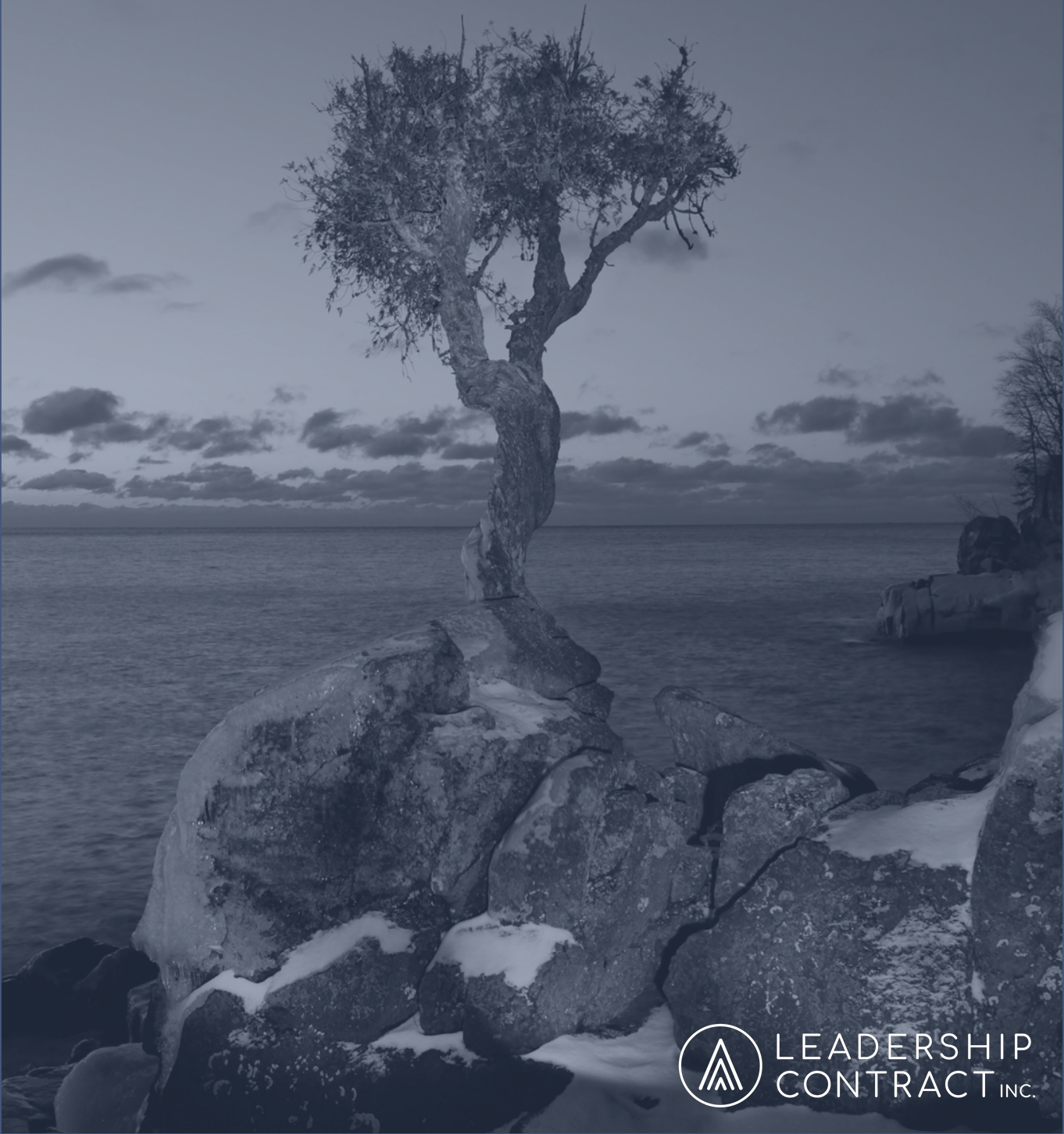


ADVERSITY

HOW TO STRENGTHEN RESILIENCE & RESOLVE AT THIS DEFINING MOMENT

AN EBOOK BY DR. VINCE MOLINARO



LEADERSHIP
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INTRODUCTION

In Cook County, Minnesota, USA, located on the shore of Lake Superior, you will find an unforgettable image. Growing out of the bare rock, on the shoreline of the lake, is a lone tree that is twisted and gnarled. In the book, *In the Company of Trees*, author Andrea Fereshteh describes that the tree has exposed roots along the rock, while other roots extend deep within the rock itself, somehow holding it in place. The local Ojibwa people refer to the tree as Manidoo-glizhikens or "Little Cedar Spirit Tree." It is also called the "The Witch Tree" by many.

The Ojibwa consider this special conifer tree as sacred, and access to it is limited only to tribal members. They value this tree so much that they leave offerings of tobacco as a way to ensure a safe passage for those traveling on Lake Superior. What is truly remarkable is that this little tree is estimated to be three to four hundred years old! During its long life, the tree has found a way to survive and grow in a harsh environment and the most unlikely of places. It is for this reason that the tree has become a meaningful symbol for resilience and resolve.



I have been thinking a lot about this tree and its profound meaning since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The reason is that in my recent discussions with senior executives and clients in my network, many have openly shared how they are feeling at this unprecedented time. They describe being stressed and overwhelmed. Many are under intense pressure. Others tell me they are struggling to deal with the uncertainty and

ambiguity we all face. A few have admitted they doubt whether they have what it will take to lead at this time.

