

RESILIENCE IN PRACTICE:

A BEHAVIOURAL APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE PERFORMANCE

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

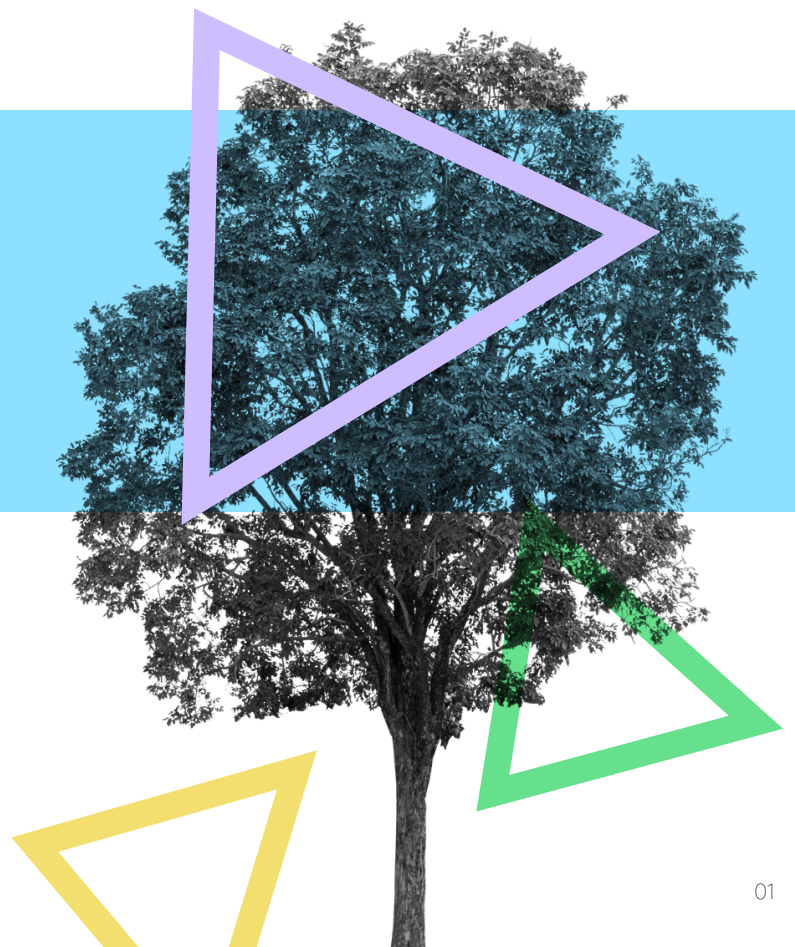
In times of pressure, disruption and change, resilience is frequently cited as a key organisational asset. Yet despite its prominence in discourse, resilience remains conceptually vague and inconsistently applied in practice. It is still too often framed as a matter of personal mindset or psychological toughness, placing responsibility on individuals to withstand stress regardless of the demands or constraints of their environment. This view places the burden on employees to manage escalating pressures in isolation, with little structural or cultural support. In doing so, it risks normalising unsustainable working conditions while pathologising natural human responses to adversity.

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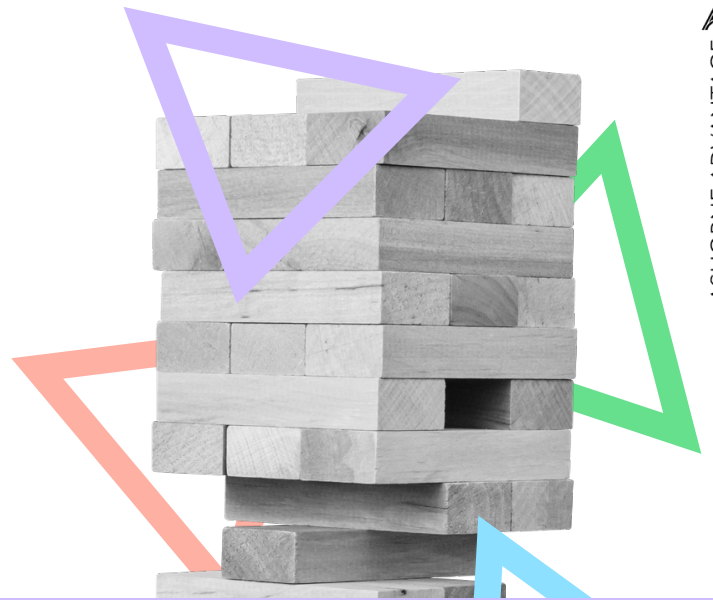
This paper takes a different view. Resilience is not a fixed trait or an abstract quality that people or organisations either possess or lack. It is a dynamic, interactive process. It is something people do, not something they are.

