

Public Sector Organizations

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Organizations are the building blocks of governments. The role of organizations, formal and informal, is most readily apparent in public bureaucracy, but all the institutions of the public sector are comprised of organizations, or have some organizational characteristics that affect their performance. Therefore, if scholars want to understand how governments work, a very good place to start is at the level of organizations involved in delivering services. Likewise, if practitioners want to understand how to be effective in the public sector, they would be well-advised to consider examining the role of organizations and how to make organizations more effective. This series publishes research-based books concerned with organizations in the public sector and covers such issues as: the autonomy of public sector organizations; networks and network analysis; bureaucratic politics; organizational change and leadership; and methodology for studying organizations.

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Rómulo Pinheiro · Maria Laura Frigotto ·
Mitchell Young
Editors

Towards Resilient Organizations and Societies

A Cross-Sectoral and Multi-Disciplinary Perspective

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Editors

Rómulo Pinheiro
University of Agder
Kristiansand, Norway

Maria Laura Frigotto
University of Trento
Trento, Italy

Mitchell Young
Charles University
Prague, Czech Republic



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FOREWORD

As sharply illustrated in this book, despite the common ancient root in Latin, the meaning of resilience changes from discipline to discipline, from domain to domain, from perspective to perspective. In recent years, the very term resilience has attracted such increasing scholarly attention that it has acquired centrality in managerial debate, becoming a jargon or portmanteau term; an issue of ambiguity that this book is very clearly addressing, by weaving back and forth in reconstructing the very complex texture of resilience via an exhaustive, cross-sectoral and multi-disciplinary perspective.

In the very days in which this book sees the light, the world is facing the Covid-19 pandemic: an unprecedented jolt and shock to our personal, professional, organizational and communitarian lives. As often happens in times of crisis, politicians and decision-makers are encouraging us to be resilient, and promote the nurturing of resilience at all levels (as citizens, individual workers, teams, organizations and communities). A question legitimately arises, though: Is resilience itself resilient enough to be employed in these troubled days?

To get rid of the potential tautology, some further reflection may be found useful. I like to frame resilience in the light of the Chinese proverb “When the winds of change blow, some people build walls and others build windmills” (Gallo, 2015; Giustiniano et al., 2020), as the capacity to build walls and windmills at the same time, boasting the ability to absorb shocks and endure, to be “sponge and titanium” (Giustiniano & Cantoni,

2018). To do so, one might accept that resilience, however defined, is a complex construct made of opposing tensions (e.g. executing vs. learning, rethinking vs. adapting). As the book unshyly reveals, such tensions are paradoxically intertwined (Giustiniano et al., 2018); hence, resilience has a paradoxical side. To this extent, the practice of resilience can be seen as “paradox work” with managers and policy makers called to resourcing their organizations under tension. The cases presented in the book show that the attempt—and sometimes the achievement—of resilience can be pursued by identifying new scopes of meaning (situational, organizational or institutional) and by extending the very frameworks in which organizational life takes place (see also Schneider, Bullinger & Brandl, 2020).

As organizational life relies on resilience, it’s necessary to remember that resilience is not based on individuals but on collectives: entire communities can express resilience, even in the absence of resilient members; on the contrary, a group of resilient individuals does not guarantee a resilient team (for example, if a collaborative atmosphere is lacking).

What’s feeding such a resilient life, then? Learning appears to be the main course on the menu, and in particular keeping the capacity of “learning to learn” active and energetic. “Learning to learn” is about nurturing generative doubt (Välikangas & Romme, 2013), by returning to a sense of mission, requalifying and reinventing a new sense of organizational purpose, while asking “why are we doing this?” Resilience emerges as a paradoxical force: Risk factors can destroy, but where they do not, resilience can be energized. While a group of resilient individuals does not guarantee a resilient team (for example, if it lacks a collaborative and socially supportive culture), resilience is based not on individuals alone but collectives; entire communities can express resilience, even in the absence of resilient members. Similar to other related constructs (e.g. grit), therefore, the presence of resilience does not grant the spread of resilience. In fact, for resilience to escalate to higher levels of aggregation (e.g. from the individual to the teams), it must be expressed by individuals, conveyed towards the others and perceived by the receivers (see Rego et al., 2020). Hence, as clearly illustrated in the many cases reported in the book, for organizations and communities to survive and flourish, policy makers, managers and professionals should consider resilience as the achievement and maintenance of “positive adaptation”, as reactive organizational experimentation out of the ordinary, building on paradox

work and a paradoxical mindset (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). Nonetheless, as the book gently suggests, “too much of a good thing can be a bad thing”. As reality reports, an extreme concern for resilience may induce people to become overly persistent in seeking to achieve unattainable goals or overly tolerant of adversity (like tolerating demoralizing jobs, toxic bosses or dangerous working conditions). Additionally, “unwanted phenomena” (crime, a cancer) can engender resilience.

In synthesis, I believe the construct of resilience can boost resilience even in times of unprecedented uncertainty and ambiguity, both as a construct in the academic debate and as a feature for managerial practice. For that to happen, though, it must be approached from a multi-disciplinary perspective and pursued with a strong-willed agency by organizational leaders, as this book sharply suggests.

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Luca Giustiniano
Full Professor of Organization
Studies and Director of the
Center for Research on
Leadership, Innovation and
Organisation (CLIO)
Luiss University
Rome, Italy

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