

ALL BUSINESS TRANSFORMATIONS NEED RESILIENCE

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39 Min.

- ◉ *The pace of change in the working world is only set to increase, just at a time when employee stress is reaching epidemic levels and increased wellbeing support during the pandemic is being withdrawn. This has led to a tremendous transformation fatigue.*
- ◉ *Transformations lead to heightened stress due to both increased workload and the stress of change. A lack of attention to this stress and human abilities to learn and grow contributes to the high failure rate of business transformations.*
Deploying a large-scale resilience skills strategy, both for individuals and at organizational level, could prevent transformation fatigue and greatly enhance the transformation success rate

This article is laid out in three sections. In the first section we share insights on the current state of transformation fatigue which is impacting people in most businesses. In the second section we lay out a new understanding of resilience and resilience skills and how this can help unlock a new way of addressing this. Finally, we show how a large scale skills based approach should be an important aspect of any transformations.

THE GROWING CHALLENGE OF TRANSFORMATION FATIGUE

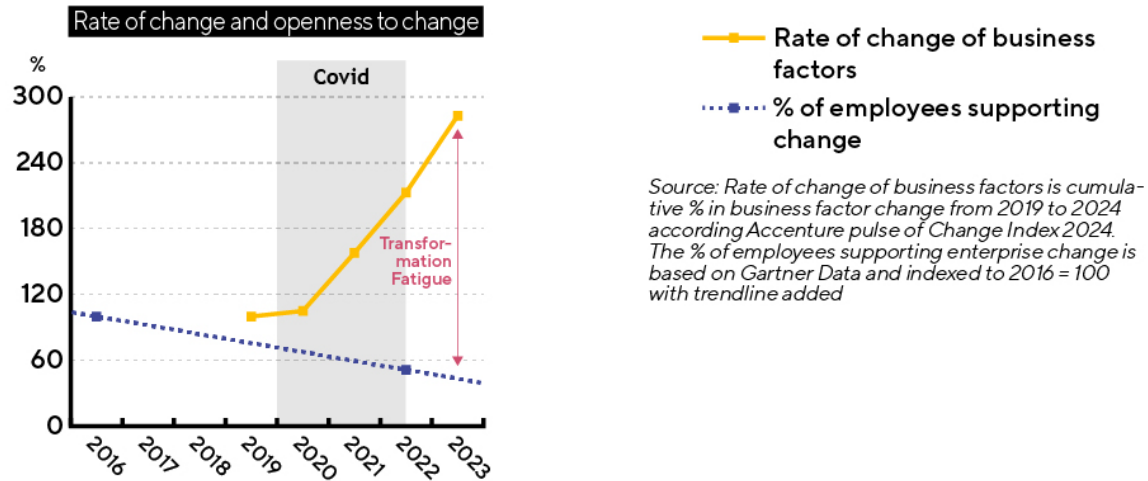
The pace of the working world has been accelerating for years. Driven by technological innovation and the digitisation of processes, as well as growing global competition and consumer expectations, the 24/7 work cycle, and the impact of social media. This has come against the backdrop of heightened uncertainty. Not least from the shift in working arrangements brought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

We believe the pace of changes to working life are set to increase, owing to the increased adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) and other factors. Companies that have already faced almost continuous transformations in the past decade, will be forced to transform even further. Deloitte, in their Global Human Capital Trends report, observed that nearly all businesses surveyed had already begun some form of transformation, compared to around 60% a decade ago.¹ In recent years, the average employee has faced 10 planned enterprise changes, up from just two in 2016.² These changes include restructuring to achieve efficiencies, a culture of transformation to unlock new ways of working, or the replacement of a legacy tech system.

Against this backdrop, transformation fatigue is understandable. And it's getting worse. In our view, transformation fatigue is made worse by employee stress, which has been rising dramatically

over the past 15 years. Given these factors, we'd go as far to say that all future business transformations will require resilience in the coming years. We've compiled two charts which underscore this, looking at data from the last 15 years (see chart below). Let's dive into implications of the charts in more detail.