Drawing on psychological research, leadership studies and learning and development theory, we explore how resilience is built through practice. It is enacted through behaviours such as emotional regulation, cognitive reframing, setting boundaries, help-seeking and recovery after setbacks. These are not innate characteristics. They are developable capabilities, shaped by context, and strengthened through skills-based learning and supported environments.

Crucially, resilience is not merely an individual phenomenon. While it may manifest at the personal level, its development is relational, cultural and structural. When supported and modelled, especially by leaders, resilient behaviours create ripple effects across teams and systems. They underpin psychological safety, encourage adaptability and enable sustainable performance even in the face of uncertainty.



At Ashorne Hill, we argue for a more evidence-informed and practically grounded definition of resilience, **one that focuses on action rather than attribution**. For learning and development professionals, this reframing opens the door to more inclusive, actionable and enduring approaches to building capability in the face of complexity and change.



64%

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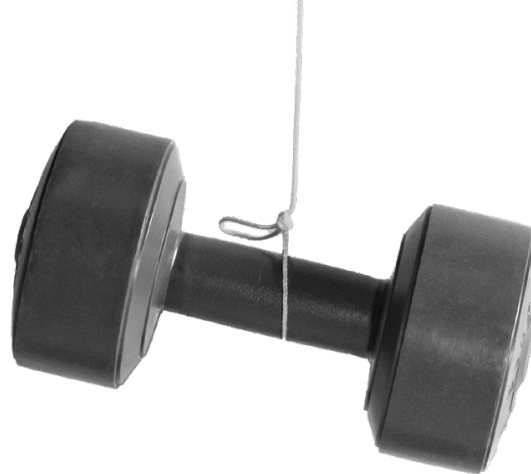
2. THE PROBLEM WITH 'HAVING' RESILIENCE



Resilience is still often understood narrowly as a personal trait. It is commonly described as grit, inner strength, or an inherent capacity to bounce back from adversity. This framing places the focus on individual mindset and tends to suggest that managing pressure and change is primarily a matter of sheer determination or willpower.

However, this perspective is limiting and potentially harmful. **By framing resilience as a fixed personal characteristic, responsibility is placed solely on individuals.** When people struggle, they may interpret this as personal failure rather than a natural, expected response to sustained pressure. Such a mindset obscures the critical influence of environmental factors. Even highly capable individuals are unlikely to thrive if their work context is chronically unsupportive or lacks psychological safety, conditions that inhibit risk-taking, open communication, and learning from setbacks.

This is not a marginal concern. Research consistently shows that stress and emotional strain are widespread in the workplace. According to the CIPD, 64 percent of UK respondents reported a stress-related absence in their organisation over the last year and stress and mental ill health are both in the top five causes of short and long-term absence.¹ Yet although organisations may have an understanding of the systemic issues that contribute to stress and burnout, the response continues to be at an individual level. It is treating the symptom, not the cause and it puts pressure on the employee to 'solve' the issue. This may result in employees internalising their struggles and increase the risk of burnout, disconnection, and long-term mental health consequences.



This mindset also has organisational implications. When resilience is seen as a static personal attribute, employers are less likely to invest in structures, learning or leadership practices that help to build it. The focus shifts to surface-level signs of toughness rather than the real conditions that support recovery, growth and long-term adaptability. This results in missed opportunities to embed resilience at scale across teams and systems.

