

***The Emotional Resilience of Managers:
Surviving the Slings & Arrows of Outrageous Fortune***

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Do you have little interest or pleasure in doing things?

Do you feel down, depressed, or hopeless?

Do you have trouble falling or staying asleep or sleeping too much?

Do you feel tired or have little energy?

Do you have a poor appetite or overeat?

Do you feel bad about yourself, or that you are a failure or have let yourself and your family down?

Do you have trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the newspaper or watching television?

Do you move or speak so slowly that other people have noticed. Or the opposite – are you so fidgety or restless that you are moving around a lot more than usual?

Do you have thoughts that you would be better off dead, or of hurting yourself in some way?

(Adapted from CIGNA's on-line interactive tool: Are you depressed?)

If you answered yes to the above questions, you could be a city manager.

The stress on local government professional managers is intense. Managers are on duty 24/7, and usually several minutes or hours behind Twitter. There is no community issue from which the manager can legitimately walk away and say "it's not my problem."

Resiliency in this environment is not only important for the manager individually but for the organization and the community. It is obviously harder for local government organizations or communities to be resilient if their leaders are not.

For the purpose of this essay resiliency is the ability to "bounce back" – to "take a lick and keep on ticking." The resilient local government manager...

*To be, or not to be, that is the question—Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The Slings and Arrows of outrageous Fortune, Or to take Arms against a Sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? Shakespeare, Hamlet*

Knows that stuff happens and gets a return on luck, good and bad;
Realizes that it is only a movie;
Builds and nurtures a big family;
Knows that life is good and that happiness is a worthy pursuit; and
Believes.

1. Stuff Happens; Pigeons Will Poop on Your Hood

During my first year as city manager in Charlotte, I went through four mayors, one of whom pled guilty to public corruption after accepting a bribe of \$20,000, delivered in a brief case to the mayor's office. The General Assembly made three legislative attempts to take the airport away from the city and successfully eliminated a major business tax source for all North Carolina local governments. Charlotte had a crippling snowstorm and a white police officer shot and killed an unarmed African-American young man. Thirteen years ago in my first year as manager in Arlington, Virginia, terrorists flew a passenger plane into our largest office complex, the Pentagon.

*Have you ever noticed
 When you're feeling really good
 There's always a pigeon
 That'll come s*** on your hood
 John Prine, Some Humans Ain't Human*

What is striking about my personal experiences as a manager is that they are not so unique. Unexpected, challenging, terrifying, and weird things happen to city, county, and town managers across the globe all the time. Too often, the bad things that occur are not communal, but intensely personal.

Ron Kimble is deputy city manager in Charlotte. In 2012, he was a key leader in one of Charlotte's highest profile events, the National Democratic Convention. Ron was in his late fifties, with a stellar professional career. He and his wife Jan had a mutually adoring relationship with their successful and vivacious 31-year old only child, Jamie. At midnight on September 3, 2012 – the first day of the Democratic Convention – Charlotte detectives knocked on the Kimbles' door and delivered the news: Jamie had been shot dead in Tampa, Florida by her ex-boyfriend, an employee of the NFL Kansas City Chiefs, who had then killed himself.

Harry Jones was the highly respected County Manager of Mecklenburg County since 2000, having served as Assistant Manager from 1991 to 2000. He had also worked in Dallas, Texas and Fayetteville, North Carolina. On December 22, 2011, Harry was informed that he had Stage IV pancreatic cancer. The doctor privately told Harry's wife, Becky, that she should get their affairs in order. Harry's treatment, however, was successful, but on May 7, 2013, at a public meeting and without advance notice to Harry, the Chair of the County Board of Commissioners announced that Harry was fired and had to leave the dais immediately. Harry asked to speak and the request was denied.

There are endless stories, told and untold, of professional and personal crises, large and small, that managers confront. Things happen. There is a tendency to focus on bad luck, but really good things happen, too. The good things are what make city management so rewarding, but it's the bad things that provide the adrenalin rush.

*If it weren't for bad luck, I
 wouldn't have no luck at all.
 William Bell, Born Under a Bad
 Sign*

Carol Jennings, chief of staff for Charlotte's executive offices, returned from an extended vacation to a very quiet office during the July break. She expressed anxiety about the quiet, embarrassingly acknowledging, "I think I like crisis better."

Whether a pigeon poops on the hood of your city or your city wins the lottery (think shale), the real issue is what does the manager and the city do with it. Jim Collins talks about getting a "return on luck" – ROL. He suggests that poor ROL on good luck is "a sure path to mediocrity" while a great ROL on bad luck can be a defining moment of greatness.

