How to Build Resilience and Performance on Your Legal Team

Anne Elizabeth Collier and Amy Dilcher

Nov 09, 2025 8 min read

Summary

- Legal team leaders must first build their resilience through mental strength, purpose, stamina, emotional intelligence, and support.
- Learn strategies to transform your firm's culture so your legal team recovers faster from setbacks and performs better.
- Resilience-enhancing practices drive improved client outcomes, better team engagement, and sustainable performance in legal practice.

iStock.com/andreusK

The legal profession is renowned for its rigor—demanding hours, emotionally charged matters, relentless standards, and the weighty responsibility of client outcomes. Lawyers face higher rates of stress, depression, and anxiety than many other professionals. These challenges are familiar to practitioners, but what is less often appreciated is the disproportionate influence leaders wield over the resilience and well-being of their teams. The atmosphere cultivated by leadership—whether intentional or accidental—often determines whether teams adapt and flourish or falter under the constant pressure.

The Crucial Role of Leadership in Legal Team Resilience

Legal leadership extends far beyond technical prowess; it calls for vision, compassion, clarity, adaptability, and principled and clear decision-making. While most attorneys can readily list the values of effective leadership, the true challenge lies in operationalizing these principles—especially when leading a law firm or guiding an in-house department.

The analogy of the airline oxygen mask applies well: effective legal leaders must first build and sustain their own resilience before supporting others. By modeling composure, thoughtful analysis, and adaptability, leaders set a constructive tone. These behaviors encourage creativity, teamwork, and resilience among team members. Conversely, leadership characterized by anxiety or defensiveness fosters a culture of stress and inefficiency, undermining both individual and collective performance.

Understanding Resilience

Resilience is the ability to navigate adversity with a clear mind, embrace change, and recover from setbacks with renewed purpose and insight. In law practice, resilience includes finding creative solutions that mitigate risk to clients. It also entails transforming obstacles into opportunities for learning and growth for oneself, rather than allowing them to be sources of prolonged discouragement and negativity.

Research, including the work of Dr. William Sparks, highlights the pivotal role leaders play in shaping team culture—especially in cultivating resilience. Leaders who remain calm and focused during turbulence inspire creative thinking and persistence, while those who react with panic inadvertently breed tension and erode psychological safety and ultimately trust.

Given the legal world's inherent uncertainty and high stakes, resilient leadership is not a luxury but a necessity. It impacts retention, engagement, performance, client satisfaction, and organizational sustainability.

Developing Personal Resilience as a Leader

Resilience is not just an innate trait but rather a skill forged through experience, reflection, and intentional action. Recognizing this, and after decades as a leader of fast-paced IT departments, Steve Howe created the ResilienceBuilder® Model (the "Model") and assessment, which help people understand their current level of resilience and provide specific, personalized recommendations and practical advice for building resilience. The Model identifies the five facets of resilience:

- **Mental strength.** How well we cope with daily challenges, how adaptable we are when our situation changes, and how we remain positive and optimistic under difficult circumstances determines our mental strength.

- **Purpose**: Having a clear sense of purpose and defined goals—in our personal lives and at work—is a key factor in building resilience. Knowing what we are trying to achieve helps us bounce back and stay on course following setbacks, enabling us to remain true to ourselves and our values.

- **Physical stamina.** Good exercise, nutrition, and restorative sleep are critical to improving resilience. It doesn't require becoming an athlete; it simply requires being conscious of the components our body and mind need in order to support a positive lifestyle.

- **Emotional intelligence.** High levels of emotional intelligence (EQ) enable us to recognize and manage our emotions, as well as the emotions of others. Emotions drive our behavior, and understanding how to manage them is crucial, particularly when dealing with pressure and stressful situations.

- **Social support**: Having a strong social support network of family, friends, and colleagues is an essential aspect of resilience. When things get tough, having people you can confide in and turn to for support is vital, as is having a mentor to help you navigate through your journey.

Of these, mental strength—encompassing prioritization, perseverance, adaptability, self-confidence, and perspective—is particularly foundational. For legal leaders, awareness and management of daily stress can make a decisive difference, allowing them to build resilience instead of transmitting stress to their teams.

