Enabling High-risk Clients: Exploring a Career Resiliency Model

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We are all born with innate resiliency, with the capacity to develop the traits commonly found in resilient survivors: social competence, problem-solving, autonomy, and a sense of purpose and belief in a bright future.

—Bonnie Benard
Resiliency in Action, Summer 1996

INTRODUCTION

In the career development field, the theory of “resiliency” can factor into the selection of career counselling frameworks, practices, and innovative assessment tools. However, what does the word mean to someone experiencing long-term unemployment or to a young person wanting to enter the workforce in a meaningful way? Before we attempt to answer those questions, we need to explore resiliency theory and examine a career resiliency model from a career development practitioner perspective.

THE BEGINNINGS OF RESILIENCY THEORY

The roots of resiliency theory can be found in the major findings of a longitudinal study started in 1955 and reported by Emmy E. Werner. Her paper, *Risk, Resilience, and Recovery: Perspectives from the Kauai Longitudinal Study* focused on children who had learned to lead successful lives despite environmental hardships and extreme stresses during their upbringing (Werner 1993). During the 1970s, youth development researchers started similar “life-spanning” studies of inner-city children. There research focused on “children born into seriously high-risk conditions such as families where parents were mentally ill, alcoholic or abusive,” wrote Bonnie Benard, research editor for *Resiliency in Action* (Benard 1996). Out of these studies the term resiliency emerged to describe people who have survived risk factors through self-efficacy. For several examples showing the resiliency of several special young people visit www.resiliency.com/faces.htm.

The resiliency paradigm became attractive because it has many applications in human development. In the 1980s, *Career Management and Survival in the Workplace* identified several elements of career resiliency (London and Mone 1987), and by the late 1990s, resiliency researchers were busy interpreting and publishing their findings. Benard (1996) states, “The astounding finding from these long term studies was that at least 50%—and often closer to 70%—of youth growing up in these high-risk conditions did develop social competence despite exposure to severe stress and did overcome the odds to lead successful lives.” Benard (1996) also asserts, “Most importantly, the knowledge that everyone has innate resilience grounds practice in optimism and possibility, essential components in building motivation.” Service providers in the youth development and career development fields began to apply resiliency theory to
assist clients in making good decisions and in motivating themselves to overcome career barriers.

**FROM JOB SECURITY TO CAREER RESILIENCE**

Over 30 years ago, we could have worked for the same employer during our lifetime. Our relationship with that employer was unequal. According to Bettina Lankard Brown, “In the 1960s, the employer-employee relationship was characterized as a parent–child relationship: the organization provided employment in jobs that were narrowly defined, status in the community, and job security in exchange for employee hard work, loyalty, and good performance” (Brown 1996).

Radical changes in the workplace have occurred over the past 15 years. The nature of employment has changed and a new economy evolved because of dwindling raw resources, free trade, re-engineering, downsizing, and rapid growth of information technologies. New employment patterns meant we could expect more than 20 jobs and seven careers in our lifetime (University of Waterloo). A new psychological contract between the employer and employee had also emerged. “The emphasis in this new contract was on worker employability rather than job security,” says Brown (1996). A new reality emerged for workers—they must learn to study market trends and to continually develop their skills to maintain their employability in a new economy (Brown 1996).

During the 1990s, our understanding of resiliency was being actively promoted to empower workers affected by the radical change noted above. Front-line career development practitioners could access such publications as *Toward a Career-resilient Workforce* (Waterman, Waterman, and Collard 1994) and *Career Resilience in a Changing Workplace* (Collard, Epperheimer, and Saign 1996). With an ever-changing world of work and a plethora of information, employment counsellors were challenged to expand their scope of practice when working with the multi-barrier clients. Resiliency theory offered some valuable insights. As originally defined by London and Mone (1987), *career resilience* was “the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, even when the circumstances are discouraging or disruptive.”

**FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE**

The following career resiliency model is basically a belief system for career development practitioners. The model encourages several processes and is not presented as a program. Once adopted it creates a theme that runs through all programs of the service provider. Resiliency theory guides the selection of career counselling models and intervention methods. It also creates an environment where clients can be truly motivated, build relationships, explore work possibilities, make decisions, set goals, and create momentum for action. The elements of the model are:
1. Theme acceptance
   - Actively promote resiliency theory throughout the organization by establishing policy and staff professional development around the resiliency theme.

2. Support for self-awareness
   - Select or modify career counselling processes or tools that facilitate the clients' journey to deep inner understanding of their core "values and interests." (Values pertain to general lifestyle values and work-related values. They are more general and consistent over time than interests. Interests measure the types of jobs, activities, and situations that people prefer) (Parsons and Williamson 1989).