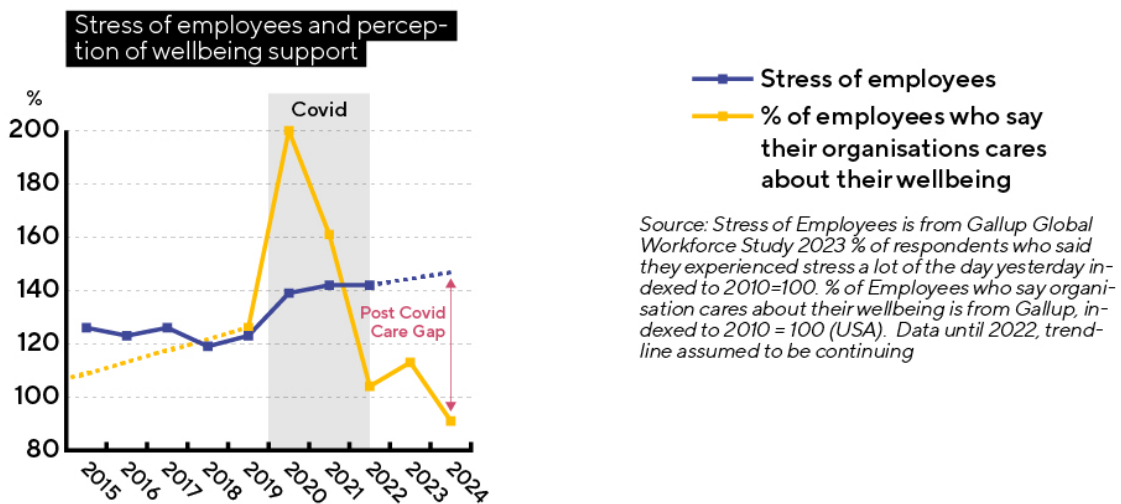
The transformation imperative and willingness to change
Transformation fatigue is real



The first chart provides evidence of the imbalance between transformation pressure and willingness:

1. **The rate of change** in businesses skyrocketed in 2019-2024. A 180% cumulative increase in business factors affecting companies has placed enormous change pressure on businesses.³
2. The proportion of **employees supporting enterprise change declined** significantly in 2016-22.⁴

Mismatch between stress and perception of support



The second chart points to the imbalance between stress and perception of support for wellbeing in the workplace

1. The proportion of employees who felt **stress ‘a lot of the working day’** increased steadily in 2009-22.⁵
2. The share of employees who felt **their organization cared about their wellbeing** saw a tremendous improvement during the pandemic. But this share has since declined precipitously.

From the charts and the data above, a few things are clear. **The pressures for business change are accelerating. While at the same time, employees’ willingness to change is declining.** It’s not hard to see why this is a problem. However, you look at it, there’s a tremendous transformation willingness gap – or transformation fatigue – as we call it.

Furthermore, stress is increasing. And this somewhat inversely mirrors the willingness to change trendline. In other words, the more stressed someone feels, the less receptive they are to change. The perception of **organisational support for wellbeing has collapsed** and is now below pre-pandemic levels. For many, check ins and flexible working are, like the pandemic, a distant and hazy memory. It’s interesting to note that while stress has been growing for years, in the years where workers perceived their employers to care more, this partially mitigated the impact of increased stress. **The post-pandemic care gap highlights current frustrations in both wellbeing departments and among employees.** Support has collapsed for wellbeing, just as stress hits an all-time high. This is a source of frustration for many employees. It’s led to a decline in trust between businesses and their employees and is weighing on employee retention.

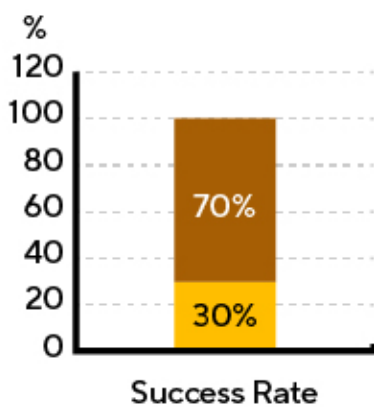
And finally, the pandemic period also provides further unique insights. During this period, the **rate of change in business factors impacting organisations was 50% year on year.** This represents the highest ever rate of change in the Accenture Pulse of Change survey.⁷ There was also a staggering 100% increase **in the perception of organisational support for wellbeing.** And surprisingly, during this time, the most important organisational transformations we faced happened surprisingly smoothly. *To us, this implies that an increased focus on employee wellbeing during times of transformation can help smooth the path of any potential changes.* Against this backdrop, let’s look in more detail at why most business transformations fail.

WHY DO BUSINESS TRANSFORMATIONS FAIL?