Importantly, research across occupational psychology, neuroscience and organisational behaviour suggests that resilience is not a fixed trait but a dynamic, context-sensitive capacity that develops over time. Rather than being innate, resilience is cultivated through repeated cycles of manageable stress, followed by adequate periods of recovery and reflection. This process, sometimes referred to as “stress inoculation,” helps individuals adapt to future challenges by gradually building coping capacity and psychological flexibility.² However, this adaptive growth does not occur in isolation. The development of resilience is deeply influenced by relational and environmental factors. Social connection, a sense of belonging, and access to meaningful support are consistently linked to more effective coping and faster emotional recovery following adversity.³ Resilient individuals are often those embedded in resilient systems - workplaces that offer psychological safety, clarity of role, opportunities for autonomy, and leaders who actively support wellbeing.



These insights have important implications for how organisations approach resilience. If resilience is something people do, rather than something they either have or lack, it becomes possible to develop it through intentional design, practice, and support. This shift reframes resilience from a reactive mindset to a proactive organisational capability. Leaders play a central role: **when they openly acknowledge challenges, model healthy coping strategies, and promote recovery as a normal part of performance, they create space for others to do the same.** For learning and development professionals, this offers a new imperative. Interventions should go beyond awareness or mindset training and focus on building everyday practices, such as emotional regulation, perspective-shifting, boundary-setting and recovery planning, within the specific context of team and organisational life. In doing so, resilience becomes not only more sustainable, but more equitable: a shared responsibility, supported by structures and culture, rather than an individual burden.

➤ ¹CIPD, “Health and wellbeing at work” (September 2023): <https://www.cipd.org/globalassets/media/knowledge/knowledge-hub/reports/2023-pdfs/8436-health-and-wellbeing-report-2023.pdf>.

➤ ²Lyons DM, Parker KJ, Katz M, Schatzberg AF, “Developmental cascades linking stress inoculation, arousal regulation, and resilience”, *Frontiers in Behavioural Science* (September 2009): <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2759374/>.

➤ ³Southwick, S. M., Bonanno, G. A., Masten, A. S., Panter-Brick, C., & Yehuda, R, “Resilience definitions, theory, and challenges: Interdisciplinary perspectives”, *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 5(1), 25338 (2014): <https://doi.org/10.3402/ejpt.v5.25338>.

3. RESILIENCE AS A VERB: A PRACTICE, NOT A POSSESSION

If we move away from thinking of resilience as a fixed trait and begin to see it as something people do, a more useful and evidence-based picture begins to emerge. Resilience is not about being unshakeable. It is about how individuals respond to difficulty: how they recover, adapt, set boundaries and make sense of uncertainty.

Psychologist George Bonanno, a leading researcher in the field, has shown that resilience is neither rare nor heroic. Most people, when placed in supportive environments and given the opportunity to process and respond, display flexible and adaptive behaviours in the face of adversity. What enables resilience is not stoicism or inner strength but the ability to recognise what is happening, adjust behaviour, and access help or connection when needed.⁴

This form of adaptability is sometimes called psychological flexibility. It involves the capacity to shift thinking and behaviour in response to changing circumstances and is consistently associated with better coping, emotional regulation and mental wellbeing. Importantly, this flexibility is not an inherent trait but a capability that develops through repeated experiences of challenge, reflection and support. From a neuroscience perspective, the brain's plasticity means that new patterns of response can be learned and strengthened over time, particularly when stress is followed by opportunities for rest, learning and social support.⁵ In other words, **resilience is a process of interaction between individual experience and the surrounding environment.**

This principle also underpins the concept of unleadership, which emerged from Ashorne Advantage's research and podcast series. In conversations with the originators of the movement, it became clear that the most impactful leadership often arises not from formal authority but from everyday relational behaviours.⁶ In times of complexity or crisis, leadership is something people do rather than something they are. It is expressed through collaboration, listening, presence and the capacity to hold space for others. These are the same conditions in which resilience can take root.

Both concepts invite a shift in perspective. Instead of looking for traits to measure or deficits to fix, organisations can create the conditions in which adaptive behaviours naturally emerge. This includes fostering psychological safety, encouraging reflection and peer support, and normalising honest conversations about limits, recovery and uncertainty. When people are trusted, supported and given the right cues, resilient responses become more likely and more sustainable.





