



# Character Strengths as a Tool of Resilience-Oriented Vocational Training for Managerial Staff in a Life - Long Learning Perspective

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	<b>ABSTRACT</b>
<p>2021 Research Leap/Inovatus Services Ltd. All rights reserved.</p> <p><b>DOI:</b> <a href="https://doi.org/10.18775/jibrm.1849-8558.2015.63.3001">10.18775/jibrm.1849-8558.2015.63.3001</a> <b>URL:</b> <a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.18775/jibrm.1849-8558.2015.63.3001">http://dx.doi.org/10.18775/jibrm.1849-8558.2015.63.3001</a></p>	<p>The main purpose of this paper is to contribute to building Resilient Organization issues. The author discusses a psychological approach to resilience, from Robert Jay Lifton’s to Martin Seligman’s conceptual perspectives. The main objective of the paper is to discuss the chance of using so called character strengths as a useful tool in resilience- oriented training courses dedicated to managers of various types of organizations. The author has conducted a workshop on “character strengths in the workplace”. The empirical basis for the mentioned workshop is a qualitative, narrative research which was carried out a few years back. This initial result of the study reveals some of the examples of collective categories in which two groups of managers (from public administration and sales industry) foresee a possibility of using character strengths in the optimization of managerial work tasks.</p>
<p><b>Keywords:</b> <i>Resilience, Character strengths, Training course, Managerial vocational training</i></p>	

## 1. Introduction

The presented text is a conceptualization of the author’s experience, rooted in empirical research, in introducing resilience issues to managerial vocational training courses. Herein, the vocational training is understood broadly, not so much as acquiring professional competences required in a given field of business, but rather as improving skills that are to a smaller or larger extent needed in any type of managerial work. Undoubtedly, resilience constitutes such a skill, or rather a social competence. Resilience tends to be ascribed to both the organization, and more widely – to its social environment, as well as to managers and employees. It is worthwhile reminding that in its first meaning resilience is frequently understood in a systemic perspective as “the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and re-organize while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity and feedbacks” (Missimer et al. 2017:36). In the broadest perspective, organizational resilience is strictly linked to sustainable management (Missimer et al. 2017, Tarba et al. 2017, both texts contain detailed references to the literature). Consistently, resilient organization calls for resilient leadership (see e.g. Zehir and Narcikara 2016). This directly evokes the issue of training managerial social skills and – at a deeper level of reflection – ventures to factor in the already rich tradition of psychological approach to resilience treated as a personal competence ascribed to organization members as human beings.

## 2. Psychological Resilience and Organizations. A Short Overview

The term “resilience” was borrowed from engineering science, where it stands for the physical resistance of materials, expressed by a rapid return to their original state after deformation. Initially, the term was used by clinical child psychologists, then, the concept was gradually adopted by theorists and practitioners working with adults, indicating the type of psychological toughness. It is not about resistance in terms of hardness (“managers do not cry”), but – generally speaking – a flexible approach to stress, easily returning to normal functioning after a failure, after a misfortune, after encountering adversity, including traumatic experiences (Seligman 2011b; Stix 2011; see also Meredith, Sherbourne, Gaillot et al. 2011 and others).

More than twenty years ago, Robert Jay Lifton (1993) described the “The Protean Self” which, in his opinion, a modern man has. That is why a man is capable of unexpectedly high flexibility and variability, even fluidity of behavior and psychological processes. In this context, Lifton wrote about resilience of the human psyche in the era of “fragmentation”. However, the recent research on psychological difficulties in changing human behavior, habits or beliefs especially in organizations (Gardner 2004) makes us treat the mentioned theoretical construct, proposed by Lifton (“The Protean self”), as a description of a certain potential rather than as traits given once and for all. Furthermore, these are the potentials that need

to be squandered within reasonable limits, and yet there is no precise research data defining these boundaries. However, this does not diminish, but, on the contrary, stresses the importance of the modern man's resilience. Some researchers suggest that resilience, together with psychologically operationalized hope, optimism and a sense of effectiveness, is considered a component of "positive psychological capital" (cf. Forgeard, Seligman 2012). Currently, there is a discussion among psychologists whether it is necessary to commonly implement the training of resilience, at least in professional groups that particularly need it, or whether the natural ability to achieve this competence in individuals should be checked first, and help be given only to those who have deficiencies in this area (cf. Seligman 2011a, b vs. Stix 2011 and Tarba et al. 2017). Martin E.P. Seligman (2011b), a supporter of the first of these options, believes that psychological fitness is a relatively stable basis of human resilience. According to the concept of Seligman, psychological fitness consists of six components: 1. overall satisfaction (life satisfaction); 2. strengths, operationalized by character strengths (awareness of possessing them and their use); 3. emotional fitness (in this case also the risk of post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD] and depression); 4. social fitness (job satisfaction and rewarding, social contacts); 4. the so-called family fitness (partner and family relationships generating support); 5. "spiritual" fitness (a set of values and beliefs that gives a person reinforcement outside the family, institutional and societal sources of support). Since 2008, Seligman (2011a, b) has been implementing, on commission of the U.S. Army, a program allowing to identify (with the use of the "General Assessment Test" (GAT)) and to develop (using the training methods) a condition of psychological fitness of individuals and professional groups. It was also supplemented by a program operating under the name of "Comprehensive Soldier Fitness" (CSF, see Comprehensive... 2011), already applied by the U.S. Army, that addresses the problems of physical development. Presently, an extended version of the program, "Comprehensive Soldiers and Family Fitness 2", is run (CSF2, see Comprehensive... 2014), covering soldiers, their families and army civilians. According to Seligman (2011a), the psychological fitness training modelled on the CSF is useful also for other organizations outside the army, including business organizations. The CSF came under the fire of severe criticism, seemingly of a more ideological than scientific nature (see e.g. Eideslon 2012), its diagnostic part has been initially validated (Vie et al. 2016), and experience stemming from the program has gained recognition among prominent researchers as a substantiation of the thesis that resilience can be trained. This belief is shared by the editors of a special issue of the *Applied Psychology Journal* to be devoted to the topic of "Resilience in Organizations" (Tarba et al. 2017).