The majority of business transformations fail. The data in the chart below is from McKinsey (see chart below). It found that less than 30% of business transformations succeed.⁸ This failure rate has continued – in 2021 McKinsey authors write “Less than one-third of respondents—all of whom had been part of a transformation in the past five years—say their companies’ transformations have been successful at both improving organizational performance and sustaining those improvements over time”.² The reasons for this trend are decidedly human, as shown in an examination of the causes of failure.

Transformations fail primarily for human reasons

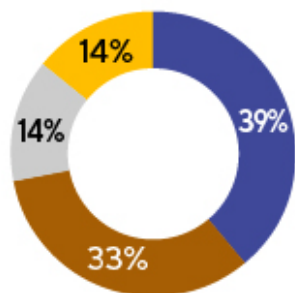
Transformations often fail



- Succeed
- Fail

Source: Scott Keller and Colin Price *Beyond Performance: How Great Organisations Build Ultimate Competitive Advantage – Data and Analysis from McKinsey*

Reasons for failure



- Employee resistance to change
- Management behaviour does not support change
- Inadequate resources or budget
- Other obstacles

This mirrors an important study by The Boston Consulting Group (BCG). It underscored the importance of business transformations addressing the hearts of employees, not just their heads and hands.¹⁰ In the study, BCG showed that transformations that explicitly address the head (clear

vision and priorities), hands (agile execution), and heart (inspiring and empowering) have a 96% success rate. Those that don't explicitly address these three aspects of human experience only have a success rate of around 30%.

ALL ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE IS HUMAN CHANGE

Transformations have a strong impact on workers. They come at a human cost. According to an article by the Harvard Business review, 55% of employees faced significant challenges to their own health, their team relationships, and their work environment during a business transformation.¹¹ Transformations require and result in a lot of change. So, fundamentally, **all transformation and organisational change is human change**. Employees have to learn new ways of thinking and behaving, as well as new skills.

We need to ask what at first may seem an unusual question: How is it best for people to feel, in order to navigate these changes? While this question might at first seem out of place, as we dig deeper into our human behaviour and psychology, we will see why this is important.

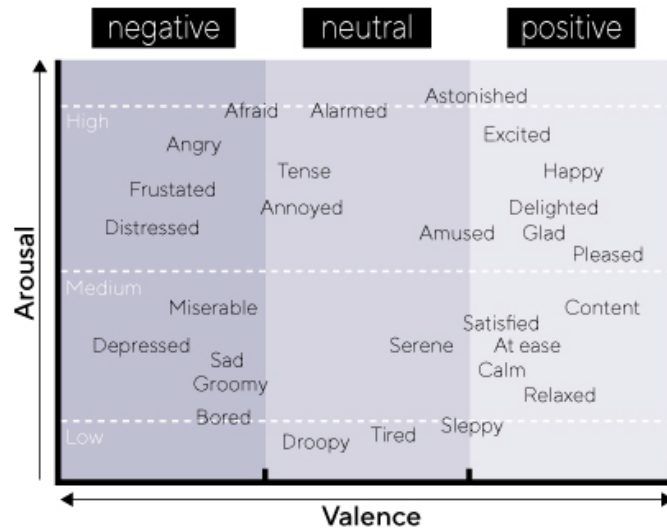
THE IMPACT OF BUSINESS TRANSFORMATIONS ON THE HUMAN BODY

As we seek to understand human resistance to transformation, or the human causes of transformation fatigue, we have to look deeper into our human nature. When we think about how humans respond to external challenges and stress, it's important to look at three different levels. The **(neuro)physiological, the psychological, and the behavioural levels**. What we observe at the behavioural level (for example resistance to transformation) is usually a reflection of what is going on at deeper physiological (for example less recovery, increased stress activation, less positive hormones) and psychological levels (fear, resistance, frustration). Our emotions combine both (neuro)physiological, psychological, and behavioural components. For example, emotions might get our heart beating faster (physiological), get us to think in a certain way (psychological), and engage in an action (behavioural).

Our emotions thus provide a fantastic window into our inner landscape. **They're actually signposts of our internal life**. At the physiological level they reliably signify the degree of arousal (nervous system activation) and the degree of valence of the activation (basically how positive or negative this activation is, manifested in the state of our hormone system). We can use our emotions as internal landmarks to get a sense of where we are on the inner map of our experience. The chart below shows the well-established **valence arousal map of our inner landscape**,¹² and the emotional signposts that show us where we are on the map.

