

# REDEFINING URGENCY: SOCIAL IMPACT LEADERSHIP AND DYNAMIC RESILIENCE

*Heather Anderson*

**W**hen I started my career as a management consultant in the 1990s, the concept of personal resilience was mostly relegated to, well, the personal realm. You might go see a therapist to build your resilience in dealing with trauma, but you likely would not hear the word thrown around in boardrooms. In keeping with the era's strict compartmentalization of the personal and professional, listing "demonstrated resilience in managing the latest client project" as an accomplishment for a performance review at work would impress few.

Fast forward to 2012, when I joined Global Health Corps (GHC), a leadership development and global health nonprofit committed to building the next generation of

health equity leaders. I was drawn to GHC's ambitious mission to infuse global health with talented young professionals with diverse skill sets and perspectives. Through its fellowship program, GHC was recruiting American and African nationals, placing them within global health organizations in the United States and East and Southern Africa, and training them to be effective, collaborative leaders for sustained impact across their careers.

GHC was then a three-year-old organization that shared some similarities with my now three-year-old daughter: unrivaled passion, a pace that could be breathtaking at times, and a level of commitment that bordered on stubbornness. And like my toddler's very real risk of melting down in the face of overwhelm, the danger of burnout among our team at GHC was ever-present, as it is for so many leaders working in social impact.

Enter resilience, a concept which has risen to prominence in both the private and nonprofit sectors over the past two decades. Over the past eight plus years, our team at GHC has come to embrace resilience as a critical leadership practice, a muscle that leaders must intentionally strengthen. Accordingly, we have made this "resilience strength training" a priority for our global team, the 1000+ and growing leaders who engage in our fellow and alumni programs, and our organization.

We've had many opportunities to both demonstrate and deepen our resilience since officially declaring it one of our top organizational values in 2018. Personally, since unexpectedly stepping into the chief executive officer (CEO) role after a challenging executive leadership transition in May 2019, I've found strong resilience muscles invaluable as I navigated the marathon of shoring up credibility, building a more effective and supported team, mobilizing resources in the face of shifts in the global health funding landscape, and strengthening our community.

Little did we know that 2019 was just a warm-up for 2020, which brought us all a global pandemic and a long overdue civil rights uprising against a backdrop of an increasingly divisive political landscape, all of

which continue to shape our lives in 2021. It turns out change really *is* the only constant, and it's coming at us quickly in our rapidly evolving world. This reality makes resilience more important than ever as a leadership trait.

## Static versus Dynamic Resilience

In the mid-20th century, psychologists began to use the term resilience to mean the ability to live a healthy, productive life after experiencing trauma. It then migrated into the engineering and ecology fields, where it came to describe the ability to be adaptable in the face of change within systems. Today, commonly accepted definitions of resilience tend to reflect the original, more static type of resilience as "the power or ability to return to the original form." But a more dynamic form of resilience—premised on ongoing transformation rather than simply recovering and returning to the status quo in response to change—is most important to the effectiveness of today's social impact leaders across their careers.

How, then, to develop and hone this ability? While most experts agree that an individual's resilience is determined by a combination of genetics, personal history, environment and situational context, studies show the influence of genetics is relatively small. That's good news, because it means that there is much we can do to become more resilient leaders and to help those around us to do the same.

## Dynamic Resilience for Equity-Driven Leaders

Far too often, resilience strength training is viewed as an activity for individuals to engage in alone, without formal support structures and apart from their communities.

Yet the most resilient social impact leaders have structures in place for self-reflection and emotional processing. They also have vibrant social networks. That's why in our work developing health equity

leaders at GHC, we intentionally focus on authentic leadership and community building.

Partners and potential supporters of our work at GHC are often surprised to learn of how deep our focus on authentic and collective leadership is compared to a more individualistic, hard skills-focused approach to leadership development. Why focus so much on building community and practicing authenticity when your ultimate goal is to build global health leaders who can save and improve more lives?

The answer is simple: because it's a long game. Our richly diverse community of leaders is united in the shared value of health equity. When equity is your North Star and you seek to build more equitable systems, despair and overwhelm are very real threats. Everywhere we look as leaders committed to equity, we see glaring inequities and complex systems that were designed to uphold them. In the realm of systems change, progress is often incremental at best because the goal is so ambitious. Rather than moving our goalposts closer, we have to equip ourselves to practice dynamic resilience in the face of frequent setbacks and obstacles.

The ability to pause, reflect, calibrate, and *then* move forward is not innate. Leaders have to practice showing up authentically, which allows them to avoid wasting time or energy presenting wholly different (often incompatible) versions of themselves for different audiences. Resilient leaders draw strength from consistently acting and speaking in alignment with their values, and wholeheartedly apologizing and working to improve when they miss the mark.

