

LEADERSHIP LIVED

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**HARDSHIP AND
LEADERSHIP:
IS THERE A
CONNECTION?**

Abstract

Hardship or adverse circumstances in life occur to every human being. The question that the researcher of this study attempts to answer is: How do human beings face hardship and how do they turn an adverse circumstance into a developmental experience? Written life narratives and interviews with four leaders, one female and three males, shed light on this topic. A model of the relationship between hardship and resilience is presented as a means of understanding the results of this exploratory study.

Key words

Church leaders, leadership, hardship, resilience, life experiences, leadership development, faith.

“Lorene Shinsky delivered her son, John, to an orphanage when he was 8 years old” (Rexrode, 2009). John’s

father had just died of a heart attack, and his mother felt unable to cope with a small child who was already getting into trouble. The only way open for this mother was to place the son she loved into a more safe and structured environment. It was rough at the orphanage, but John learned to survive and even thrive. By 12, he was placed in a foster home. At 16 (6-foot-4, 220 lbs) he became a highly sought-after football prospect. He finally chose Michigan State University, where problems with one of his knees ended his professional career.

“Education would be Shinsky’s ticket,” says Rexrode (2009). In 1983 John received a doctorate in education from MSU and reconnected with his real mother, Lorene. He bought her a new outfit and invited her to his graduation. The next day, Lorene was dead at 53 of a brain aneurysm. “I had to bury her in the same outfit,” said John in recounting this experience.

John went on to have a 20-year career as director of special education for a Michigan school district in charge of thousands of children with different disabilities. And in a life-changing encounter on a plane he began what he calls the fulfillment of his 40-year career—opening his own orphanage in Matamoros, Mexico.

In the midst of building the orphanage, John learned in 2007 that he had cancer in his neck. Thirty-three radiation treatments left him unable to talk for weeks or taste for months. But as soon as he regained his strength he continued with what is now his life commitment. John is convinced that he would not have accomplished everything he has done in life if it were not for the difficult circumstances that time and again shaped and molded who he is now and what he is able to do for other

children that, like him, face life
without a parent.

Van Velsor and McCauley, editors of the *Handbook for Leadership Development* (2004), make the following statement:

Dealing with losses, failures, and disappointments can also stretch people. Job loss, business mistakes, damaging relationships, and similar events can cause a great deal of confusion, often stimulating a search

Hardship and Resilience

Hardships are different from other kinds of developmental experiences in that they are linked with resilience. There is no single definition for resilience, but from the large amount of research on the topic, I can say that in essence resilience is the ability to bounce back from adversity or hardship (Moxley & Pulley, 2003; Masten, 2001). Stoner and Gilligan (2002) talk about "leader rebound" when they mention managers that "bounce back" from tests of adversity. According to the Center for Creative Leadership's research, resilience, or this ability to "bounce back" from hard circumstances, consists of individual capabilities that can be learned and developed in a person's life: purpose and meaning, cognitive strategies, improvisation, and social support.

The search for meaning, for reconnecting with one's own core values

gruent with what Janson (2008) posits:

Understanding the stories leaders tell followers (and themselves) about their past experiences can provide valuable insight into which experiences leaders consider formative, and why. This is particularly relevant because the impact of a formative experience on a leader depends more on the meaning the leader can make of it rather than on the experience itself and because this knowledge can further help leaders develop new leaders. (p. 76)

As I read 30 life narratives, at that time with the only purpose of better acquainting myself with each one of the students in the program, it became evident that there was a common thread in all of them: the impact of hardship and adverse circumstances in molding their lives and shaping their leadership practices. One of them mentioned how when he was at the peak of his career, feeling arrogant and in control of his destiny, a near-fatal accident caused him to reframe his life. Another one mentioned that she was on a path of uninterrupted professional success until a long illness shattered her dreams. For another, a traumatic demotion and work re-location was the beginning of many years of confusion and loss until he bounced back.