Resilience does not develop in isolation. It is shaped by relationships, norms and systems. It emerges through culture and context, not just personal effort. If organisations want resilience to be more than a buzzword, they must stop asking whether individuals are resilient and start asking: **what are people doing, what are we enabling, and what kind of environment are we cultivating?**

4. A BETTER FRAME: RESILIENCE AS RELATIONAL, CULTURAL AND STRUCTURAL

If resilience is something we do, not something we are, then we need to look beyond individual traits and ask where that doing takes place. The answer lies not just within a person, but in the relationships they rely on, the culture they work within, and the structures that shape their daily experience.

Relational resilience is grounded in human connection. Strong social support networks are among the most consistent predictors of resilience across diverse populations and contexts.⁷ In the workplace, this plays out through trust, mutual respect and everyday acts of support. When people feel seen, heard and valued, they are more likely to adapt and recover when things go wrong. Research from the American Psychological Association highlights that connection and belonging act as buffers against burnout, while isolation increases the risk of stress-related absence and disengagement.⁸

➤ ⁴George A Bonanno, "The Resilience Paradox", European Journal of Psychotraumatology (June 2021), 12(1): <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8253174/>.

➤ ⁵Bruce S. McEwan, "Physiology and Neurobiology of Stress and Adaptation: Central Role of the Brain", (July 2007), Physiological Reviews 87 (3): <https://journals.physiology.org/doi/full/10.1152/physrev.00041.2006>.

➤ ⁶Ashorne Advantage, James Lee, Claire Evans, Carol Jarvis, Hugo Gaggiotti, "(Resilience Podcast)" (Wed, 10 Sep 2025): <https://media.rss.com/ashorne-advantage-podcast/feed.xml>



Cultural resilience is shaped by what an organisation normalises and rewards. In some teams, it is routine to speak openly, admit mistakes or take rest when needed. In others, resilience is equated with silence, self-sacrifice or always maintaining composure. These are not simply personal choices. They are behaviours guided by what the group perceives as acceptable. A study published in Harvard Business Review found that organisations that model vulnerability and cultivate psychological safety are more likely to foster innovation, collaboration and long-term retention.⁹

Structural resilience sits within the systems and design of work. How decisions are made, how much autonomy people have and how workloads are distributed all influence how people experience pressure. Poor structure can push individuals to breaking point, while good structure provides the flexibility, clarity and fairness that enable people to respond rather than react. The CIPD's annual Health and Wellbeing at Work report repeatedly identifies job design, workload management and role clarity as core enablers of wellbeing and engagement, particularly during periods of uncertainty.¹⁰

This broader view offers a more practical and inclusive starting point. **Resilience is not just a matter of personal grit or optimism. It emerges through relationships, grows in healthy cultures and is either enabled or undermined by the way work is organised.**

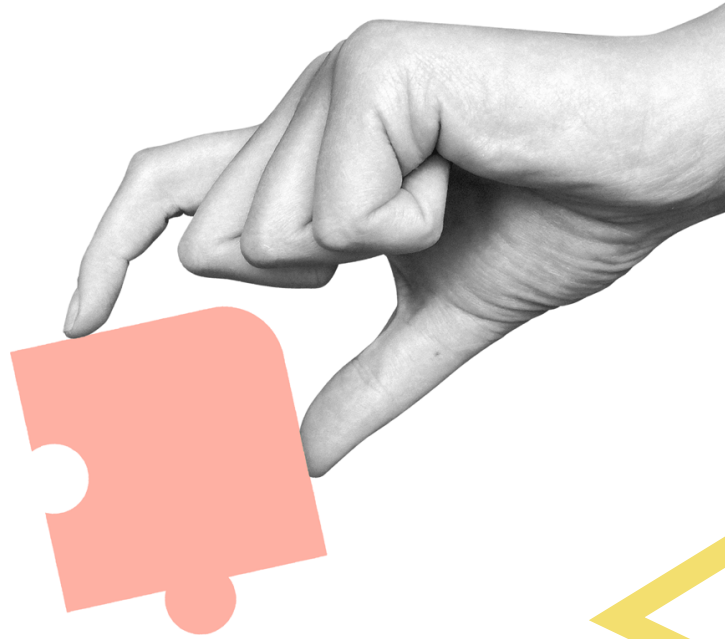
When we approach resilience this way, we stop asking people to tough it out and start asking what needs to change in the systems around them. The burden shifts from the individual to the collective. It becomes a shared responsibility to create the conditions that allow people to cope, recover and continue to contribute with care and creativity.