All these reactions are entirely understandable. However, this is not the first set of conversations I have had with leaders about leading in the face of adversity. I have also written a lot about my belief that being a leader has never been easy – it is a tough role to do well, and it comes with much hard work. As leaders we need to get tough, have resilience and resolve, and demonstrate the sheer determination to lead our teams and our organizations. But now, leadership has become even more challenging than any one of us could ever have had imagined. I suspect this is true not only of this moment in time, but also as we try to figure out how to lead our companies and lives in a post-COVID world.

Just like the Witch Tree, leaders today will need a healthy dose of resilience to be successful. But I do not believe resilience alone will be enough. The adversity we face will also require us to demonstrate real resolve. We will explore these ideas further in this eBook.

ADVERSITY DEFINES A LEADER

If you look up a standard definition of resilience in any dictionary, you will find that it means the ability to bounce back and recover quickly from a demanding experience or setback. Resolve has two different meanings. The first is that resolve is about solving a problem. The second is about possessing a sense of determination, commitment, and purposefulness. To me, resolve is about the ability to dig deep, to have conviction and push forward in the face of adversity.

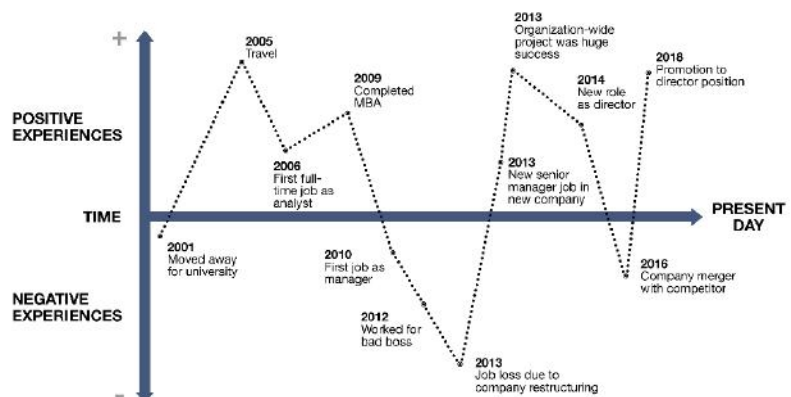
As you look throughout history, you will find many compelling examples of leaders who have demonstrated both resilience and resolve in the face of hardship and difficulty.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is one of those leaders. In 1963, King published a collection of his sermons titled *Strength to Love*. Included in this book was one of his most famous, most enduring quotes:

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in comfort and convenience, but where he stands in times of challenge and controversy."