The landscape of our experience

Valence arousal map of our inner experience



Source: Awaris Resilience Framework

At Awaris, we like to summarise this map into four important internal states; **stressed, growing, regenerating, and letting go**. We believe that true resilience requires us to be able to shift between these four internal states. We can summarize these four internal states below.

Stressed – *High arousal and negative valence*. Being stressed is a state of intensity. High performance for a brief period and high energy use. This is a common state in modern workplaces. High arousal is often due to urgency, complexity, or high workloads. It can be combined with some kind of threat or potential perceived loss. These states are increasingly likely to be experienced regularly as part of working life. Especially in negative working environments, with high urgency tasks, or tasks with high risks or costs associated with them. These states are valid for a short period of time, but not healthy for a long period. It's not useful for people to get stuck in stress. They'd expend energy with insufficient reward. Getting stuck in the stress zone for too long is where the symptoms of chronic stress show up.

Growing – *High arousal and positive valence*. An expected reward activates us. We're more likely to learn, grow, and perform well in this state. We're expending energy for some future benefit, and so this still involves a short-term imbalance. This is a state of learning, with heightened intensity but also with an expected reward. We feel good and are growing. This state could equally be mapped to what's commonly called 'thriving'. This is naturally an ideal state to be in for transformations. But because it's still high energy, the energy cost outweighs the rewards after a while, even with positive valence.

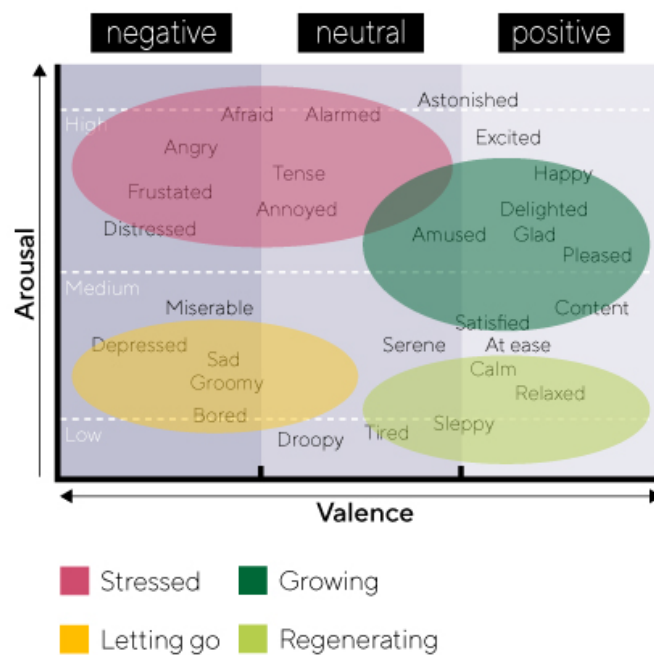
Regenerating – *Low arousal and positive valence*. We feel safe. We can relate to others in a calm way. This helps us to regenerate, gather energy, or strengthen social bonds. This is an important zone. It's one where we are recuperating energy, healing, and strengthening connections. This most

closely resembles a zone of wellbeing. It's vital for long-term health, but staying in this zone for too long wouldn't be appropriate in dealing with workplace challenges or hitting deadlines.

Letting go – *Low arousal and negative valence*. A perceived threat or loss is present. It's time to let go, unlearn, and withdraw. This can be an important state to shift into as part of being resilient. In today's world, we forget about the importance of letting go, letting be, and not acting. This can be especially true during business transformations. However, getting stuck in this zone for too long would be problematic.

Resilience means shifting between four internal states

Awaris Resilience Framework



Source: Awaris Resilience Framework

If we now return to the subject of transformations, we see that transformations can increase our stress level and the degree of negativity we experience, by confronting us with potential threats or losses.

