

Building Resilience

Asia is being tested from every direction at once. Climate shocks are intensifying, inequality is widening and geopolitical rivalries are hardening into blocs. Cities are urbanising faster than their infrastructure can keep up, and technological change—sharpened by artificial intelligence—is compressing the time leaders have to adjust. None of these pressures are new in isolation. What is new is their simultaneity. Leaders can no longer treat them as episodic disruptions to be weathered before returning to business as usual. That old assumption—that stability is the default condition, and disruption merely an interruption of it—no longer holds.

The idea of resilience is not new, even if the debate feels unprecedented. The term entered systems thinking in the early 1970s, via ecologist C.S. Holling’s distinction: engineering resilience as a system snapping back to its original state; ecological resilience as a system absorbing disturbance by reorganising into something new. Debate ratcheted up again after the 2008 financial crisis and post-9/11 security anxieties, as governments and central banks began speaking of resilient *institutions*. Nassim Nicholas Taleb’s *Antifragile*, published in 2012, pushed the conversation furthest, arguing that merely withstanding shocks was too modest a goal—some systems actually improve under stress. A parallel debate unfolded closer to home, where grit reframed personal perseverance as resilience’s individual face. That provocation

casts shadows this issue: several contributors remain uneasy with older, static definitions of resilience as simply bouncing back. This is why resilience has become the defining leadership challenge of the moment.

Resilience, as several contributors remind us, is not simply the capacity to withstand shocks and return to an original shape. It is a more demanding, more active capability. It rests on three linked disciplines: anticipating disruption before it arrives, preparing deliberately for it and adapting continuously as conditions change. Long-term resilience cannot be built by any single actor; it depends on sustained coordination across businesses, governments and communities.

Anticipation is the first discipline. It begins with recognising how fundamentally the environment itself has shifted. As Arnoud de Meyer argues in Vantage Point, the disruptive forces reshaping the corporate landscape are not passing disturbances, but rather structural features of a permanently unstable system. Resilience, he suggests, means abandoning the old metaphor of the elastic band that snaps back to its original shape, in favour of organisations capable of continuous rearrangement without losing coherence or purpose. Jack McGuire’s In Motion column extends this logic, using organisational adoption of artificial intelligence to illustrate. Before a system goes live, he argues, leaders must anticipate its social meaning as much as its

technical performance—not only how the system performs, but also how employees respond to its performance.

Preparation is the second discipline. It is where good intentions are converted into practised capability. Keith Fitzgerald’s Practitioner’s Guide sets out what it means to prepare for crisis rather than merely hope to survive it. That means diagnosing a crisis before acting and building the plans that prevent costly delay. It also means rehearsing behaviours that distinguish productive response from failure. McGuire makes a parallel point about AI: preparation is not training people to click through a checklist, but rehearsing judgement itself. Employees need to learn when to trust a system, when to question it and how to explain decisions shaped by it.

Adaptation is the third discipline: it asks organisations and institutions to treat real-world experience as evidence, not a deviation to be corrected. Sun Sun Lim explores this in the evolution of Singapore’s approach to online harms. Policy moved from the early assumption that harm was an individual burden to be endured, through reactive legislation, to today’s more anticipatory, victim-centred architecture, culminating in the newly established Online Safety Commission. Susan Chong and Tan Hwee Hoon’s research shows adaptation at a more human scale. Supervisor support, they find, turns voluntary, staff-led environmental initiatives into sustained, organisation-wide outcomes—evidence that

sustainability strategies must adapt to how people actually behave, not only to what leadership intends. Moreover, adaptation can occur at a sectoral level. This issue’s Impact Spotlight shows how Themin Suwardy’s practice-led research on audit quality contributed to Singapore’s Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority’s efforts to strengthen the country’s audit and financial reporting ecosystem.

Running beneath all three disciplines is a reminder that resilience is ultimately personal before it is institutional. In our At the Helm conversation, Mayor Denise Phua reflects on two decades moving between the corporate, non-profit and public sectors. She locates resilience in clarity of purpose, the willingness to act on what one sees and frameworks for navigating the tensions cross-sector partnerships inevitably bring. Jeremy Lee’s account of building SimplyGood makes a related point from the vantage of entrepreneurship. Resilience, he suggests, is often simply the capacity to keep absorbing rejection and failure without losing sight of the value one is trying to create.

Taken together, these contributions suggest that resilience is not a single capability to be acquired once, but a discipline to be continually practised—at every level, from individual to organisation to system. It requires the humility to recognise that disruption is now the operating environment, not an exception to it. It also requires the discipline to keep anticipating, preparing and adapting even when the storm has not yet arrived.

Building resilience is not a project with an end date. It is, increasingly, simply what it means to lead.



PROFESSOR SCOTT FRITZEN
Editor-in-Chief
Asian Management Insights
sfritzen@smu.edu.sg

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Prof. Scott Fritzen

EDITOR

Ms. Preeti Gaonkar

ASSISTANT EDITOR

Ms. Erin Lee

CREATIVE DESIGN

C2 Design Studio Pte Ltd

Asian Management Insights (ISSN 2315-4284) is published thrice a year by the Office of Impact, Singapore Management University, 81 Victoria Street, Singapore 188065.

We welcome comments and letters to the editor, which should be sent with the writer’s name, address and phone number via email to ami@smu.edu.sg. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium and at the discretion of the Editor-in-Chief. All letters become the property of Asian Management Insights and will not be returned.

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