In many ways, King's quote is addressing something I have always believed - namely, that adversity defines leaders. In all my leadership development work with leaders across the world, this is one of the consistent lessons to emerge.

In our Leadership Contract™ development programs, participants complete a powerful exercise called the leadership timeline. They reflect on their life and identify the experiences they believe had the most significant impact on their roles as leaders. They also determine if the experiences were positive or negative while they were living them. Everyone then maps out their experiences on a timeline, just like the image to the right.



We then discuss the insights that emerge from this reflection.

The most frequent and consistent theme from this exercise is that adversity creates the most impactful growth for leaders. Leaders consistently say that they have grown the most when they had to figure out how to deal with difficult and even painful events in their lives.

What these leaders also reveal is that the way to deal with difficult times is to dig deep at a personal level which helps them rise above the challenges they face. Many leaders confirm how they relied on both their inner resilience and resolve. This is the same message I have heard repeatedly from the leaders I have worked with. My sense is it is something most great leaders do in the face of adversity.

For example, the late Nelson Mandela is one of the most courageous leaders the world has ever known. He spent 27 years in South African prisons, the victim of a vindictive and racist regime that understood that he was a leader who could inspire a revolution. Upon his release, he filled the role of peacemaker and statesman, serving as president from 1994 to 1999. Mandela shared a quote about his experiences:

"Do not judge me by my success, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again."

Even the research supports Mandela's idea. In her book, *GRIT – The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, Dr. Angela Duckworth, a world-leading authority on the topic, shares a great perspective. She says that when a person is gritty, they are able to put one foot in front of the other and hold fast to a purposeful goal. Leaders will need to have grit at this moment and resilience and resolve are key to making this happen.

If you agree with me that adversity defines a leader, this means that the time we are facing right now can be a defining leadership moment for you. How you step up and lead yourself and your team at this critical time will define you as a leader. Have you considered this time as your defining moment?

CHALLENGING OUR ASSUMPTIONS

In my work with leaders, I have also come to learn that many of us cling to some assumptions about resilience that may not serve us well. For example, some leaders I have worked with see resilience in a literal way – it is about bouncing back in the face of difficult circumstances. When we think of resilience in this way, I believe we may end up seeing ourselves like the famous toy of years back – the inflatable plastic Bozo the Clown punching bag. You may have had one of these toys as a child. No matter how hard or how often you punch it, it just keeps bouncing back up.

Many leaders think this is what resilience is all about - one must keep taking the punches, and you bounce back up for more. However, this approach is not sustainable. Resilience is not just about taking punches, getting back up, and coming back for more. Do you see resilience in this way?

The other assumption I have observed is a belief that only a few individuals possess the rare and inherent gift to lead effectively through adversity. We see these people as having a unique superpower

that allows them to rise above their circumstances in ways that others cannot. We must challenge this assumption. I would suggest the ability to deal with adversity resides in every single person. Some of the most remarkable stories of triumph over adversity come from everyday people who somehow managed to deal remarkably with the challenges in their lives.

A case in point is J.K. Rowling, the best-selling author of the Harry Potter books. Her back story is about a regular person who had to contend with tremendous adversity in her life. She lived a relatively ordinary life until she suffered a series of seismic events. First, her mother died when Rowling was 25 years old. After her mother's death, Rowling moved to Portugal for a fresh start, where she worked as an English teacher. Rowling began dating a man and became pregnant and miscarried. Shortly after, she decided to marry this man, and they ended up having a daughter. The marriage, however, was a rocky one and ended after just 13 months.

Rowling and her daughter returned to the UK, where she settled in Scotland. Times were so tough for Rowling that she collected government benefits to make ends meet. It was a difficult period for her. She describes feeling depressed and having thoughts of suicide during that period of her life. However, she was able to seek out the help she needed to persevere.

If that wasn't remarkable enough, this difficult period was one where she also managed to develop the world of Harry Potter. Today, she holds the distinction of being named by *Forbes* magazine as the world's first author billionaire. In addition to penning some great novels, J.K. Rowling is also the author of one of my favourite quotes about adversity:

"You will never truly know yourself, or the strength of your relationships, until both have been tested by adversity."

