Mental Toughness: Resilient Leaders Thriving in a VUCA World

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Many of us intuitively know what mental toughness is. We sense it when we witness people who have it. We know it when we see it in our sports heroes. But what exactly is mental toughness? It’s often talked about around the water cooler, but until recently, has not been operationalized.

In the recent past, mental toughness was a vague notion. We now have a specific recipe of traits that create a hearty leadership meal. More importantly, although some traits are inborn, much of it can be developed in our leaders. That’s exactly what I do with our aspiring leaders, as a professor in the Engineering Management Program at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

Mental toughness is a moderately plastic personality trait which determines in large part how individuals respond mentally to stress, pressure, opportunity and challenge. Research shows that Mental Toughness scores correlate closely with performance, well-being, positive behavior and aspirations. As a concept, it embraces other well-known concepts such as hardiness, resiliency, grit, growth mindset, emotional intelligence, learned optimism, as well as most definitions of character/ethos.

Doug Strycharczyk and Dr. Peter Clough have developed a four-factor model that has held up well to the scrutiny of peer reviewed research. Over 100 papers have been published around the world on this mental toughness model.

1) **Challenge** – seeing challenge as an opportunity.
2) **Confidence** – having high levels of self-belief.
3) **Commitment** – being able to stick to tasks.
4) **Control** – believing that you control your destiny.

In Developing Mental Toughness: Coaching Strategies to Improve Performance, Resilience and Wellbeing, Strycharczyk and Clough note, closely coupled with traits of mental toughness we find key characteristics of high performing teams and individuals.

1) **Passion** – a high level of interest in their job, task, etc.
2) **High self-confidence** – a high level of confidence in their own abilities and their ability to deal with others
3) **Controlling the things they can** – and not worrying unnecessarily about that which cannot be controlled
4) **Resilience-dealing with setbacks** – the ability to bounce back
5) **See challenge rather than threat** – finding opportunities for self-development within each new challenge
6) **Focus** – the ability to clear the mind of unnecessary thoughts and clutter
7) **Ability to relax** – and can recognize when they need to relax
Imagine an aspiring manager given the choice of two options. Option ‘A’ is to take over a well-running department. The team performs at a high level, gets along well and the processes in place are mature and well developed. Option ‘B’ is what might be considered the exact opposite. A department that could be described as dysfunctional. It has struggled to complete tasks and deadlines. The team does not work well together and morale is low.

Given these two options, the mentally tough leader would often choose option ‘B’ because she has a ‘can do’ attitude and sees opportunity in the challenge. The mentally sensitive (opposite of mentally tough) manager might see a threat in option ‘B’ and typically avoids doing hard things. Therefore he would choose option ‘A.’

What kind of leader are you? What kind of leader do you aspire to be?

When you enroll in our Engineering Management program, you will be provided the tools to be the mentally tough and resilient manager that will be sought after in industry. Every corporation is looking for the kind of leader that gets things done in difficult circumstances. They are desperately searching for the kind of leaders that are the calm in the storm when uncertainty and change prevail.

The modern business world is often characterized as a VUCA environment. This acronym, first proposed in 1987, and largely based on the leadership concepts of Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, gained prominence in the military. It is defined by:

- Volatility
- Uncertainty
- Complexity
- Ambiguity

This is the kind of world where mentally tough leaders excel. This is the battlefield of the dynamic world of Engineering and high technology. Join our high performance team.