Since GHC's founding in 2009, we have partnered with the leadership training organization Rootwise Leadership (formerly known as Still Harbor) to develop these skills. Rootwise Leadership supports the design and delivery of a year-long leadership development curriculum with a particular focus on the interior formation of GHC fellows as leaders. In addition to facilitating workshops at trainings and retreats, Rootwise Leadership facilitators offer the opportunity for fellows to engage in one-on-one, confidential accompaniment sessions year-round. Rootwise

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Leadership's teaching and one-on-one accompaniment have been essential supports for fellows, providing the reflective spaces necessary for cultivating resilience.

Similarly, creating and nurturing a healthy community where leaders can find mutual support requires intentional efforts. Resilient leaders invest in relationships that transcend the personal and the professional. They surround themselves with others who share their values and encourage and appreciate their showing up authentically. Among their communities, they cultivate empathy, active listening, and a culture of sharing encouragement and honest feedback that breeds dynamic resilience.

Intentional community building has always been a pillar of GHC programming. During our fellowship year, we support fellows to build meaningful relationships through our trainings, a binational co-fellow model, a community mentorship program, and a structured community cohort project. Our alumni

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program strengthens community ties and fosters collaboration through Collective Action Coalitions, team-based seed funding to pilot health projects, and alumni chapters.

## Resilient Leadership in Times of Crisis: Creating a “New Normal”

Over the past year, leaders around the world have faced a series of chronic and acute crises, from an ever-changing, unpredictable pandemic to violent displays of white supremacy. While authentic leadership and community building provide a strong foundation for resilient leaders, crises like these demand additional efforts to strengthen dynamic resilience and protect against burnout. During crises, leaders not only have to manage their own emotions and actions in rapidly evolving and unprecedented situations, they are also called upon to shepherd the groups or institutions they lead to do the same.

When COVID-19 hit in March, I penned a letter to our community in which I shared: “In myriad ways, the pandemic is disrupting our individual and collective lives. Yet as much as we all long for a return to normal, we have an opportunity and a responsibility to question which aspects of normal we want to reinstate.”

In that call to question the normal was a call to practice dynamic resilience. As I’ve strived to do this myself over the past months, I’ve learned that crises often tempt us to pursue a return to the status quo. As we become fatigued by the many difficult decisions we must make, we long for a time when the pace of change was slower and keeping up with the headlines didn’t demand all our energy. Because the future is unknown to us, our tired brains easily deliver images from the seemingly easier days of the past and before we know it, we can be overcome with nostalgia for the precrisis era.

How to actively participate in creating a new normal? Several key tactics have helped me build my own, my teams’, and our community’s dynamic resilience during this time:

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### 1. *Tap into the power of imagination.*

Imagination is an underestimated tool in leaders’ resilience toolkits. Collectively imagining, in partnership with our teams and our communities, what our organizations and the world could look like postcrisis is a powerful antidote to returning to a status quo characterized by entrenched inequities. The novelist Arundhati Roy wrote in April 2020 that the “pandemic is a portal.” This notion of crisis as a mechanism for moving us to a completely different time and place is essential to the concept of dynamic resilience. When we cease viewing crises purely as disruptions from our normal lives, we open ourselves up to a plethora of opportunities.

This reframe does not mean we aren’t clear-eyed about how individuals and communities, ourselves included, are negatively impacted. It simply means that we recognize that crises are not one-dimensional, linear forces; instead they can be transformative if we allow them to be through a shift from reacting to reimagining.

### 2. *Prioritize connection and reflection.*

Even as we imagine a brighter, more equitable postcrisis future, dynamic resilience in the day-to-day of a crisis requires heightened connection and reflection. When COVID-19 hit, our team increased the frequency of our global all staff meetings from monthly to weekly. While we continue to share key organizational updates on various work streams during these meetings, the top priority is to hold space for staff to be seen, heard, and valued. That means that sometimes all work updates

get put on hold so each and every team member can share a highlight from their holiday season.

We also strive to begin and end meetings with a few unscheduled moments of processing the latest news, sharing recipes and book recommendations, and swapping stories from our weekends at home. This has been especially important for me in my weekly check in meetings with my direct reports. While our important work constantly beckons, taking time to connect and reflect is a recognition of our shared humanity that builds dynamic resilience.