One well-known example of this principle in action is Google's Project Aristotle. In an extensive study of team effectiveness, Google identified psychological safety, not intelligence, experience or performance, as the most critical factor. Teams where members felt safe to take risks, admit failure and share concerns were consistently more effective than those where such openness was absent.

5. RESILIENCE IN ACTION: PROJECT ARISTOTLE

In 2012, Google initiated an internal research project called Project Aristotle. The goal was to understand what made some teams at Google consistently effective while others struggled. Over a two-year period, researchers examined more than 180 teams across the company. They analysed a wide range of factors, including group dynamics, skill levels, individual personality traits, leadership styles, tenure, and even team members' seating arrangements.¹¹

Surprisingly, none of these conventional predictors reliably explained team success. What did emerge as the most consistent differentiator was psychological safety. **Teams that felt safe to take risks, admit mistakes, and be vulnerable in front of one another outperformed those that did not.** This insight fundamentally shifted Google's understanding of what drives team effectiveness¹².



PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND RESILIENCE

Psychological safety, as defined by Harvard Professor Amy Edmondson, refers to a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. Within the context of resilience, it provides the foundation for behaviours such as asking for help, acknowledging setbacks, experimenting with new approaches, and reflecting openly on failure. These are core actions that enable individuals and teams to adapt and recover from pressure, rather than mask or suppress it.¹³

In teams with high psychological safety, members reported feeling more engaged and more willing to share ideas. These teams demonstrated higher levels of innovation and problem-solving, and they were more likely to sustain performance over time.¹⁴

➤ ⁷Ozbay, F., Johnson, D. C., Dimoulas, E., Morgan, C. A., Charney, D., & Southwick, S. (2007), "Social support and resilience to stress: from neurobiology to clinical practice", Psychiatry (Edgmont), 4(5), <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2921311/>.

➤ ⁸American Psychological Association, "2023 Work in America Survey", (2023): <https://www.apa.org/pubs/reports/work-in-america/2023-workplace-health-well-being>.

➤ ⁹Edmondson, A. C., & Mortensen, M. "What psychological safety looks like in a hybrid workplace." Harvard Business Review (2021): <https://hbr.org/2021/04/what-psychological-safety-looks-like-in-a-hybrid-workplace>.

➤ ¹⁰CIPD, "Health and wellbeing at work" (September 2023): <https://www.cipd.org/globalassets/media/knowledge/knowledge-hub/reports/2023-pdfs/4436-health-and-wellbeing-report-2023.pdf>.

THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

Leaders played a critical role in creating these environments. According to Google's findings, effective team leaders actively promoted equality in conversational turn-taking, encouraged sensitivity to others' emotions, and invited input from all members. They focused on how teams worked together, not just what they accomplished. In doing so, they modelled and reinforced the kinds of interpersonal behaviours that support resilience and collective learning¹⁵



IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings from Project Aristotle support a key argument of this paper: resilience is not an innate trait but a set of behaviours shaped by the team environment. Psychological safety creates the conditions for these behaviours to emerge and thrive. When leaders foster trust, openness, and respect, they lay the foundation for resilient teams, teams better equipped to adapt, recover, and sustain high performance amid uncertainty and pressure.

This view calls for a change in organisational practice, moving from placing responsibility solely on individuals to developing systems and cultures that enable resilience. Leaders must model vulnerability, encourage participation from all team members, and support ongoing reflection and learning. In this way, resilience becomes a shared and sustainable capacity rather than an individual burden.

