*Ibid.*: 25). In such a view habits, as Carlisle writes, 'develop when a repeated change, such as a movement or a sensation, *makes a difference* to a being's constitution' (2014: 12, emphasis in original). Put otherwise, a habit might be the mere quantitative repetition of almost identical actions, but this repetition makes a qualitative difference to the subject, it changes that subject's very composition.

Habits, then, are on one level automatic reactions to something familiar. But they are also dispositions that help us navigate the world. Understood in this later sense, habits are in many ways a series of responses which anticipate the stimulus as well as our conscious and willed choices. Once established, the function of a habit as a disposition is to free us of the burden of reflective decisions by anticipating how to act and react. Habits build a kind of resistance within us so that we need not improvise, or use will-power and cognitive energy to figure out which course of action to take. In this way, habits help form our individual character by anticipating 'the commandments of the will' (Ravaisson, 2008: 51).

This dispositional aspect of habits bears important consequences for discussions of resilience. If we are to build resilience among employees, we need to consider how habits are part of the individual character of each employee. The political philosopher and management theorist Mary Parker Follett already pointed this out almost a century ago. Contemporary HR gurus would do well to remember her lesson.

In *Dynamic Administration,* Follett discusses how it is not enough to integrate the worker and the organization into a successful relationship. If you do not 'change the habit patterns of people, you have not really changed your people' (Follett, 2013: 51), she noted. To change organisational behaviour, then, is to change individual habits. This requires the additional insight that 'none of us can change our mental habits in a minute, however much we may wish to' and that 'we shall realize also that we must be patient until the habits are acquired' (*Ibid.*: 20-21). For Follett, habits are the platform from which further actions springs, the material through which new thoughts take hold. The habits we have developed over time create a certain aptitude for change that is the basis for further change. So, if we are to believe Follett, HR change agents with a resilience building agenda must take great effort to respect and understand how each employee has been habituated differently, both within and beyond the organisation. In her often cited piece on resilience, Diana Coutu states that one of the features of resilient people is their 'uncanny ability to improvise' (Coutu, 2002: 46). What Follett and Ravaisson teach us about habit is that such an ability to improvise is deeply rooted in the habitual disposition we possess. To improvise we need habits to improvise through. Which brings us to the second feature of habit routinely passed over by contemporary HR faddishness.

Habits are plastic

Our habits are, as the American philosopher and psychologist William James once suggested, evidence of our plasticity as human beings. In 1890, he described the structure of the habit forming subject in the following way: 'weak enough to yield

to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once' (James, 1890: 105). The imagery is instructive. Plastic is receptive without being amorphous, it is robust though not inelastic, it moves but does not flow. So it is with our habits. Another way to picture our habits, as Carlisle proposes, is to understand that 'our capacity to acquire habits testifies to this plasticity insofar as it rests on the twin conditions of receptivity and resistance to change' (2013: 31).

Through our habits we resist the wind of change, while without our habits we would not be capable of change. Habits make us receptive to change: they let us filter both the many impressions from the outside and the many whims of the will from the inside. Follett's insight on the relationship between habits and change management seems buttressed by such imagery. This shouldn't surprise us because she was entirely familiar with the work of James (Follett, 1924). For Follett, the changing of behaviour within organizational settings had the character of a profoundly philosophical problem, at the same time as being an inherently practical concern. She approached both with an indication of the notion of plasticity when she wrote:

> When we say that "evolution is better than revolution," it is not because we are afraid of blood and battle, but because it is only by the slower process that you can get the habit systems changed. The question all leaders, all organizers, should ask is not, how can we bring about the acceptance of this idea, but how can we get that into the experience of the people which will mean the construction of new habits. This means a keen and inventive intelligence; good intentions, noble ideas are not enough. (*Ibid.*: 161)

Follett sees habit as providing the basis for change. It paves the way for new beginnings by creating a basis upon which to start, a site into which to intervene. Without the possibility of manifesting new habits, change will gain no material grip. Workers will not change their way of working simply because the organizational frame in which they once worked has changed. Rather, as Follett suggests, habit is the material through which change is to be realised.

Resilience, then, makes sense from the perspective of plasticity. HR initiatives aimed at building resilient employees should refocus their involvement away from efforts intended to break habits as such and towards an acknowledgment of the ubiquity of individual habits as both receptive to and resistance of change. And since habits are plastic, they are *caused* neither by employees nor managers. This brings us to the final feature of habit: their sociality.