### **3. The Proposal of the "Character Strengths in the Workplace" Managerial Workshop**

The workshop proposed in this article derived from the author's conviction that elements of resilience training should be present

in any and all forms of education that improve managerial skills, and not just be covered by separate programs only. The targeted forms are not so much the ones related to elementary education, but to various examples of managerial life-long learning, such as studies for working people, postgraduate studies, trainings that improve managerial skills for professionals or MBA studies. The application of resilience in

management requires personal maturity of the manager. The author will subject this conviction to a wider analysis in a different paper (cf. Meredith et al. 2011). Managerial education in such a country as Poland required a relatively intercultural component of resilience training (CSF and its derivatives have not been studied in terms of cultural realities yet) as well as a component that would, during a limited duration of the training devoted to more comprehensive problems, offer ample opportunity to develop elements of resilience in participants. In the opinion of the author of this article, the above conditions were met by the part of Seligman's theory and practice of building resilience that concerned "character strengths". Seligman assumed that the first two of the listed components of psychological fitness which build psychological resilience (see above) – life satisfaction and the strengths – should not be changed, and should only be identified and used to optimize the psychological functioning. According to Seligman, character strengths are universal strengths of an individual that are to be found in relatively every culture. Contrary to talents that are inborn to a large extent, strengths may be successfully developed throughout the lifespan. Also, possession of a strength substantially depends on the individual. Signature strengths form sets, identified by Seligman's team in intercultural research as universal as well. It turned out that six sets of strengths postulated by different cultures in various historical periods can be identified. To their surprise, the researchers realized that the sets of strengths they had identified are of a moral nature. Hence, they named them "virtues" (Seligman 2002, Peterson and Seligman 2004; critical approach see Banicki 2014)<sup>1</sup>. The list of character strengths structured in larger groups – the virtues – is as follows (Seligman 2011b): wisdom and knowledge.

Every human being possesses several signature strengths that constitute their personal strengths. Identifying them and using them as frequently as possible in the course of implementation of professional tasks makes it easier, according to Seligman, for both managers and their subordinates to foster psychological fitness. Americans are provided with a diagnostic tool (accompanied by a manual) to define signature strengths, developed by Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman (2004), the "Values in Action Inventory of Strengths" (VIA) questionnaire, and its new version "The Abbreviated Character Strengths Test" (ACST), which has been initially validated (Vanhove et al. 2016). Managers in the majority of countries outside the USA still lack such tools. In Poland, managers have solely access to literal translations of the VIA available in the

translations of Seligman's books *Authentic Happiness* (Polish version 2005) and *Flourish* (Polish version 2011). However, they cannot serve any diagnosis before they have undergone standardization procedures and cultural adaptation. Polish managers may, for the time being, only resort to the mentioned publications as an aid in their independent, highly preliminary observations of themselves in terms of possessed signature strengths. This may suitably take place at a workshop within the frame of a training course run by an experienced expert. Such a proposed workshop, which has been provided for 10 years by the author of this article, comprises the following stages that use the techniques developed by Seligman (2002, 2011b, cf. points 1–4 of the workshop) and Liz Hoggar (2005, cf. points 5–6 of the workshop):

1) Participants, individually, but sitting in one room, identify their character strengths, following the instruction, which is provided by a trainer. Compared to the original assumptions made by Seligman, some modifications were made in the way of identifying the strengths. Firstly, the respondents are asked to read descriptions of the traits and to determine on a scale of 1 to 10 points (where 1 is chosen if a person does not recognize the possession of the trait, and 10 if in the opinion of this person the strength occurs at a very high level) to what extent the strength occurs, and only then are they asked to complete a non-standardized version of the VIA questionnaire. To select the most important strengths, both indicators are taken into account (both the self-assessment based on the description of the various strengths and the points received as a result of completing the questionnaire). This way, every person receives a list of their strengths, 5 to 8 on average. To be specific, the trainer's instruction contains information that in a moment he/she will present a slide show in the following order: first, a description of the virtue that should be read only – no scoring. Then, one slide (or two in the case of a longer text), which describes a specific strength. After reading that information, participants are asked to do the self-assessment – on a scale of 1 to 10 points. The following slide includes, after a translation of Seligman's book *Authentic Happiness* (2002, Polish version 2005), two questions from the short version of the VIA test, and each of them is assigned to the response from "this matches my character well" – 5 points – to "this does not match me at all" – 1 point. These points are supposed to be added up and written (under the already written name of the strength) next to each other, both the results of the self-assessment and of the test.