The impact of transformations on our physiology

They increase our stress levels and shift the valence of our experience to the negative

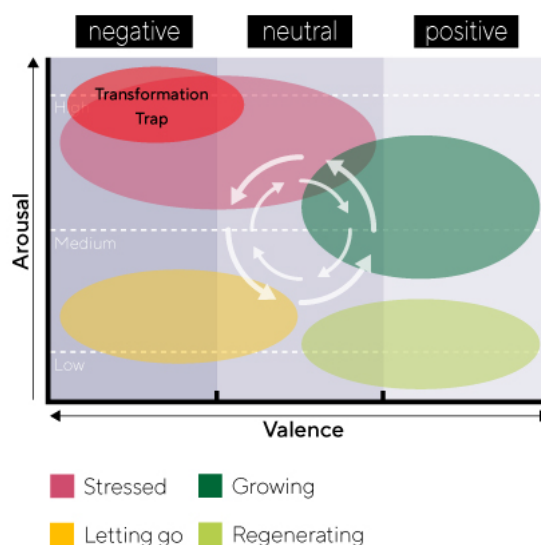
Transformations lead to heightened stress...	...and negatively impact our emotional state
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heightened urgency. • Decreased productivity in core tasks due to process changes, breaks or friction. • Higher workload due to transformation tasks plus existing workload. • Uncertainty about roles, tasks, colleagues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Declines in morale, motivation and work engagement. • Threats to status. • Disruption in social connectedness at work, and loss of colleagues. • Heightened negativity – a lot of communication is about risks, problems, urgency.

Source: Awaris

So, if we look at the map on the next page, we can see how business transformations can push employees into the top left corner; into stress (negative valence and high arousal). We call this the **transformation trap** (see chart below). Getting stuck in the top left of the map represents chronic stress. It's well established how poor chronic stress is for our health. Further, it's terrible for our openness and ability to change and grow. The ability to be resilient, in our view, means being able to navigate around this landscape. Despite external workplace pressures and stress. It most definitely means not getting stuck in one corner, such as the **transformation trap**.

Resilience: The ability to circulate through the states

Transformation trap – getting stuck in stress



Source: Awaris Resilience Framework

Employees being able to shift their state is crucial for any business transformation. A transformation needs **phases of intensity and stress**. This is both natural and unavoidable. It'll also require **time spent in the growing zone**, to learn and adopt new habits and mindsets. It'll require time for **people to regenerate**. To recover their energy and their motivation. And finally, business transformations need phases where **employees let go of old patterns and ways of being**.

What does this tell us? **It firstly tells us that all (successful) transformations will involve circling through the states**. But it also begs questions. How much change can people handle in a short period of time? How hard is it for workers to shift from stressed to growing to regenerating to letting go? Children can handle a lot of learning and growth, which is why they are so resilient. However, as we get older, we become less able to learn and grow, even though neuroplasticity tells us that it is still possible to change as we age. We believe there's a limit to how much learning and growth someone can handle. For businesses, they should therefore be wary of implementing too much business transformation, too fast, while expecting positive results. They also need to focus on maintaining the resilience of their employees in the face of said transformations, given the limits to learning and growth.

HOW CAN ORGANISATIONS REMAIN RESILIENT DURING BUSINESS TRANSFORMATIONS?

In [previous blog posts](#), we wrote about the [resilience skills](#) and [competencies](#) we all have. Further, we talk about workplace resilience in much more depth in our book the *[Resilient Culture: How Collective Resilience Leads to Business Success](#)* which is released on **July 3rd**. At Awaris, our resilience framework highlights 12 skills and three resilience competencies that help in maintaining our resilience. Fundamentally, we believe resilience isn't something fixed or static. It's not about enduring hardship, without complaint. It's about moving around the landscape of human experience. Business transformations bring two types of stress – the **stress of heightened workload** and the **stress of change**. Practicing resilience skills can help to move us around the map of our experience, and cope with both challenges (*see chart below*).

Stresses of transformations

Different skills help us deal with different stress types

Resilience skills which help us deal with workload	Resilience skills which help us deal with change and uncertainty
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Movement and exercise• Sleep and recovery• Healthy nutrition• Relaxation• Attention regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Positive outlook• Connection to purpose• Social connection• Emotional regulation• Compassion and care

Source: Awaris Resilience Framework

STOP FIXING THE GEARS AND REFILL THE OIL INSTEAD

In many business transformations, the focus is on processes, structures, systems, and key performance indicators (KPIs). The human side is often only addressed from the point of view of communication strategies. From what we've seen working with 250 businesses, there's no real focus on how people feel at work. Or on helping them deal with the stresses they face. This blindness can be extreme. Leaders can spend months or even years ignoring some of the biggest issues they need to address, given that transformations fail primarily due to human factors. The story below highlights this.

A real conversation we had with the leaders of an important transformation in a global automotive company, following a scandal. We were having a session about processing emotions.

