



# How to Drive Frontline Engagement in an Era of Change and Disruption

meQuilibrium

## INTRODUCTION

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To drive the engagement and performance your organization needs, you need a team of frontline employees who can adapt in this era of change and disruption. As the public face of your company, these employees hold the key to your organization's reputation and success. **Equip them to withstand challenge and adversity by providing them with the tools to build resilience.**

Their temperament, their capacity to cope with stress, their ability to stay in control of their emotions, and their overall wellbeing directly impact a customer's impression of your organization. As we've seen, time and again, dissatisfied and absent employees can quite literally put your reputation and revenue on the line.

Even with all this influence, however, frontline employees have very little control over the conditions of their own work. Building adaptive thinking and behavior that better helps employees control their emotions under stress is a key investment in creating engagement that can translate change into positive transformation.

In fact, a global survey conducted by the McKinsey Group found that when leaders help frontline staff "feel a sense of ownership," transformations are 70 percent more likely to succeed. When frontline employees "take the initiative to drive change" themselves, that rate rises to 71 percent. And when both factors are present, that number further rises to 79 percent.<sup>[2]</sup>

Fostering resilience in these frontline employees not only helps them overcome the negative consequences of stress, but can optimize their full potential.

**By learning cognitive and emotional skills that reduce the degree and duration of episodes of discouragement, reluctance, or defeat, employees can quickly put negative events into perspective and search for alternative solutions that benefit both them and the company as a whole.**

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## THE CHALLENGE FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES FACE

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Surveys have shown that frontline employees are the least connected to the goals of the organization. In a study on employee engagement trends by Quantum Workplace, they ranked, "I understand the company's future plans for success" 16th in a list of drivers for engagement.<sup>[3]</sup> The same study shows large organizations are struggling with engagement most of all, with engagement numbers for organizations over 5,000 people decreasing by 2.5 percent in just a year.

Part of that trend may be due to a disconnect between managers and frontline employees. While the number one source of work-related stress for employers was work/life balance, the top source for employees was inadequate staffing, including lack of support and uneven workload.<sup>[4]</sup>

As a result of these pressures, **employees can develop problems affecting their physical and mental health, leading not only to poor engagement, but also to absenteeism and high turnover.** Studies have tied stress and other emotional factors to an increased risk of heart disease, smoking, alcohol use, physical inactivity, obesity, and insomnia. **One long-term study published in *Psychological Medicine* found that employees in high-stress work environments had twice the risk of major depression and anxiety.**<sup>[5]</sup> Another study published by *Psychosomatic Medicine* found high job strain associated with 45% higher risk for diabetes.<sup>[6]</sup>

The key issue behind these health-related problems seems to be the loss of control that employees feel over their environments. In another study published in *Applied Nursing Research*, lack of autonomy

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in a multinational company was associated with long absences, particularly among men.<sup>[7]</sup> In other studies, nurses in both Taiwan and England working in high-demand, low-control environment experienced higher rates of turnover.<sup>[8]</sup>

# OPTIMIZING FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES THROUGH RESILIENCE

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Despite the high prevalence of stress, many employees are reluctant to reach out and seek help due to stigma associated with these conditions. In addition, they may have other reasons not to look for assistance, including worries about privacy, confidentiality, quality of treatment, convenience, and cost.

**While existing wellness programs might help address the symptoms of stress (smoking, diet, alcohol), they don't address the roots of the problem by changing thinking and behaviors that lead to problems in the first place.** While 85 percent of US employees promote EAPs as a solution to stress, only 5 percent of employees take advantage of EAPs to help them cope with their emotional problems.<sup>[11]</sup>

**As an alternative means of addressing workplace stress, many employers are turning to resilience training.** From the Latin for "to leap back," resilience is the ability to quickly recover from adversity, as well as the capability to navigate difficult day-to-day conditions and thrive and persevere in the face of ongoing challenges.

Resilience training provides a set of learnable, cognitive patterns and proactive behaviors that can be used to reframe perceived setbacks or challenges, and re-imagine what is possible in new circumstances. As a result, it gives employees control over their thoughts, feelings, reactions, and behaviors, so they develop the capacity to deal with change.

**US employers are implementing resilience training as a means of handling workplace stress at rates faster than any other wellness program.** A survey by Willis Towers Watson found that employers intend to address the root causes of workplace behavioral health issues. **More than one third (36%) have already assessed and taken steps to reduce stress and improve resiliency; another 47% are planning or considering action over the next three years.**<sup>[4]</sup>

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# OPTIMIZING FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES THROUGH RESILIENCE

In the past 30 years, some 600 peer-reviewed studies have looked at the psychological effects of resilience, <sup>[13]</sup> concluding that it is a powerful, effective, lifelong coping mechanism for stress that has measurable effects on a wide range of worker health and performance outcomes.