### 3. *Show vulnerability.*

Author, researcher, and professor Brené Brown says, “Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change.” Dynamic resilience requires each of these ingredients to flourish, which makes vulnerability an essential practice for leaders. And yet, as leaders climb ladders and garner more impressive titles and accolades, the price of being vulnerable seems to increase. We think: “What will happen if I share too much of myself? Will I look weak? Will I jeopardize all that I’ve built?” While my private sector training often serves me well in leadership and management, in this regard I’ve had to do a lot of unlearning.

The transition from a behind-the-scenes architect of GHC’s programming to an external face of our organization as CEO over the past couple years has forced me to get more comfortable with demonstrating vulnerability than ever before. I’ve opened up to colleagues about my husband’s months-long battle with COVID-19, the stress of navigating childcare and schooling for my two young children, and my journey to more deeply grapple with the privileges my white skin, American passport, and socioeconomic status afford me. In return, I’ve often been rewarded with deeper insights into my teammates’ own struggles and fears, and the mutual relief that comes from being seen and understood.

### 4. *Model and codify self-care.*

No matter how nonhierarchical we may strive to be as leaders in our organizations, senior leadership continues to play an outsized role in influencing organizational culture. And while those we lead may appreciate words

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of encouragement to take care of themselves, I’ve found that the single most powerful tool I have for fostering self-care and boundary setting on my team is to practice it myself, without apology. My direct reports know that I prioritize getting seven to eight hours of sleep each night. I often schedule a block of time on my calendar to ensure I eat lunch. I strive to respect weekends and late nights as off time and avoid sending any nonurgent emails. While it can be tempting to discard these practices during crises, that’s precisely when they’re most important to maintain.

Beyond modeling self-care for their teams, leaders have an important role to play in ensuring organizational policy allows dynamic resilience to flourish at all times, and especially during crises. Even as a relatively small nonprofit organization, our team at GHC has long prioritized providing staff with significant paid vacation time, sick time, and parental leave beyond what the law requires. In spring of 2020, as the pandemic gripped our countries of operation, we also granted each staff member five wellness days, a new category of paid time off to be used at their discretion. These kinds of policies are an investment in a resilient team.

### 5. *Redefine urgency.*

Like many leaders with lots of competing priorities, I’m prone to deem too many things on my (or my team’s) long to-do list “urgent.” A key element of building resilience is to critically examine what truly deserves that label. If everything (or too much) is urgent, prioritizing the rest, reflection, and strategic long-term thinking needed for resilience becomes an afterthought. When we become more discerning about what matters most, we give our teams permission to prioritize self-care and in turn make sound, timely decisions.

As a white American CEO, I’m also mindful that urgency can hinder efforts to center genuine collaboration in our work as a diverse, global team and community. In

fact, the organization Showing Up for Racial Justice has identified a “constant sense of urgency” as a characteristic of white supremacy culture. They point out that overusing the urgent label can also jeopardize inclusive decision making, which often takes more time but ultimately boosts resilience and results in better outcomes for the long-term effectiveness of organizations.

At the same time, crises often provide opportunities to imbue a sense of urgency into processes and work streams that may suffer from a lack of focus without the fire of crisis to illuminate their importance. In our work at GHC, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have long been central to our work, but the past year’s events have pushed us to deepen our focus on this area even further. With a renewed sense of urgency, we’ve reinstated an internal DEI task force, published a DEI Vision, and implemented more racial justice programming in partnership with diverse experts and activists—all efforts that we hope will contribute to a more resilient staff and organization over time.

6. *Let your values guide you.*

Making difficult decisions and navigating immense uncertainty are two hallmarks of periods of crises. Resilient leaders can meet both challenges by centering our values, which function as bedrocks when everything around us is changing. This sentiment is reflected in the notice that our team posted on our website in March 2020: “We are adapting and innovating our program as needed during this time of upheaval. Our belief in the power of collective leadership to transform global health is unshakeable.”

Holding on to what is unshakeable can be a powerful clarifying and galvanizing force. Does our program look different than we had hoped or expected? Yes. Have we had to adjust how we approach fundraising during this time? Yes. Is our team facing heightened professional and personal challenges during this time? Again, yes. But knowing that we continue to share a common set of values keeps us connected, tapped into our purpose, and striving to live out those values each day. In other words, our core values both prompt us to demonstrate dynamic resilience and support us in doing so.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, strengthening and practicing dynamic resilience—on both the individual and the organizational level—is about embracing ourselves and our colleagues as the whole, complex, interdependent human beings we are. Put simply, resilience is “the business of being human,” as 13th-century Persian poet Rumi put it long ago. Particularly as we navigate the fast-moving seas of crisis, this approach opens us up to radical transformation. And isn’t that exactly what we signed up for when we stepped into social impact leadership roles?

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