FROM INSIGHT TO ACTION

Google did not stop at identifying psychological safety as a critical factor for team effectiveness. Through their re:Work platform, they developed practical tools and guidelines to help teams translate this insight into everyday behaviours. For example, teams are encouraged to hold regular check-ins and use conversation prompts such as "What are we not discussing that we should be?" or "Who hasn't had a chance to contribute?" These prompts foster ongoing reflection, encourage openness, and help ensure that all voices are heard.

Such practices build trust and promote inclusive dialogue, enabling teams to collaborate more effectively and respond to challenges with greater unity. **This approach shows that resilience is not just an individual attribute but a collective, interactive process.** It can be nurtured through intentional culture-building, shared responsibility, and leadership behaviours that prioritise psychological safety and mutual support.¹⁶



➤ ¹¹Google re:Work, "Guide: Understand team effectiveness", <https://rework.withgoogle.com/intl/en/guides/understanding-team-effectiveness>

➤ ¹²Google re:Work, "Guide: Understand team effectiveness", <https://rework.withgoogle.com/intl/en/guides/understanding-team-effectiveness>

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

If resilience is not something people have but something they do, it cannot be taught in isolation or ticked off in a workshop. It needs to be practised, supported, and embedded into the rhythms and relationships of everyday work. This has significant implications for learning and development.

Too often, resilience is treated as an individual skill, something to be developed quietly, perhaps even privately, through coaching, wellbeing apps or mindset sessions. But as we have seen, **resilience is not built in a vacuum. It emerges through relationships, culture, and structure.** That means learning and development teams have a broader role to play, not just in offering individual support, but in shaping the conditions that allow resilience to grow and take hold.

This requires a shift in approach: from delivering content to designing environments, from one-off training to ongoing practice, from teaching people how to cope to helping organisations rethink how they work.

RETHINK THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Resilience is a leadership issue, but not in the traditional sense. The most effective leaders are not necessarily the most confident or charismatic. As shown in Google's Project Aristotle and echoed in the University of the West of England's work on unleadership, resilience is often modelled by those who create space for others, respond with care and openness, and are willing to listen and change course when needed.

Leadership development should focus less on performance under pressure and more on presence, reflection, and relational skills. Leaders need to practise:

- Creating psychological safety and making it visible
- Encouraging others to share uncertainty, setbacks, and needs
- Responding with curiosity rather than judgement
- Setting boundaries and modelling recovery

These are not soft skills. **They are the foundations of resilient teams.**



CENTRE LEARNING ON PRACTICE, NOT POSSESSION

Resilience does not come from knowing what to do. It comes from doing it. This means learning strategies must move beyond simply providing information and focus on embedding resilient behaviours through consistent practice and reflection. Ashorne Advantage's proven approach emphasises experiential learning to help individuals develop and reinforce resilient habits within a psychologically safe environment. This approach supports the gradual embedding of recovery routines and resilience practices as part of everyday work, rather than leaving them to chance or sporadic efforts.

Key components include:

- **Micro-practices that enable individuals to reframe pressure, regulate emotion, and shift perspective in real time**
- **Peer learning groups designed to create safe spaces for reflection, mutual support, and collaborative problem-solving, strengthening social connections essential for resilience**
- **Recovery routines integrated deliberately into the workflow, encouraging timely rest and reset as a shared norm rather than an afterthought**

By focusing on what people actually do day-to-day, rather than what they have theoretically learned, this approach promotes sustainable behaviour change. It encourages organisations and learning professionals to ask not "Have they learned resilience?" but rather "What are they doing differently?" and "How are we enabling those behaviours?"

DESIGN FOR CULTURE, NOT JUST CAPABILITY

Culture is one of the most powerful forces shaping resilience, yet it is also among the most challenging aspects to influence. People take their cues from what behaviours are normalised and rewarded around them. If resilience is understood as silence, stoicism, or individual grit, employees will often push themselves to the point of burnout. Conversely, when resilience is framed as open dialogue, shared responsibility, and the ability to recover, the entire organisation benefits.