Ron and Jan Kimble have launched a campaign to bring awareness to domestic violence, especially among professional athletes. Their efforts will save countless others from the fate of their daughter. Harry Jones was keynote speaker at the 2014 winter meeting the North Carolina City/County Management Association and keynote speaker for the Inspirational Breakfast at the ICMA 100th Anniversary Conference. His story, told with humor and hope, motivates and inspires people to focus not on death, but on life and to live one's life to the fullest every day.

A resilient manager gets a great return on luck.

2. It's Not Personal; It's Only a Movie

Richard Nixon evoked intense responses across the political continuum and could not separate the political attacks on him – mostly related to Viet Nam – from himself personally. His paranoia led him to launch illegal attacks on his enemies and led to the completely unnecessary self-implosion of his political career.

Always remember, others may hate you, but those who hate you don't win unless you hate them, and then you destroy yourself. –Richard Nixon

When a mayor or council member gets in a manager's face and starts attacking for something done or not done, it feels personal. When a taxpayer launches an attack during open mic night at the Council meeting or in the grocery store, it feels personal. However, such attacks are only personal if we make them personal. Here's why: they don't know us personally. They don't really know who we are, what we believe, what is in our hearts or what is in our heads. They are merely reacting to the manager's public position of power. They are reacting based on their values and what is in their own heads and hearts.

Managers are also at risk when they take praise personally. People don't necessarily love the manager as much as they love the manager's position and perceived power. A manager who believes the flattery or thinks that a community's success is all about him or her and develops a sense of entitlement is on a slippery slope. Narcissism is not resiliency.

Maria Swanson is the human resources director for the City of Tamarac, Florida. Back in the 1980s, Maria and I worked jointly on a number of projects in Arlington as budding public administrators. Whenever something bad or weird would happen, we would look to each other and affirm: "it's only a movie." I'm not a real City Manager; I just play one on TV.

Dr. Mark Anschutz, an Episcopal Priest, gave a homily several years ago about the travails of Moses. Moses sought to lead the Chosen People out of slavery and into the Promised Land, but they whined, rebelled, and generally acted-up the whole distance. Dr. Anschutz suggested that on our really bad days we should remember what Moses had to endure. And, indeed, on really bad days I will often get a text from my wife, Emily: "Remember Moses."

A resilient manager realizes that it is only a movie.

3. It's Lonely at the Top; Get a Family Plan

Google "it's lonely at the top" and get over 35 million hits. It must really, really be lonely at the top. One hit is a cartoon of a man telling his colleague, "We were lonely at the bottom and in the middle. I'm sure we'll get used to being lonely at the top."

*Ev'rybody knows my name
But it's just a crazy game
Oh, it's lonely at the top.*
Randy Newman

People with whom managers interact mostly want something. Department directors rarely drop by with good news, they are more likely to make a confession or delegate a problem up to the manager. No telephone call between 10 p.m. and 8 a.m. brings good news. And then there are the perpetual questions: What do you think about this? What should we do about that? It's enough to make a manager break down into tears and collapse in a fetal position. Then the resilient manager gets up, looks in the mirror, smiles, and says, "It's show time!"

The problem of loneliness is not trivial. Because of the 24/7 nature of the work, managers often don't make time for friends and family. Not only can life be lonely for the manager, it can be intensely lonely for the family, especially the partner and children. This leads us to the issue of life-work balance, a concept that presumes a dichotomy that may or may not exist: I have only one life. I work, therefore I am.

Roberto Morachel was a former local government planner and architect, originally from Mexico. Among Roberto's many distinguishing characteristics was that he did not live in two worlds. Roberto didn't separate work and family. If you worked with Roberto, you were part of his family and he shared everything. Even when someone was poor at reciprocating, Roberto never gave up. He was not only a good friend to his co-workers; he helped co-workers be friends with each other. The extent of Roberto's family was evident at his memorial service. Roberto was not a lonely man because he refused to be. He successfully brought home and work together into a single and fulfilling life.

The critical question is what work-life style is right for individual managers and their families? Far too many managers suffer in relationships that lack mutual understanding and mutual accommodation. Some end in divorce; others continue in perpetual misery. Many managers express regret for missing the formative years of their children. Lost years cannot be recovered, but every day offers a new start.

As with all relationships, failure to communicate often lies at the core of family dysfunction. Spouses of managers commonly lament to my spouse that their partners will not share their work challenges with them, a situation with which she has extensive experience. When the manager comes home he or she will not share the day. Managers, on the other hand, lament the inability to go home and put work behind them. They have been talking and problem-solving all day. Thus, a communication paradox emerges.