2) The above procedure is repeated for the six virtues and the twenty-four signature strengths. Every participant identifies their character strengths, taking into account both the self-assessment and the VIA questions. As a result of this procedure, each of the participants receives two numerical indicators of each strength. The pace of the slide presentation is imposed by the trainer, with due regard for the needs of the participants.

3) The participants are asked to write down the strengths that, within the two categories – that is, both the result of the self-assessment as well as the result of the VIA test – scored

relatively the highest number of points (compared to the other strengths of that person).

4) The participants are asked to check which strengths from the list obtained at the previous stage meet the additional criteria of character strengths provided by Seligman (2002:214). And this verified set of character strengths is used in a further interpretation.

5) Each participant is asked to write down their character strengths on a piece of paper and highlight the one which they consider the most important.

6) The respondents are asked to express in a narrative writing how they can use their most significant character strength in their work during the next two weeks. Sometimes this final part of the workshop is fulfilled as participant's homework.

In view of personal content evoked at this workshop, its results are not discussed in the training group. However, participants are encouraged to take advantage of individual consultations with the trainer. The workshop usually includes two training hours (90 minutes). It is sometimes advisable to have a break before point 6.

#### **4. Preliminary Narrative Research: the Possible Operationalization of Personal Strengths at the Workplace in the Perspective of Managers' Professional Experience**

Having run the workshop for several years, in the academic year 2011/ 2012 the author and Monika Strocka, a reflexive manager-practitioner who was then graduating from the Faculty of Management at the University of Warsaw, carried out a preliminary study of narratives obtained in point 6 of the workshop from two groups of managers or potential managers: public administration executives (Prison Service, N=27) and sales industry representatives (N=35).

The unconstrained narratives of the members of these groups regarding the possible use of their own character strengths to carry out professional tasks were considered as the qualitative indicator of the possible operationalization of these character strengths in managerial work. The research question was as follows: What are the possible patterns of using character strengths in management work reported by the managers themselves? The term "pattern" was understood as an order of particular professional tasks assigned to the key areas of management, which are:

1. managing internal organizational environment
2. managing client-related activities
3. managing actions against competitors

The study was strictly of a qualitative nature. The goal was to identify potential patterns of using character strengths, without deciding whether the results would be complete and representative in a statistical sense.

The public administration representatives participated in a managerial course for the Prison Service executives provided on April 17 and 20, 2012. The representatives of sales industry were part-time students of the first year of management studies at the Faculty of Management at the University of Warsaw, specialization – sales. The research was carried out in the second semester of the academic year 2011/2012. Not all the members of both groups were managers, but the educational forms they participated in inclined them to adopt a manager's perspective. The Prison Service representatives completed a writing task during the management course. The representatives of sales services completed the task at home (partly point 2 and points 3–6 of the workshop). The respondents granted their consent to an analysis of their written narratives. However, a personal and “sensitive” nature of these narratives (as mentioned above) justifies the postponement of the publication of results until the present day. This is the reason why the researchers refrained from collecting any personal data from the respondents. Respondents' narratives were collectively assigned to the above-mentioned key areas of management, within corresponding strengths, and analyzed purely qualitatively, intuitively.

The representatives of the public administration group identified 14 out of 24 character strengths to optimize the performance of professional tasks. They omitted 10: curiosity/interest/novelty-seeking/openness to experience; perspective/wisdom; love; forgiveness; humility; self-regulation/self-control; appreciation of beauty and excellence/wonder/elevation; gratitude; humor/playfulness and spirituality/faith/purpose. The representatives of the “sales services” group identified 15 out of 24 character strengths to optimize the performance of professional tasks. They omitted 9: perspective/wisdom; bravery and valor; forgiveness; humility; prudence; self-regulation/self-control (i.e. all qualities that make up the virtue of temperance); appreciation of beauty and excellence/wonder/elevation; gratitude and spirituality/faith/purpose.

## 5. Conclusion

The workshop described in this article has been provided in Poland since 2005 (till 2012, it bore no relation to resilience issues) as a permanent component of courses for the management staff of the Prison Service (till 2015), certain training courses ordered by companies, part-time and postgraduate studies in sales management, public administration, health care management, higher school management, IT management, as well as – in a simplified version – international MBA studies. At a present stage of training experience, it is worthy of taking actions aimed at standardization of the workshop and comparative studies in different countries concerning the opportunities for and limitations in its application.

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