

# STRETCH OR STRAIN? A JOURNEY TOWARDS RESILIENT LEADERSHIP (AND LIFE)

Last week, Leaders in GM gave me the opportunity to open a workshop on Resilience, for the amazing Rene Barrett (find her [@renebarrett](#))

I said yes, before could give myself time to get nervous and change my mind.

Why nervous? Public speaking is always nerve wracking, but to talk about something more personal is a challenge. I had attended Rene's resilience workshop back in the summer, and it had such a profound effect on me, that I wanted to give something back.

On the day, it was scary. But the smiles, nods, expressions of empathy, shared experience and understanding around the room made it all worthwhile. It was a privilege to work with Rene. I hope that sharing some of what I talked about via this blog, might help others beyond the room.

Life is a rollercoaster.. it just is. None of us will get through life without challenge, stress, grief, heartbreak, illness or upset.... So what do we do about it? How do we bounce back from tough times, at work and at home?

I was asked to consider the questions below for my presentation. Here's some of what came to mind:

## **1. What is my story of developing as a "resilient leader?"**

It's a journey. I'm haven't nailed it yet. I keep working at it. Learning all the time, especially from those older and wiser than me.

In my 20's, 30's, 40's there have been different demands in work and at home. I've needed to adapt all the time.

**In my 20's**, I thought I had demands on me. I didn't have a clue! Lucky me. Though I didn't realise it then, I burnt the candle at both ends and in the middle.

I had found my 'ikigai': my purpose, in the work that I loved, which made a difference, which was certainly needed...and thankfully I could be paid for.

I worked really hard, and played hard too. No problem.

**In my 30's**, I was on a different journey, with three under 5's.

**I found TIRED.**

It was physically demanding. I had *years* of poor quality sleep. It was a struggle just to get everyone out of the door in the morning so I could even start work.

In an attempt to juggle and be everything to everyone, I worked as a freelance consultant for a while.

Looking back now, that didn't really suit me as much as I thought it did. It was a bit lonely and isolating. I lost confidence in my abilities, as I didn't give myself time and space to build relationships and connect with colleagues. I was either being mum, or was head down 'doing the work' with no space around the edges.

But it was perfect for the family, as I worked from home, with a flexible approach that could keep changing, as the girls got older. It enabled me to be at home, take them to childminders and pre-school and see them happily settled into school.

During this time I got a lot badly wrong in resilience terms. I was trying to do it all... look after babies and toddlers, work hard, run marathons, socialize, stay up late. There were times when I got really run down. I needed to learn to adapt!

**Into my 40's** – I started to learn. Getting the balance right more of the time, but not always. I had certainly realised how important sleep was, and started to make it a priority.

However, I stepped into more challenging leadership roles at work, as Chief Officer of a start up social enterprise, then Director of Derbyshire Sport. These roles took more out of me mentally and emotionally; I was learning all the time, and feeling a great sense of personal responsibility to my employees and colleagues, at the same time as having big responsibilities at home.

**I'm in my mid 40's now. Proper mid-life.**

I find that I haven't got the same *sort* of energy that I had in my 20's. I have a different kind of energy. I certainly have more stamina. Grit, you could call it.

Greater Manchester Moving. This is the most exciting job. What a time to be working here, with the shared ambition and purpose. But it's place where **pace takes on a**

**new meaning.** A leadership role here perhaps ought to come with a health warning. Take care. Of yourself and others. More on that [here](#).

Family life is less physically demanding, but with teenagers I find it more emotionally complex. And gone are the days of kids in bed by 7pm and a peaceful night ahead. Our evenings are full of homework, revision, music lessons and sports fixtures.

I try to make sure the girls can take up the amazing opportunities they have and get them to all the places they want to go. There is so much fun to be had. I find it hard to say no. **I'm working on it.** In the meantime, we have a complex network of lift sharers, I go for runs wherever we happen to be, or spend the waiting around time in cafes catching up on work. This flexible and creative use of time, energy and places means we all get to do what we want, and creates time for fun and adventure in the space between.