Chris: "What proportion of your work time is occupied with dealing with conflicts, difficult emotions, and negativity due to this crisis? How much energy or productivity are you losing because of this?"

Leaders: "Not sure. Maybe 20-30%?"

Chris (somewhat stunned): "Sorry, how much?"

Leaders (in unison): "Somewhere between 20-30% of our time."

Chris: "If you had an engineering problem which was costing you 20-30% of your time, how long would it take you to address and fix it?"

Leaders: "We'd identify it two weeks. And fix it in three to 12 weeks, max."

Chris: "Okay. So, how long have these emotional issues been draining you and costing you time?"

Leaders: "Between 12 to 18 months."

Chris: "When did you first start talking about addressing it?"

Leaders: (Silence.)

One leader: Today. Just now.

The story above highlights the lack of focus we consistently see on the human side of performance in organisations. Anyone who has tried to maintain high performance as an athlete knows something business leaders tend to ignore. When athletes go through intense times, especially at competitions, they focus on maximising their performance. However, **they also prioritise their rest and recovery, ensuring they stay focused**. All to ensure that they can maintain their performance. Businesses would do well to take note of this, especially during business transformations. Rest and recovery require as much focus and performance does.

EMPOWERING EMPLOYEES TO NAVIGATE THE EXPERIENCE LANDSCAPE

Given that business performance is [closely correlated](#) with staff wellbeing, companies really need to address the impact of high workloads. We see three crucial skills which can help employees with this. These skills should be viewed as organisation-wide resilience skills, which need to be learnt and strengthened across teams and the wider business. The two most relevant resilience skills for workload management, especially in transformations, are **attention regulation, and rest, recovery, and relaxation**. Let's look at these in more detail now.

1. Attention regulation

This is the first chronic weakness when it comes to companies managing high workloads. Basically, at work, everything is viewed as being urgent. It needs to be done now, or better yet, yesterday. The skill of attention regulation underlines both performance; the ability to get stuff done, as well as the ability to relax; to let go of thinking and rumination and pay attention to other things. We've seen in many businesses, especially management populations with high workloads, that attention regulation has the highest correlation with resilience. At the organisational level, this skill can be improved by a number of core practices. If learned effectively, this can lead to organisation-wide resilience skills. For example, if we're working on attention regulation with teams or departments, we might train individual level practices like:

- ◉ Working with our devices and minimising interruptions.
- ◉ Limiting email checking.
- ◉ Working with our calendar to strengthen focus time and deep work.

At the team or business-wide level, we'd work on developing:

- ◉ Shared focus time.
- ◉ Meeting-free times (or days, ideally).
- ◉ Shared agreements on email processing.
- ◉ How to protect focus time as a team.
- ◉ How to reduce multitasking demands in individuals.

Such agreements strengthen the ability of entire departments and organisational units to get work done. It helps to reduce their felt workload and need to be supported in times of business transformations.

2. Rest, recovery, and relaxation

In our work with clients, we often ask participants when they first check their emails in the morning, and when they last check them in the evening. In global organisations, especially Anglo Saxon or Asian ones, an answer given by at least 50% of the participants is 7am and 11pm. This is a stunningly bad way to live and generally unnecessary. For example, we recently worked with an engineering team in a high-performance environment. We asked them to scan two months of emails, to assess the causes of the emails sent outside work hours.

They found not a single email which raised an issue that couldn't be addressed within three-to-six hours the next working day. This is a widespread (and damaging) habit. People don't check their emails because they have to. They check them because they think there's a vague expectation they should. Or for many, they're simply addicted to the stimulus of emails and can't stop checking them.

Companies need to support clear workplace boundaries, to ensure employees have enough rest and recovery outside working hours. The best way of doing this is clear email agreements at a team or department level. Or better yet, turn off servers outside working hours, as some companies are doing. This will help workers recover and to sleep, as checking emails late at night inhibits sleep. And perversely, will actually make them *more productive* in the long run.

A telling conversation: *Liane was leading a session on the importance of having breaks, with an professional services firm.*

Liane: “Relaxation is so important. It’s crucial to take breaks during the day. For example, I’d encourage you to stand at the window and just be. Sigh. Breathe. Gaze into the distance. Doing so will help shift your attention from a short-term and narrow focus on screens, to a wider perspective. A bit like awareness style practices, which can help us relax. This only happens when we look far.”