Intrigued by what I was seeing as a possible connection between hardship and the way these leaders understood and practiced their leadership, I chose a purposeful sample of four of them, three males and one female. All of them hold top leadership positions and all of them mentioned in their life narratives situations of hardship that were key factors in their development as leaders. And all four of them are Christian leaders. I conducted two-

hour-long interviews with each of them and later carried out a member check, to grasp the significance participants ascribed to their experiences with a greater degree of accuracy (Janson, 2008).

The conceptual framework for the present study lies in two theoretical approaches. One of them comes from Luthans and Avolio (2003), who propose that leaders need to identify actual events that when reflected upon in retrospect contribute to their leadership development. The other approach is based on the concept that people can improve their capacity for leadership and that life experiences can be a "key driver in leader development" (Van Velsor & McCauley, 2004).

Stories of Hardship

The interviews corroborated what is found in the literature on hardship and its relation to leadership. All of the leaders mentioned that hard circumstances in their lives contributed to a greater sense of their purpose and meaning and enabled them to empathize with others in a different way than before their adversity struck. Sally mentioned that when adversity strikes, you are left "naked, stripped of everything" (Sally, 2004).

Profoundly disappointed, he turned to his father and said: "Dad, I thought I was going to see the city and the planes." "Well, son," his father replied, "in life you will climb many peaks, and when you reach a peak there will be another peak, but in each peak you will be able to see farther and farther. And one day you will reach your last peak and then you will meet God."

Pedro wanted to study. One day the opportunity came for him to go to a distant city to enroll in higher education. His parents, extremely poor, were barely able to give him money for the bus fare. Before hugging her son and saying goodbye, his mother put in his hands the only treasure she had and her only connection to the outside world: an old transistor radio. It would be many years before Pedro was able to see his parents again, but that old radio was a constant reminder of his home and his own desire to gain an education and to rise above poverty. "Who would have thought," Pedro says, that out of that humble beginning, "today I would end up with a PhD in Leadership?" Pedro has climbed many peaks in his life, and he has had many valley encounters, but no matter what hardship he has faced he always knew that God would take him to a higher peak.

Cognitive strategies such as making sense of life's formative experiences are crucial for resilience, but so is faith. Hamel and Valikangas (2003) appropriately mention that resilience in companies and organizations is "not about responding to a onetime crisis. It's not about rebounding from one setback." What is needed are leaders who have the capacity for resilience, for what they call "rid-

dent he was that God was leading the way. As Robert told me about the drowning incident, I could picture the river, overflowing and running rapidly, and him and his friend gasping for air. I could feel the utter helplessness of those seconds and minutes in which he tried frantically to hold on to life and not go under to never come back again. His mind, keenly alert in the moments of peril, flashed back all his life in front of him. He saw how arrogant he had been in his dealings with others. He saw the times in which he had not relied on God. In desperation Robert asked God to save him and give him the chance to become a better person, a better husband and father, and a better leader. And that's when he felt a strong arm pulling him up and taking him to safety. His friend drowned.

It took a long time for Robert to reel back from this event. He felt disoriented, lacking focus and understanding of what the future held. He was impacted by his friend's death and did not understand why he had lived while his friend had died. Youseff & Luthans (2007) explain that the affected individual needs time, energy and resource investment to recover,

court. He chose the latter, finding

77:11, 12; 78:7, NIV). "Blessed are those whose strength is in you, and whose hearts are in your paths. When they go through the valley of tears, you will turn it into a spring, as when the rains fill the pools of water. They will go from miracle to miracle and will see God in Zion" (author's English translation of Psalm 84:5-7, RV 1960 Spanish). "I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them" (Isaiah 42:16, NIV).

The quest underlying the present exploratory research was a desire to understand if there is a connection between hardship and leadership. The Christian leaders I interviewed believe that their effectiveness and success as leaders is due to the way they have processed and faced the hardships in their lives. The experience of bouncing back from adversity and crisis imbues their lives with a heightened sense of purpose and meaning. They have learned to make realistic use of the resources they have at hand. But above all, they

consider their faith in God the indispensable component in their ability to bounce back when hardship hits them with full force.

*The names of leaders mentioned in this article, with the exception of John Shinsky, are fictitious in order to protect confidentiality.

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