These days, if I don't manage to fit a run or swim into the day, I'm in desperate need of some headspace and endorphins by the evening.. but often the time and energy runs out.

So, **I've become a morning person.** It's the best way to ensure I get my fix, before the kids are even awake. If I leave 'me time' until last, it goes out of the window. In my 20's I would procrastinate about a run all day. Now, I seize the moment as soon as I can.

## **2. How have I maintained a level of resilience in my past and current roles? What works well, what hasn't?**

When I thought about this, I realised that I have developed some strategies that are about **how I work**, and some that are about **what I do outside of work**, to maintain my energy and strength.

### **How I work.**

When I moved to Greater Manchester it was a fresh start. **I decided to be me.** To bring who I am to this role, and be more honest and open than I had perhaps been before. I decided to care less about what people might think of me. Just to be me, work in ways that are true to my values , and do the best I could. It was liberating.

**I try to make time to build relationships.** To listen. Connecting with colleagues beyond 'the work' is really important to me. Understanding their worlds, sharing stories and learning from their experiences.

**I ask for help.** Particularly from those who are more experienced, and wiser than me. I often ask people about the 'how' and the 'why' of what they are doing, not just 'what' they've been working on. I seek their top tips. In terms of 'self care', I especially want to learn from those in more demanding roles than me. I want to understand more about how people stay physically and mentally healthy under pressure.

I have asked colleagues to help me to keep the balance, by noticing when I'm getting carried away; especially if I'm sending emails at night or at the weekend... which has a knock on effect to them too.

**I read a lot** – learning, learning, learning. I don't have much time for courses and formal 'CPD'. I have learnt so much from people across the system, locally and elsewhere, that I follow on twitter. It's a great way to pick up articles and conversations from different professional backgrounds and perspectives. Great for understanding.

There are so many amazing things to read about leadership out there, but the person I return to again and again is Brene Brown. If you haven't read her work, you're missing out.

**Coaching and mentoring** is amazing for my personal and professional development. I've been working with a coach this year, who is helping me to identify my strengths and work on the things that will help me to grow. More on that in a blog yet to be written! And if you're looking for a coach, [@liz\\_mcque](#) is awesome.

**Meditation and Mindfulness** practices don't come naturally or easily to me, but are amazing. I keep the Bhuddify app on my phone, and listen to the short meditations as I walk between meetings, or on the train. They're a great way to calm the mind and develop clarity of thought when there are a million thoughts and plans rushing through. A breathing space. Even if it's just a couple of minutes, can totally change the way I approach the next meeting or conversation.

### **Outside (or in and around) work.**

Outside of work, I'm becoming more aware of the physical, mental and emotional demands that my job is placing on me, and trying to take better care with my energy.

**I need time outdoors.** Every day. Ideally running, walking, wild swimming, cycling to work, mountain biking. All of these give me time to think. Perspective. It's well known

that [immersion in nature is amazing for mental health](#) as an earlier, crowd sourced blog illustrated.

**Cold water swimming** is the single best thing for lifting the mood. The evidence that it reduces anxiety and can help combat depression is just emerging. All I know is that **I feel like a different person** after a swim here.

Plenty of sleep and rest. Noticing when alcohol 'use' is becoming a crutch to help me relax, rather than a nice accompaniment to a night out with friends.

**Acupuncture and massage** with the amazing [Lisa Rutter](#). Beyond brilliant. I feel like a different person after her treatments.

**Listening to music:** it never fails to lift the spirits. Spotify is the best invention ever. Music for any mood, any time, anywhere. And I just went back to choir for the first time this year. I'd forgotten how amazing singing makes me feel (and it's in the pub).

**Playing a sport...** because it's different to going for a run. In sport, the focus is absolute. I don't have time to worry about what happened at work today or that argument about who didn't turn the lights off/lock the door, when I'm trying to score or stop a goal. It's more mindful. And a team sport is great for a laugh and a sense of togetherness, in winning or losing.

**Friday nights in the pub.** I am lucky to have a fantastic community pub, and a great bunch of friends to share it with. A glass of wine, a laugh and a chat, and the cares and strains of the week melt away.