Resilience training uses cognitive behavioral therapy tools to identify key thinking patterns that increase stress. Personalized coaching then promotes awareness of these patterns and provides skills to decrease detrimental responses to perceived stress.

## Resilient people possess seven key qualities, defined through more than 20 years' worth of research:

— **Emotion regulation** – The ability to control feelings in the midst of adversity.

— **Impulse control** – The ability to shut out distraction and urges and to restrain reactions.

— **Causal analysis** – The ability to identify the causes of a problem.

— **Self-efficacy** – The sense of mastery and confidence.

— **Realistic optimism** – The belief that things can change for the better, that you can control your life's direction.

— **Empathy** – The ability to read and react to others' social and emotional cues.

— **Reaching out** – The ability to seek out new challenges and relationships.

## RESILIENCE AND POSITIVE WORKPLACE OUTCOMES

Increased resilience can lead to positive outcomes that benefit your business. When employees become more resilient, they reconnect to a sense of purpose, becoming more engaged and productive and feeling more confident and empowered. They are **less likely to miss work, burn out or quit—decreasing absenteeism, turnover, and use of the family medical leave act, which improves your bottom line.**

One study shows that a 10 percent increase in resilience translates into a 0.45 percent improvement in performance and a 2.45 percent reduction in avoidable absence.<sup>[14]</sup> In another sample of 2,000 workers, high resilience scores were associated with 27 percent less depression, 12 percent fewer absences, and 14 percent higher productivity—as well as statistically significant improvements in job satisfaction, decreased burnout, and fewer sleep problems.<sup>[13]</sup>

These programs can be particularly effective for frontline employees who are exposed to high degrees of stress. One Fortune 500 media company that operates large call centers, for example, suffered from chronically high absence rates due to company-wide stress. While existing programs

such as EAP, yoga, and meditation were helpful, participation rates were low.

The company decided to implement a resilience program, training human resource leadership and call center management in the program to obtain buy-in, and launching the strategy company-wide through an aggressive campaign employing on-site events, posters, flyers, and emails to encourage employees to participate.

Employees who took part in a resilience training “boot camp” reaped significant reductions in stress and improved performance, with their resilience scores increasing by 8.3 percent, and their stress management abilities increasing by 20.2 percent. Moreover, employees who participated in the program experienced 40 percent fewer absences after six months, despite having similar rates to other employees before they started the program.

Such improvements in productivity and morale can have direct financial benefits for your firm. **A good resilience program can show 12 percent improvement in resilience—and often times higher.** According to one estimate, this level of improvement could increase top-line performance

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by as much as \$600 per participant. In addition, lower absence and turnover rates could net an additional \$200—for an overall ROI of \$800. (With a 16 percent increase in resilience, the same analysis found, a company could save over \$1000 per participant.)

By improving morale and increasing engagement, increased resilience could very well have many intangible benefits as well, turning frontline employees into brand ambassadors.

**In short, resilience is the most effective strategy for dealing with stress and its resultant workplace costs, and can radically improve employee mental health, morale, and productivity. In addition, resilience can reduce absenteeism, turnover, and poor job performance.** Having trained, motivated, and committed frontline employees is key to achieving higher market share as well as building your brand image, and strengthening all-important bonds with your customers.

A 12% improvement in  
resilience could result in...

**\$600**

**Boost in Top-line Performance**

**+**

**\$200**

**Savings in Absence & Turnover**

**=**

**\$800**

**ROI PER PARTICIPANT**

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## About meQuilibrium

meQuilibrium is the engagement and performance solution that harnesses behavioral psychology and neuroscience to unleash your organization's full potential. By unlocking the power of resilient people and teams, your organization can navigate even the most turbulent of times. Powered by the predictive meQ scores and data-driven insights, our solution uses a clinically-validated assessment and robust benchmarking to measure resilience and create personalized training programs that build team and employee skills. With meQuilibrium, you can equip each of your employees to discover and master the skills they need to overcome any obstacle, increase agility, gain adaptive capacity, and transform your organization.

To learn more about improving engagement and performance through the power of resilience, contact us at 617.274.8830 or visit us at [www.meQuilibrium.com](http://www.meQuilibrium.com).

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## NOTES

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