Employee A: “Er, for how long?” (said with a confused look on her face).

Liane: “At least a minute, better two.”

Employee B: “How often?”

Liane: “At least three times a day.”

Employee A: “Sorry, but that’s impossible. I’m too busy to spend three minutes doing nothing – just gazing aimlessly.”

Employee B: “And what’ll people think? It’ll look like I’m being lazy.”

Employee B: “I guess I could drink a coffee and hold a document... So others might think I’m working, rather than just relaxing?”

Liane (puzzled): “Are you seriously telling me that you can’t take three minutes of breaks during your day? And that others would judge you, unless you can find a way to make it look productive?”

Employees A and B (in unison): “Yes!”

The story above highlights common, largely hostile attitudes towards relaxation in businesses. Indeed, when you tell someone in the modern workforce to relax, especially one in the middle of a transformation, it’s usually considered to be some kind of putdown or criticism. This is misguided. Relaxation is a skill. One which is crucial for maintaining performance. Relaxation is necessary during the workday. It’s also connected with one of the core aspects of transformations; namely letting go.

Most transformations tend to add new processes, products, and KPIs. This means many people get stuck in complexity and bloated workloads. To offset these new stressors, businesses also need to relax. To let go of some KPIs, processes, and products, to make way for new ones. It’s interesting to look at this in light of the pandemic. One of the crucial things that happened was that companies let go of some requirements and processes. They found that people were able to shift their behaviours and work modes.

Relaxation is important in the workday. But particularly towards the end of the working day. Both are crucial to recovery.¹³ Together, they contribute to our ability to see the whole and not get

overwhelmed by details and speed. However, most businesses fundamentally don't believe in relaxation, and the art of letting go, which is connected to this. For this reason, they often get blinded by to do lists and deadlines. They don't understand the importance of making space for growth.

In our view, this is one of the biggest weaknesses that businesses have, in terms of organization-wide resilience. We often get asked how things can be improved in this domain. It's simple. Offer clear company-wide messages about the importance of relaxation. Remind employees to take breaks. Tell them it's fine to look out of the window, from time to time. Strongly encourage team-level agreements on work boundaries. Measure email traffic outside of work hours. Analyze the source. Do all the things companies are good at doing when they have a financial or customer service problem.

All employees should know that rest, recovery, and relaxation is inextricably linked to learning and growth. And on top of all of this, it's important to take the brave step of letting go of processes, KPIs, and products. This is the real basis for making space for growth.

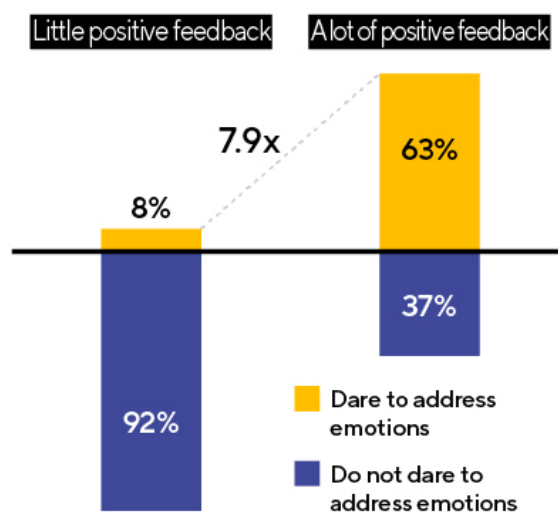
EMPOWERING EMPLOYEES DEAL WITH THE STRESS OF CHANGE

We've seen that specific resilience skills also help people deal with the personal stress of change. These skills can be grouped into a competency called [Social Integration](#). The name alone should make all transformation leaders pay attention. In our eyes, it's the social fabric of an organisation that helps people adapt to change and learn and grow. So, these are not just individual skills, but are skills that show up more at the We level. Specifically, we've seen that practicing five specific resilience skills supports individuals' and especially and organisation's ability to deal with change:

1. Positive outlook.
2. Emotional regulation.
3. Connection to purpose.
4. Social connection.
5. Compassion and care.

1. Positive outlook – We’ve worked with over 130 teams on anchoring habits and practices which build these resilience skills at the team level. These practices lead to powerful outcomes. For example, teams that anchor three to five practices of positivity in their teamwork are **three times more innovative and adaptable, according to our data** (see chart below). This is underpinned by their improved ability to build emotional intelligence into their team and address team emotions. Teams can anchor positive habits in their teamwork through starting meetings with what went well. Appreciating each other and avoiding blame. And frequently giving positive feedback. Teams that regularly give positive feedback feel more connected, motivated, and joyful. Our data shows that 81% of these teams describe themselves as joyful, compared to just 36% that do not give positive feedback.