3. Conversion
   - Help clients to identify and overcome barriers in order to convert their dreams into career realities—action planning through intrinsic motivation.

4. Connectedness
   - Foster a client's sense of community and encourage meaningful connection between people.
   - Encourage clients to pool resources (i.e., job search groups) and to celebrate successes.
   - Promote a client's lifelong relationships with various institutions that support continuous learning.

Today, career development counsellors are finding the principles of career resiliency theory applicable when working with a variety of unemployed workers. These guiding principles, in modified form, are covered in a critique of career self-reliance written by Diane Byster (1998):

1. Individuals are or need to become the primary architect of their lives.
2. Client need help to find and be motivated by their core values.
3. Clients need to stay current in their field through continuing education courses, certificate and degree programs.
4. Clients need to develop a connectedness with the community by creating relationships with mentors, job shadowing, and job support groups.
5. Clients need to learn how to accommodate to the changing needs of employers while keeping a clear sense of self and direction.
We need to build a framework for a client’s self-understanding. Although in a modified form, the following suggestions by Byster (1998) show career resiliency themes that career development practitioners can follow:

1. Encourage clients to seek intrinsic motivation by exploring their own inclinations, dreams, and goals rather than self-contort to a job that does not fully support their makeup.

2. Encourage clients to cultivate other interests, such as hobbies and activities that promote a sense of well-being, during their job search campaign.

3. Promote real connections between people by advising clients to pool resources with others by forming job search club.

4. Actively discourage clients from blaming themselves when they get stuck in career planning.

Career counselling relies heavily on the interpretation of labour market information when assisting clients in analyzing their employability and choosing a career. However, a career choice based on sound reasoning today can be a poor decision within a few short years. According to Sandra Kerka (1993), “occupational information (a vital component of career education) can be bewildering as the quantity, distribution, and quality of jobs change continuously in the new economy.” This career resiliency model encourages all clients to be true to their core values and not to ignore self-knowledge when developing a career action plan. While exploring their values, clients should be encouraged to get data from the real world by conducting informational interviews with targeted employers.

Many career development centres across Canada are successfully applying many elements found in the above model and stated principles of career resiliency theory. One popular set of themes is called “The High Five,” which encourages clients to take more initiative in their own learning. These themes are being communicated to clients through the following statements.

1. Change is constant.
   Adaptability is one of the most important skills people will carry in an ever-changing world. To achieve this, clients must learn to read their external environment when goal-setting.

2. Follow your heart.
   One’s “heart” drives one’s career path. Encourage clients to allow their dreams to shape their goals so that they are truly motivated to go after what they really want.
3. Focus on the journey.
Since continual change undermines prediction of occupational destinations, we must make great effort to help people enjoy the process: to better fulfill their values, beliefs, and interests with every decision they make.

Learning is constant when change is constant, and learning can be enjoyable and meaningful when it is seen as part of a journey that fulfills one’s heart. Opportunities to learn are all around us; we should encourage clients to take advantage of them.

5. Be an ally (team up with your allies).
Few people feel part of a community or have the wherewithal to create one for themselves. We can facilitate the connection to community by helping clients focus on family, friends, neighbours, teachers, etc.—people who represent a wealth of labour market information and contacts (Redekopp, Day, and Robb 1995).

A high-risk client can be anyone, at any education level, at any age, from any culture. Some people are at high risk because they have experienced a recent life-shattering event (i.e., layoff, family crisis, accident, etc.), and remain traumatized, unable to create momentum for action. Many times the career development professional will meet multi-barrier clients, whose issues may seem insurmountable. Employment counselling centres need to find effective ways to play a broader enabling role in support of their high-risk clients. A career resiliency model/principle/theme holds considerable promise that a client will feel hopeful while removing employment barriers one by one.

CONCLUSION
What does applying career resiliency theory mean to someone who is experiencing long-term unemployment or to a young person wanting to enter the workforce in a meaningful way? It means that the unemployed logger who wants independence and likes working with wood could follow his intrinsic values to start a home-based business making wooden buttons for a Japanese manufacturing firm. It means a young person who loves being around horses could start training to be a horse massager. In short, this career resiliency model applies a number of processes to assist clients in gaining self-knowledge and self-efficacy.

“The fostering of resilience operates at a deep structural systemic, human level: at the level of relationships, beliefs, and opportunities for participation and power that are part of every interaction, every intervention no matter what the focus,” states Benard (1996). “We are creating the conditions that allow their innate potential for social
competence, problem solving, sense of identity and efficacy, and hope for the future to unfold” (Bernard 1996).

Youth Development Research has clearly shown that fostering resiliency can produce impressive results. The crossover to the career development field can expand the scope of practice for practitioners in career development. The opportunity now exists to enable high-risk clients through the application of this career resiliency model.