If you agree with Rowling, then it means there is an opportunity for you to know yourself and the strength of your relationships in the face of the global pandemic.

STRENGTHEN YOUR RESILIENCE AND RESOLVE

Leaders with strong resilience and resolve can find strength during a challenging experience. They find a way to generate positive energy from adversity and convert it to forward momentum for themselves and their teams. In my book, *The Leadership Contract*, I describe several essential actions that can help you build up more significant reserves of resilience and resolve. First, you need to consider actions that I describe as foundational as you need to invest the time to implement them on a regular ongoing basis.

1. **Develop a clear leadership obligation.** The expectations and pressures of leaders increase dramatically during periods of adversity. Being clear about your leadership obligations helps to create a sense of focus, especially when you are facing an ever-changing and uncertain landscape. What would you say is your leadership obligation at this time?

2. **Draw on lessons from the past.** You most likely have had to deal with great difficulty as a leader in the past. Take time to recall those experiences. The leadership timeline activity I referenced above is a great way to do this. I suspect you will find many valuable lessons that you can apply to your leadership right now. What experiences and lessons come to mind as you think back over the adversity you have faced in your life and career?
3. **Take care of your health.** One of the critical actions is to maintain your physical, emotional, and mental health, especially in times of adversity. You must exercise, eat healthy foods, get plenty of sleep, and engage in relaxation or meditation practices. What are you presently doing to take care of your health?
4. **Lean on your community for support.** Sometimes, when the stress of adversity is high, some leaders may inadvertently isolate and cut themselves off from others. As you can imagine, this only serves to make the situation even more challenging. Find a way to connect with your community of leaders for support. Reach out and continue to build trusting relationships with colleagues and peers. There is nothing that undermines your effectiveness more than feeling isolated and disconnected from others or feeling that you need to do it all on your own. Can you identify two to three colleagues you can go to when you need support?

Another big part of being resilient and demonstrating resolve is managing your reactions to highly stressful moments that you may experience. You need to be aware of how you react in these moments because it affects the way you lead. You can imagine how a team will respond when the leader is always pessimistic, tends to catastrophize, or loses their composure in the face of stressful events. These responses can undermine your effectiveness as a leader.

Below are some actions you can use to help you in highly stressful moments:

1. **Develop a reset button.** I have found through experience that leaders who can elevate how they lead in stressful moments possess what I call a useful "reset button." Once you press it, it helps you refocus and take action to meet any challenge. One of the biggest challenges we face right now is not giving in to our fears and anxieties about the present or the immediate future. Worrying about things like this can send you spiralling downward. So, the next time something happens during your day that tests your resolve, observe how you respond. Do you let the event disrupt your entire day? Or do you take it for what it is, learn from it, and move on to the next thing?
2. **Calm yourself.** If you find yourself overwhelmed by the circumstances you face, take deep breaths. By calming yourself down, you can get in touch with your reactions to the situation. Resist the temptation to act immediately. Challenge yourself to pause throughout your day to catch your breath. The more you can embed this practice as a habit, the more it will become automatic.
3. **Reframe the situation.** With a calmer mind, you can look at your challenges with fresh eyes. What is the hidden opportunity that may exist for you or your team? How can you bring an optimistic perspective to bring hope to others?

4. **Learn from the moment.** Open yourself up to the lessons that come from a challenge. How might you approach it differently next time? Remember, every problem is an experience that you can use to help you confront some future scenarios.
5. **Inspire yourself.** Based on what you have learned, leverage the energy to propel yourself forward. Use the lessons as inspiration. See the moment as a challenge – a test to see how good you are as a leader.

THE RESILIENCE AND RESOLVE OF YOUR TEAM

Many of us may be feeling isolated and disconnected right now, especially if we are working from home. Also, some of us are trying to balance the pressure of trying to remain productive while also managing the demands of family life, especially homeschooling young children or supporting elderly parents. It can all be a lot and drive a considerable amount of stress.

