

# The STRESS EFFECT

## Building Resilience At Work: The Impact of Resilience on Decision Making and Leadership

By Henry L. Thompson, Ph.D.

**T**he core process of leadership is decision making. That's what leaders do—they make decisions. To be a successful leader, you must be able to consistently make effective decisions. Obviously, making effective decisions requires Knowledge, Skills, Abilities and Experience (KSAE). For the sake of this discussion, let's assume that two leaders are evenly matched on KSAE. How can this be explained?

**The leader with the most stress resilience has a much greater chance of making effective decisions across time than the leader with low stress resilience.**

From a neurological perspective, the prefrontal cortex (PFC) is the brain's CEO. This is where information is collected and decisions are made. Making decisions, even easy ones, is work and requires energy. The more decisions you make in a day, particularly difficult ones, the more energy your brain consumes. By the time you get home from work you may have already reached "decision fatigue." Your brain is tired and you are ready for someone else to make decisions, e.g., where you are going to eat. Anything that tires or reduces your ability to fully access the capabilities of your PFC reduces its effectiveness at making decisions.

Stress has been shown to have a significant impact on the functioning of your PFC. As your stress level goes up, your IQ, Emotional Intelligence and decision making effectiveness go down. Your IQ (Cognitive Intelligence) and Emotional Intelligence are factors in the PFC's decision-making process. As stress increases, the PFC accesses less and less cognitive and emotional abilities, which leads to more ineffective decisions. Given that leaders operate in a fast-moving, stressful and hectic environment these days, it's no wonder they sometimes struggle to make effective decisions.

### Why Build Resilience

Resilience is key to effective decision making under high stress and can be defined as "having the agility, strength and flexibility to adapt effectively to sudden, enormous stress and change, and recover quickly." We all need resilience, especially when operating in a leadership role. The example below will help show the impact of resilience.

On January 15, 2009, US Airways Flight 1549 took off from LaGuardia airport and flew into a large flock of Canada geese. So many geese went into the plane's two engines that both engines shut down. Captain Sullenberger and his crew had 180 seconds to

*(Continued)*



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# The STRESS EFFECT



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save the plane and the 155 people on board. Sullenberger had three options. One was to go back to LaGuardia, but there was not enough time. A second was to divert to Teeterboro. He couldn't do that, either. His last, and only viable option, was the Hudson River. He opted for the Hudson and made a picture-perfect landing. Everyone on the plane was rescued and the incident became known as the "Miracle on the Hudson." Captain Sullenberger, under an extremely high degree of stress, made a series of excellent decisions and the crew and passengers were saved. How was Sullenberger able to remain in control and make all the right decisions? One answer is high stress resilience.

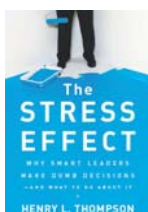
## Seven Best Practices for Managing Stress

The ARSENAL™ presents the seven best practices for managing stress and building stress resilience. Let's look at one of the best practices, Awareness, at the top of the model below, overlooking the other components. Awareness is asking: "Am I aware of what's going on in my world? Where am I and what's going on right now? Am I aware of how tired I am?" It's very important to be vigilant about knowing how stressed you are and what's going on around you. If not, you will discover that *an unaware brain is a surprised brain*.



Everyone has stress resilience to some degree, with some having much more than others. Research also suggests that most people could develop more than they currently have. With that in mind, leaders should focus on building greater stress resilience. If they do, then under high stress they might be as successful as Captain Sullenberger.

With commitment and effort, the ARSENAL™ seven best practices can help you build a strong foundation for resilience. Building stress resilience increases your ability to use higher levels of Cognitive and Emotional Intelligences under high stress. The results are improved health, reduced stress, better interpersonal relationships and increased job performance.



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