Habits are social

Habit, as Dewey puts it, shows the individual 'using and incorporating the environment in which the later has its say as surely as the former' (1922: 15).

Habits are always ways of relating to a material and social environment. The Dewey scholar Shannon Sullivan reminds us that the apparent fact of a woman walking in high-heeled shoes is best understood as a habit constituted in a dynamic relationship to both the material and the social world. It isn't, in other words,

> an activity that is contained within a person's feet and legs. It is located, so to speak, between feet, legs, shoes, floors, and gendered expectations. (Sullivan, 2013: 258)

Social institutions, rituals and in this case certain gendered norms impact our habits and the dispositions they create. But, as Sullivan reminds us, habits are also plastic in the sense that they are not mere products of the social. Habit lets us resist and be receptive to our social environment in the process of constituting our own character. The way the woman wearing high heels moves along the pavement might help '(re)constitute the environment that then feeds back into expectations for her and other women's (and men's) footwear habits' (*Ibid*., 2013: 259). The point here is that the way our habits relate to the environment can create an individual path, the plasticity which we call our own, the self which we have come to know as 'I'. All of which makes it misleading to conceive of habits as the effect of will power. All of which also makes it erroneous to conceive of habits as the automatic response to environmental stimuli. In fact, like others before him, Dewey suggests that with habit, the response in fact precedes the stimulus (Menand, 2011).

To think the individual's character can be rehabilitated from 'worse to better' (Dewey, 1922: 20), by 'preaching good will' (*Ibid*.: 22) or by working on 'the hearts of men' (*Ibid*.: 22) is nothing short of a belief in 'magic' (*Ibid*.: 20), Dewey argues. To change oneself, to build resilience if you like, by changing habits, also requires 'modifying conditions, by an intelligent selecting and weighting of the objects which engage attention and which influence the fulfilment of desires' (*Ibid*.: 20). This does not mean that individual habits are mere environmental products. Plasticity ensures that any individual can respond differently to the same cue. Habitual plasticity is built up by all of us over time. As the philosopher Elisabeth Grosz reminds us, the wonder of habits is that they transform 'the constrained into degrees of freedom, degrees of openness' (Grosz, 2013: 234). Habit does this by introducing 'the needs of the organism to its environment and inserting its environment into the behaviour of the organism' (*Ibid*.: 234). My habits rely on their environment and my particular pattern of habits constitutes an individual way of relating to this environment.

What Dewey, Sullivan and Grosz teach contemporary HR about habit's relationship to resilience is that any behavioural change programme is also a matter of social engineering. The question of individual resilience, then, is extra-

individualistic: it also raises questions about how to delimit work-tasks, how to organize workplaces fairly and how to create an organizational context that is resilient in itself. This shifts from the assumption that resilient employees are discrete and docile resources awaiting managerial deployment to an ecological hermeneutics. Resilience, thought through, reveals itself as a relational concept. All fish out of water die quickly.

Resilience through habit

These three features of habit inform the contemporary employee resilience building project in various ways. 1) That the dispositions habits form reminds us that our habits constitute who we are and what we can do. 2) That habits are plastic reveals the nature of the material which every change programme has to work with. 3) That habit is a function of an organism and its social and material environment requires a relational appreciation of resilience.

Furthermore, taking our bearings from habit's dispositional, plastic and social nature requires us to form habits not out of nothing but rather out of nothing other than other habits. Resilience is of course not reducible to habits. Nor do this dynamic take on habit debunk what resilience is. But what the dynamic take on habit does do, is to point out that resilience building has to take habit into account to be effective. And what habits *are,* is in no way straightforward. Habits are themselves ontological slippery. They are not the bedrock of stability but a meshwork of dispositional, plastic and social features. What a dynamic view on habit *can* teach HR change agents is that any resilience building initiative – be it on an individual or organizational level – can only ever be slow, partial and have to work through the habits that already inform any given individual and the environmental conditions of the organization she is part of.

It was with this I mind that I told the head of department enrolled in a resilience course the following: No wonder you are confused. You are right to be. As long as the HR department, and the gurus they summon, ignore the mundane but important nature of habits – and especially the temporal and social character habits have – change agents prohibit themselves from the capacity to change anything. I suspect that the course the manager would participate in would offer a change-agenda which is intolerably porous and anything but resilient.

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