At Ashorne Advantage, we recognise that shifting culture requires intentional action and persistent effort. Learning and development can play a pivotal role by:

- Facilitating honest conversations about pressure, uncertainty, and failure to break down stigma and foster psychological safety
- Creating space in leadership programmes for vulnerability, doubt, and critical reflection, encouraging leaders to model these behaviours
- Challenging traditional assumptions about leadership, moving away from “heroic” ideals toward more relational, adaptive practices



This cultural work also demands a reassessment of what organisations measure and reward. Are we prioritising output at any cost, or do we value the importance of pause, reflection, and adaptability as key drivers of sustainable performance?

MAKE LEARNING A SYSTEM, NOT JUST AN EVENT

While one-off workshops and events can be valuable for raising awareness and introducing new concepts, building resilience requires more than isolated experiences. It demands ongoing practice and reinforcement embedded within everyday work. Resilience is a shared, continuous practice that flourishes when learning becomes a collective act of sensemaking and mutual support.

Ashorne Advantage recognises the important role of targeted events as catalysts, sparking reflection, equipping individuals with practical skills, and creating momentum. However, lasting impact arises when these interventions connect with the broader organisational context and are supported by aligned systems and leadership behaviours.

To support this, learning and development professionals should work closely with operational leaders, HR teams, and senior executives to:

- Revisit job design and team dynamics, ensuring roles and workloads enable people to respond and recover effectively
- Embed learning rituals and reflective practices into regular team meetings, helping sustain momentum beyond the event itself
- Shape manager expectations and establish feedback loops that reinforce supportive leadership and cultural norms

By positioning learning as an integral part of how work happens, rather than a separate activity, **Ashorne Advantage helps organisations build resilience that is durable, adaptive, and woven into the fabric of everyday work life.**

➤ ¹³Amy Edmundson, “Psychological Safety and Learning Behaviour in Work Teams”, *Administrative Science Quarterly* (June 1999), https://web.mit.edu/curhan/www/docs/Articles/15341_Readings/Group_Performance/Edmondson%20Psychological%20safety.pdf.

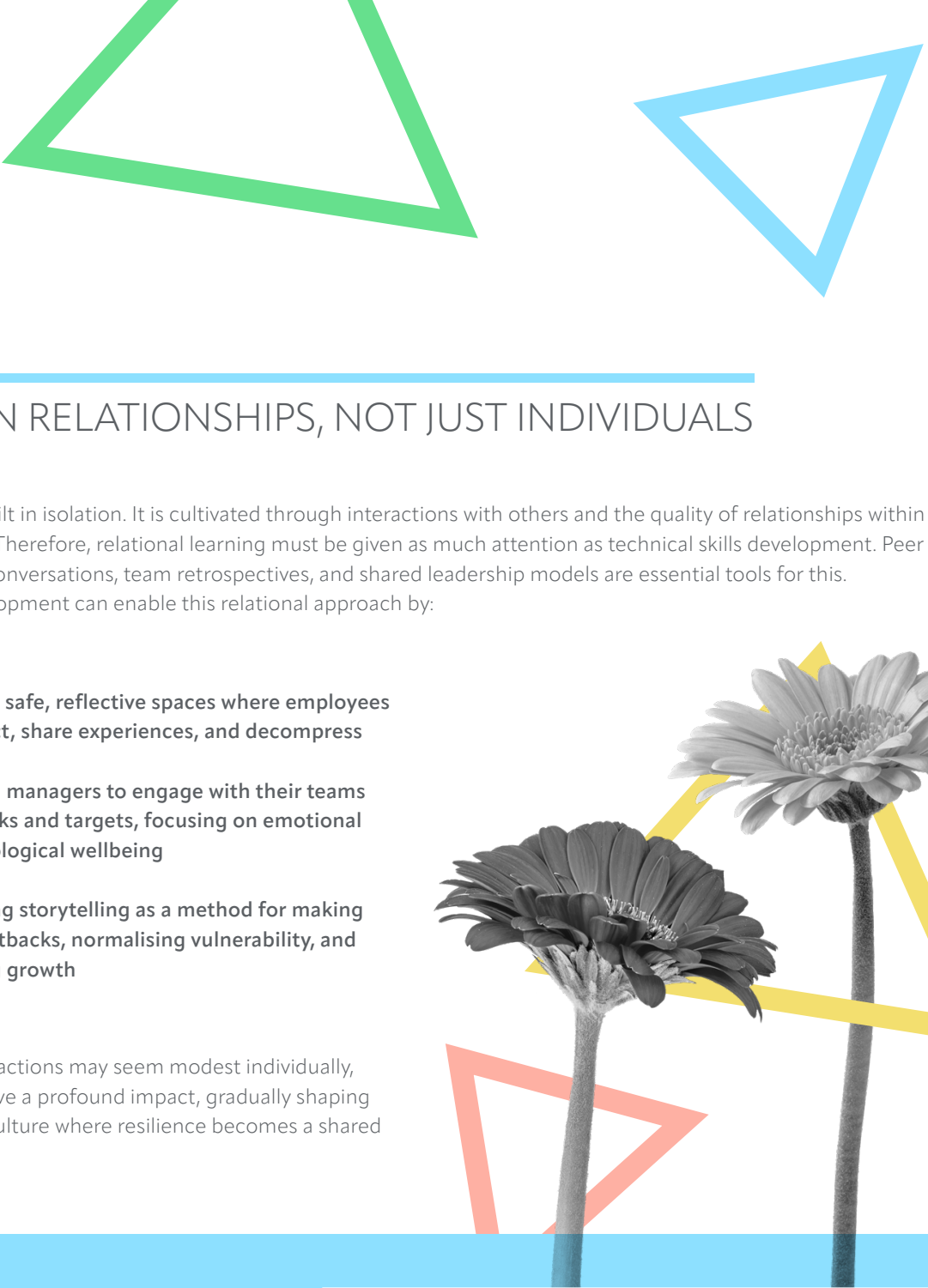
➤ ^{14,15,16}Google re:Work, “Guide: Understand team effectiveness”, <https://rework.withgoogle.com/intl/en/guides/understanding-team-effectiveness>