*How the hell can a person
Go to work every morning
And come home in the evening
With nothing to say?*
John Prine, Angel from
Montgomery

Supportive homes do not just happen and do not happen unilaterally. Like building a city management team and developing trust with elected officials, creating a good home requires a lot of work and a collaborative approach. It sometimes requires managers to demonstrate at home the same patience they give their council members.

Helping mitigate the loneliness of managers is a large family of peers. Managers can say things to other managers that they cannot say to anyone else. Managers may play golf, hike, go to the opera, or vacation together, but they don't have to in order to get the peer family benefit. They do, however, have to spend time together. Connection and trust only come through time. ICMA, AFI, state associations, and regional organizations provide the opportunities.

For itinerate managers peer relationships can be especially valuable. Managers that move from one community to another often arrive knowing no one and with no organizational history or support system. As with a military family, relocations further test family resiliency when it is most needed. I have always admired managers who could do this, but did not fully understand the experience until last year when I moved from a community where I had worked over 29 years to become manager in a city that I had never even visited. Charlotte is as welcoming and friendly as any city can be. People are intensely nice in Charlotte. Nonetheless, 2013 was the loneliest year of my professional career and underscored the importance of strong support at home and from my network of peer managers.

A resilient manager builds and nurtures a big family.

4. Be Happy

John Jacobs, co-founder of Life is Good®, promotes optimism. The company's products feature t-shirts with stick figures and happy talk: *Who feels it knows it; Do what you love; Keep it simple; Remember where you came from. Enjoy the ride.* Other bromides appear aimed at the dominant city manager demographic: *Youth knows no age; It's not the years in your life, it's the life in your years.*

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all ...are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

The success of Life is Good® suggests that people desire hope and optimism. Consider the opposite expressions: *Do what you love v. Hate what you do; or Enjoy the ride v. the Ride stinks.* Unfortunately, managers are at great risk of cynicism, which can metastasize into negativity and pessimism that spreads throughout the city's executive ranks and deep into the organization.

This essay began with a depression test. Google "happiness test" and get 70 million hits. People desire happiness and many people actually are. Happiness happens – if we're willing to recognize it. From Covey to Collins, the "power of positive thinking" always emerges as a key leadership trait. Resilient managers do not waste their time wallowing in despair and they inoculate themselves against cynicism.

A resilient manager knows that life is good and that happiness is a worthy pursuit.

5. Believe

A major factor in the resilience of many managers is faith. Ron and Jan Kimble remember the words of Shane Page, their preacher, at Jamie's funeral, "This was not God's plan; this was her assailant's plan. God's plan was for Jamie to live. God's plan now is for Jamie's spirit and memory to live so that others may live." It is this very faith that drives Ron and Jan in their efforts to bring awareness to the issues of domestic violence.

Harry Jones gives the credit for his physical survival and resilience to a higher power, to which he boldly gives witness in his inspirational talks.

For some, divine providence is a better explanation than "luck." For others, however, faith in divine providence or commitment to a particular religion is an intellectual challenge. A character in the Tom Robbins' novel, Even Cowgirls Get the Blues, states, "I believe in everything; nothing is sacred/I believe in nothing; everything is sacred."

Regardless where one lands on matters of religious faith, resiliency requires belief in something. Managers, like all people, need a set of personal values as an anchor. The values may grow out of the words of prophets or philosophers or a simple belief in the dignity of all people and our indomitable spirit to survive and thrive.

Resilient managers believe...

*Everybody's wonderin' what and where they all came from.
Everybody's worryin' 'bout where they're gonna go when the whole thing's done.
But no one knows for certain and so it's all the same to me.
I think I'll just let the mystery be.*

*Some say they're goin' to a place called Glory and I ain't saying it ain't a fact.
But I've heard that I'm on the road to purgatory and I don't like the sound of that.
Well, I believe in love and I live my life accordingly.
But I choose to let the mystery be.
Iris Dement, Let the Mystery Be*



Ron Carlee's career in local government began in 1975, as Assistant to the Mayor of Birmingham, Alabama. He is currently City Manager of Charlotte, North Carolina; appointed April 1, 2013. From 1980 to 2009, Ron worked for Arlington, Virginia in a variety of positions, serving as County Manager from 2001-2009. From 2009-2013, Ron was Executive in Residence and Chief Operating Officer at ICMA, with an appointment as Adjunct Professor at the George Washington University. Ron earned a Doctorate in Public Administration from George Mason University and is a Fellow in the National Academy of Public Administration. He is married to Emily Cross.

Ron can be followed on Twitter @roncarlee. October 4, 2014

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