In my book, *Accountable Leaders*, I describe what you as a leader, need to look for in each of your team members in challenging times. Here are some questions for you to consider:

1. Does your team remain optimistic in the face of adversity?
2. Do your team members effectively manage their emotions and reactions to stressful events?
3. Are they able to get back on track after a setback or disappointment?
4. Do they sustain their energy to maintain their performance?
5. Do they ask for help and draw on the support of others on the team?
6. As you review these questions, what insights do you gain? Where do you need to focus your attention on helping your team?

As you reflect on these questions, if there are some team members who you know are struggling then you must find a way to support them. Here are some strategies to consider that will help you manage your team's resilience and resolve.

1. **Reach out.** Make it a habit of regularly reaching out to your team members to see how they are doing, especially if you are leading a virtual team. Regular check-ins via a phone call or video chat is a simple but powerful action for you to adopt.
2. **Look out for uncharacteristic behavior.** Sometimes a team member may be overreacting or getting emotional. If it is uncharacteristic behavior, this could be a telltale sign that they are struggling. In my experience, I find that some team members may open up enough to tell you what is going on; others may not. You need to ensure that you communicate your support at these moments and help them seek any assistance they may need. This simple gesture is often appreciated and enables the team member to better cope.

3. **Provide recognition and show appreciation.** Recognition and appreciation can foster resilience and resolve, especially when you explain how you value your team and their contributions. Many people are feeling unsettled at this moment. Recognition is a great way to reinforce one's value and reaffirms the contribution they are making currently.
4. **Make resilience and resolve a regular team discussion.** Another action that you can consider is to ensure that your team can openly discuss how everyone is coping with everything happening at this time. Use your team meetings as the forum for these conversations. When you do, you ensure your team knows you are available to offer support to them when they need it. In turn, you will be valued and admired as a leader.

WILL THIS BE YOUR DEFINING LEADERSHIP MOMENT?

Being a leader has never been easy. The role comes with considerable hard work. As a result, we need to get tough, have resilience and resolve and demonstrate the sheer determination to lead our teams and our organizations when it matters most.

In his epic book, *The Hero's Journey*, author Joseph Campbell said:

"Opportunities to find deeper powers within ourselves comes when life seems most challenging."

This quote nicely summarizes the core idea of this eBook. Adversity defines a leader. To be successful, you must strengthen the resilience and resolve in yourself and your team.

I challenge you to use this time to find the more profound powers within yourself to lead your team and organization to a better future.

Make this time your defining leadership moment!

About Dr. Vince Molinaro



Vince Molinaro, PhD, is a strategic leadership adviser, speaker, and researcher on leadership accountability. As the founder and CEO of Leadership Contract Inc., Vince travels the world helping organizations build vibrant leadership cultures with truly accountable leaders.

He experienced a defining moment early in his career when he saw a respected colleague and mentor succumb to cancer that she believed was the byproduct of a stressful, toxic work environment. As a result, he has made it his life's work to boldly confront mediocre and unaccountable leadership.

Vince calls out the global leadership crisis today and thoughtfully lays out the strategy to address it head-on. His

unique combination of provocative storytelling, evidence-based principles and grounded practicality has leaders at all levels stepping up to fulfill their obligations to drive the success of their organizations.

He is a *New York Times* best-selling author and has published several books including *Accountable Leaders* (Wiley, 2020), *The Leadership Contract* (3rd ed., Wiley, 2018) and *The Leadership Contract Field Guide* (Wiley, 2018). He has also co-authored two other books: *Leadership Solutions* (Jossey-Bass, 2007) and *The Leadership Gap* (Wiley, 2005). His ideas serve as the foundation of leadership development programs in leading companies around the world.

Vince lives leadership accountability every day as an entrepreneur and global executive. His research and writing on leadership accountability are featured in some of the world's leading business publications. He also shares his insights in his Gut Check for Leaders blog and through the Accountable Leaders App available from the Apple and Google App Stores.

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