FOCUS ON RELATIONSHIPS, NOT JUST INDIVIDUALS

Resilience is not built in isolation. It is cultivated through interactions with others and the quality of relationships within teams and organisations. Therefore, relational learning must be given as much attention as technical skills development. Peer learning groups, coaching conversations, team retrospectives, and shared leadership models are essential tools for this. Learning and development can enable this relational approach by:

- Facilitating safe, reflective spaces where employees can connect, share experiences, and decompress
- Supporting managers to engage with their teams beyond tasks and targets, focusing on emotional and psychological wellbeing
- Encouraging storytelling as a method for making sense of setbacks, normalising vulnerability, and celebrating growth

Though these interactions may seem modest individually, collectively they have a profound impact, gradually shaping an organisational culture where resilience becomes a shared and valued asset.



RESILIENCE IS NOT BUILT IN ISOLATION. IT IS CULTIVATED THROUGH **INTERACTIONS WITH OTHERS** AND THE **QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIPS** WITHIN TEAMS AND ORGANISATIONS.

7. CONCLUSION: RESILIENCE AS A COLLECTIVE, ONGOING PRACTICE

Resilience is not an individual trait to be summoned in times of stress. It is a shared practice, something people do together, every day, through the way they lead, relate, recover and reflect. It is built through habits, strengthened by culture, and sustained by systems that prioritise openness, connection, and care.

If organisations want to build true resilience, not just survive change but thrive within it, they must stop asking whether their people are resilient and start asking what conditions they are creating to support resilient behaviour. That means shifting focus:

- From mindset to practice
- From personal grit to relational trust
- From pressure to reflection
- From one-off workshops to embedded learning

CALL TO ACTION

For L&D professionals, this is a moment to expand your support:

- Design environments, not just courses
- Support relational learning, not just skill acquisition
- Champion recovery, reflection and rest as integral to performance

For leaders and decision-makers, the challenge is to model the behaviours you want to see:

- Acknowledge uncertainty
- Invite others in
- Demonstrate that resilience includes rest, not just endurance

And for organisations as a whole, the imperative is clear:

Bake resilience into your culture, structures and leadership norms. Only then can it become the foundation for sustainable performance, wellbeing and long-term success.