The Power of Reflection and Purpose

Resilient leadership begins with reflection and learning. Consider the example of a law firm partner facing a significant loss in litigation: the resilient leader pauses to evaluate what was within his control, what was not, and how to adapt moving forward. This constructive mindset enables both individual and team growth.

Purpose acts as a compass and stabilizer during turbulent times. Leaders who connect their work to a broader mission—advocating for justice, serving clients, mentoring emerging attorneys, shaping organizational policy—are better equipped to endure setbacks and maintain momentum. They inspire teams by communicating shared vision and values, fostering engagement even amid difficulties.

The Importance of Self-Care and Emotional Intelligence

Physical stamina, though often overshadowed by work demands, is essential for clarity and energy. Leaders who set boundaries, prioritize wellness, and encourage balanced work habits create healthier, more productive teams. For example, discouraging the general practice of responding to late-night emails and promoting organizational wellness initiatives such as a team step-counting challenge can make a significant difference.

Emotional intelligence is equally critical. Leaders who process their own emotions constructively, are not reactive to colleagues', clients', or adversaries' strong negative emotions, and listen thoughtfully to others, foster trust, stability, and a calm atmosphere in which people can do their best thinking. Maintaining supportive relationships inside and outside of work equips leaders to withstand and learn from adversity.

Alternatively, leaders who cast a dark leadership "shadow" struggle with performance, well-being, and retention because they've created a culture that reflects their own reactivity to stress and low resilience. Carl Jung described the "shadow" as embedded in the subconscious, triggered by stress, and fueled by negative emotions such as fear, anger, and jealousy. All people have their shadows. However, leaders with a high degree of emotional intelligence and thus strong resilience manage their thinking and emotions so they ground themselves in objectivity. Leaders who view legal and business challenges or the actions of colleagues with objectivity rather than through the lens of fear and negative personalization get better results from their teams by creating emotional safety. To find out your leadership style, your shadow, and how you impact your team both your best and at your worst, take this free short-form leadership assessment.

Cultivating a Resilient Team

Now that you've invested in your own resilience, the next step is to embed your resilience-enhancing practices within your team's operations and culture. By fostering resilience in team members, they recover more quickly from setbacks, adapt more readily to change, and develop as professionals and leaders in their own right. Your team's resilience is key to performing well despite inevitable legal setbacks, shifting priorities, and change.

From Intention to Action: Strategies for Building Team Resilience

Leaders committed to embedding resilience into team culture utilize the following strategies:

1. **Truly prioritize.** Clarity around priorities eases stress. Leaders need to distinguish urgent matters from routine tasks, communicate them transparently, and leverage visualization tools such as collaborative calendars to help team members keep track. Frequent check-ins at milestones or to ensure projects stay on track help teams adapt and rebalance workloads.

2. **Communicate transparently.** Communication that drives results takes thought, patience, and structure. It includes clearly articulating the rationale behind new initiatives, inviting team feedback, and providing ongoing support; hosting regular team meetings and individual check-ins to discuss personal wins and obstacles and for constructive coaching; and employing visualization tools, such as dashboards, collaborative calendars, or project boards for shared clarity on priorities and progress.

3. **Foster a feedback culture.** Hold forums for open dialogue and structured reflection on both triumphs and challenges. Debrief every major initiative, even those that go well, to normalize reflection on opportunities for improvement.

4 **Clarify control.** Much stress comes from attempting to control the uncontrollable. Delineate what lies within the team's scope, refocusing efforts on actionable items and reducing anxiety.

5 **Balance positivity and optimism with reality.** Leaders reinforce trust by acknowledging difficulties and setbacks rather than glossing over them. Cheerleading needs to be backed by support. Focusing on progress made—however incremental—and lessons learned, especially in the face of setbacks, fosters resilience and adopts a can-do attitude.

6 **Be the coach-facilitator.** Especially when it comes to complex matters, encouraging a solution-oriented mindset by digging into the problem with the team reinforces the team's confidence and legal skills. Leaders who excel at facilitating and applying executive coaching skills are better able to support their teams in sussing out critical assumptions, resource limitations, and other critical factors, all of which aid in developing creative solutions.