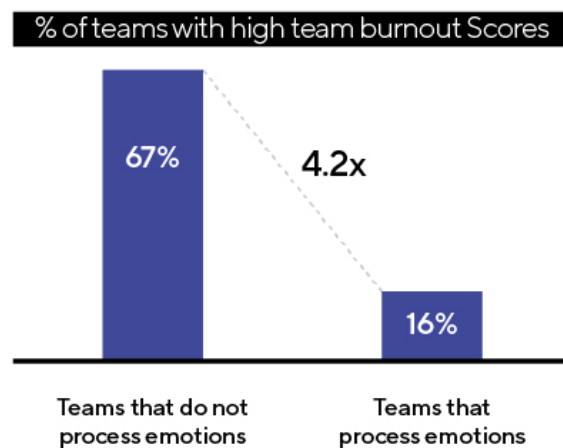
Positive teams are more likely to process emotions



Source: Awaris Data of over 500 team members, 60% of total number of teams gave each other positive feedback rarely and 40% frequently

2. Emotional regulation – The above habits of positivity tie into the next skill; supporting teams’ willingness to deal with emotions and improving their team-based emotional intelligence. Being better able to emotionally regulate reduces stress and burnout at the team level. A key habit here is addressing emotions that are present in the team. Practices that are helpful for emotional regulation include ‘check ins’ and ‘check outs’, at the start and end of meetings. Naming emotions that are present. And emotional mapping. Our data shows that teams using these practices are **four times less likely to have elevated burnout scores** (see chart below).

Teams that process emotions have lower burnout risk



Source: Awaris Data of over 500 team members, 64% of teams avoid talking about team emotions, 35% feel emotionally intelligent

3. Connection to purpose – Business transformation leaders need to communicate the vision of the transformation. Above all, they need to make it personal. Helping employees understand how their day-to-day work will be impacted, and what it means for them. Studies have shown that connection to purpose is crucial in supporting resilience, particularly in times of transformation.¹⁴ Concrete practices here include storytelling (giving the transformation meaning), team or departmental purpose mapping, and impact reflections and feedback. Others include mentorship, coaching, and peer-to-peer-recognition programmes. These all must be an important part of transformational business journeys.

4. Social connection – Practices which build the resilience skill of social connection really make a difference. This can be done by making time for social connection. Whether through after work drinks, buddy or peer groups, end of week check outs, and many other small habits. A story from one transformation leader we worked with underscores this.

“I invited the leaders of two divisions, whose merger I was responsible for, to a three-hour kick-off meeting. The transformation we were engaged in was complex. The merger of two divisions was ongoing, while at the same time, a new transformation across a large new business had also been started. It was a transformation nested within another transformation. When everyone had arrived, I closed the door. I simply informed everyone that we had no agenda. The only item was all to get to know each other. We spent the next three hours just getting to know each other in larger and smaller groups. It made all the difference.”

5. Compassion and care – Compassion and care, especially from leaders, also makes a big difference in helping employees cope with the stress of change. During the pandemic, compassionate leadership suddenly became a hot and also hard topic.¹⁵ But things have largely returned to business as normal since then. We believe leaders have to understand they don't just have a duty of performance. They also have duty of care. Whether in times of crisis, or in fact in all aspects of

modern work, **care and performance (or ‘careformance’, as we call it) are inseparable**. This approach must be followed if leading through transformations. Too much damage is done in many transformations for people to feel safe to engage and contribute. Being conscious about care as a leader – and in fact as an organisation – is the key to making transformations work. For the reasons above, we clearly believe all business transformations need resilience *and* care. Without them, they’ll fail due to human friction. Or perhaps more accurately, human pain. Transformation budgets should include large-scale, resilience-skill-building budgets. It’s like oiling the machinery and not just fiddling with the gears.

*In our forthcoming book, **The Resilient Culture: How Collective Resilience Leads to Business Success**, we write extensively about developing organisation-wide resilience skills and how to make this happen. It is published by Kogan Page and will be released at all good bookstores and online on July 3rd 2024.*

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