**We have a 'place to go'** in sad times, happy times, stressful times. **Big Stone** is that place. 30 min walk from home, it is my spiritual home; to celebrate with others, to think alone, to be grateful, to get perspective, to cry, to mourn, to say thank you.

#### **What hasn't worked?**

- I still find it hard to relax and watch TV. Self care 'success' is flopping in front of the TV and watching a film with the family, without falling asleep or having ideas and plans in my head!
- I don't think enough about food. It's the last thing I consider. Healthy eating and family meal times during the week are a dream for a parallel life where I have a live-in cook!
- My work is one of my biggest passions. A purpose driven life is amazing, but I know I can be too driven. I love my work, so I struggle to stop.

- Liz McQue says that the best of us can be the worst of us. This is so true. Some of my strengths: juggling, connecting, helping, striving, planning, rescuing, taking responsibility... can become my biggest resilience enemy.
- **To be**, not always **to do**..... I haven't cracked this yet, by a long way.

### 3. What am I working on right now?

All of the things above. Being more aware of them. Noticing how I feel, then doing something about it when energy is low or stress is high.

I have **stopped making 'rules' for myself** about time management (I always broke them, then felt crap about that too). Instead I am trying to be aware of my energy levels, then *go with the flow*. It's not always possible, but I am trying to do the things that suits the mood and the energy.

**I am trying to be more aware.** Am I *digging too deep*, when I could perhaps head home early, go in to work a bit later, take a proper lunch break in a demanding day. **I am trying to look around the corner.** Scanning ahead in my work calendar, and noticing when busy times are likely to produce feelings of strain, when the stretch could become too great. Then create space for a a quieter day or weekend, after a really busy spell, try to balance travelling, public speaking and high energy leadership commitments with some bits of quiet and **time to think, plan and reflect.**

Diary commitments and events don't always allow for this though. Occasionally I need to lead, present or deal with a challenge when I'm feeling low on energy, confidence or courage.

I have found that **an honest conversation with a trusted colleague** in these situations isn't an admission of 'weakness'. In fact it shows greater self awareness, trust and builds relationships.

*When my mother in law had died last year, I was leading a conference and trying to organise three children (with outfits and shoes) to fly Ireland for the funeral. It was a crazy few days, after a really sad few weeks. I was exhausted. I confided in my co-presenters what was going on, and asked them to 'have my back'.*

*I'd never shared vulnerability at work like this before. Their response was amazing. I didn't crumble in the end, but knowing they were ready to step in, if I did, helped me through the day. I remember one of them bringing me a plate of food during the lunch break, checking in on me, as I was busy sorting things out for the afternoon. I was so grateful.*

The work we are doing in Greater Manchester is all a journey into the unknown. Fascinating, exciting, ground breaking, but with that occasionally comes anxiety provoking, uncertain and complex. This is where trusted colleagues come into their own again. Safe spaces to work through fears and falls, as Brene Brown says, are vital.

### **Gratitude.**

I am **noticing the small things every day**. I loved Rene's suggestion of spending 5 minutes a day on a gratitude diary.

In what might have seemed like a tough day, I can usually identify all of the things in the star here. No matter how small they might be.

The sunrise, the funny conversation on the train, the amazing people I work with, who inspire me and I'm in awe of. The gratitude and love I have for my family, and the serenity of an early morning swim.

### **I am changing my definition of success.**

For a long time the identity I have prided myself on, has been 'hard working and committed'. Someone who digs deep and is tough. But my friends, family, and colleagues whose views I respect, have told me I work too hard. They worry about me sometimes. That's not good.

### **Be the change you want to see...**

I want to be a healthy, active, calm, balanced mum and leader... and to lead in ways that show how it can be; especially for other women and parents in leadership roles... and for my daughters as they start to think about what it is to be a working woman.

Family first.

Work second.

Fun and adventure in both.

Like I said at the beginning. I haven't nailed it yet.

It's a journey.

**Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass,**

**it's about learning to dance in the rain.**

Ready more on Hayley's blog <https://hayleyeverblog.wordpress.com>