7 **Support change.** ResilienceBuilder data reveals that 99% of highly resilient people are adaptable to change. Whether it's technology, reorganizations, or work, change pervades the workplace. Unfortunately, for many lawyers, who are hard-wired and then trained to anticipate, plan, and control the minutest of details, change accompanied by massive uncertainties can trigger stress and anxiety. It can paralyze. Effective leaders guide teams through transitions with clear and frequent communication, acknowledging what they do and don't know; empathy and understanding for the impact on the lawyer; and accessible support for training and other resources. Designating a "change champion" to lead people through change by holding open forums and providing support resources helps to mitigate the stress and foster smoother adaptation.

8 **Foster team members' individual purpose through mentoring.** A facet of resilience is purpose. Having a clear sense of personal and professional goals is a key factor when it comes to resilience. People need to know where they are headed and why in order to overcome setbacks. Knowing one's goals helps a person remain focused and bounce forward from setbacks and difficulties. Purpose often needs to be cultivated by a mentor. Regular one-on-one meetings that address not only goals, but individual values and aspirations, reinforce purpose, belonging, and, ultimately, resilience. Provide relevant opportunities and resources.

9 **Utilize coaching and mentoring skills.** Structured coaching and mentoring build trust and psychological safety. Leaders who listen, ask insightful questions, and

offer encouragement—not just direction—create environments where team members thrive. Normalize personalized support through structured coaching and mentoring programs.

10 **Set healthy communication norms.** Open, respectful dialogue underpins trust and safety. Leaders must model nonreactive communication, invite and provide positive and constructive feedback, and encourage iterative improvement.

11 **Champion excellence over perfection.** Lawyers hold themselves to such high standards that some fall into the trap of maladaptive perfectionism, which is the excessive rumination about past and future mistakes. Model and tout excellence, not perfection. Value growth and effort, rather than demanding flawlessness, to encourage risk-taking and innovation. Teams that learn from mistakes without fear of repercussions drive continuous improvement.

12 **Collaborate strategically.** Resilient teams bring clients and partners into the conversation, considering broader business realities and welcoming fresh perspectives and constructive feedback. Recognizing collaborative accomplishments builds shared vision, inspiration, and action.

13 **Model healthy habits and boundaries.** Promote stress management and mental rest by modeling and calling out expectations that team members take vacations and do not routinely answer email messages at 2 a.m. Emphasize holistic self-care as part of professional excellence.

14 **Celebrate collaboration.** Rotate project leadership, feature teamwork in firm communications, and publicly acknowledge the team's achievements.

The Ripple Effect: From the Individual to the Firm or Department

When leaders consistently prioritize resilience-enhancing actions, the benefits extend beyond immediate teams. Mistakes become learning opportunities, engagement and retention improve, and clients receive better, more consistent counsel. Ultimately, resilient legal leaders are not just technically capable but also adaptable, empathetic, and purpose-driven. And, they build these characteristics in their team.

Conclusion

Resilience in legal leadership is much more than a buzzword—it is a dynamic discipline that drives excellence, adaptability, self-care, purpose, and connection. When leaders lead with resilience in mind, they equip their teams to weather the inevitable storms of legal practice. By building environments where adaptability, trust, and collaboration are valued, law firms and legal departments empower lawyers to thrive, both professionally and personally, no matter the challenges ahead.

Authors

Anne Elizabeth Collier

Arudia

Anne E. Collier, MPP, JD, Professional Certified Coach, is the CEO of Arudia, a firm dedicated to improving leadership, culture, collaboration and communication. She is an expert leadership and executive...

Amy Dilcher

Amy Dilcher is a healthcare transactions attorney at Sheppard Mullin, with over 25 years of legal experience, including serving as General Counsel for several healthcare organizations. She counsels clients on...

Published by the American Bar Association ©2025. Reproduced with permission. All rights reserved. This information or any portion thereof may not be copied or disseminated in any form or by any means or stored in an electronic database or retrieval system without the express written consent of the American Bar Association.

ABA American Bar Association

https://www.americanbar.org/groups/law_practice/resources/law-practice-magazine/2025/november-december-2025/build-resilience-and-performance-on-your-legal-team/