



Handling Adversity

The patterns of thought and emotion with which you respond to difficulty are deeply ingrained. But they can still be improved.

Traditional training is tantamount to upgrading and installing new software in your brain, argues Paul Stoltz, president and CEO of PEAK Learning, Inc., a research and consulting company based in San Luis Obispo, Calif. But when your brain's operating system is overburdened, the benefits of training will be limited and short-lived. So the most direct route to performance improvement is to beef up your operating system. And that is accomplished by improving what Stoltz calls your adversity quotient (AQ) – your capacity to respond productively in times of stress.

Neurophysiological research demonstrates that the "function and health of every cell of your body-mind is influenced by how you respond to life's events," writes Stoltz in *Adversity Quotient @ Work* (Williams Morrow, 2000). "Our reactions to life's events evoke certain peptides, which get dumped into the cerebral spinal fluid and flow to all of our issues. Thus, high-AQ and low-AQ people see and experience the world differently because their neurological systems function differently under stress. Their explanatory styles – the patterns of thought and emotion with which people respond to events – are hardwired into the brain.

An explanatory style, Stoltz continues, has four dimensions:

- ♦ **control** - the extent to which you feel able to influence a situation positively and the extent to which you can control your own response to a situation;
- ♦ **ownership** - the extent to which you take personal responsibility for improving a given situation, regardless of its cause;
- ♦ **reach** - how extensively you allow a particular kind of adversity you face to affect other areas of your work and life;
- ♦ **endurance** - your perception of how long an adverse situation will last.

Stoltz developed the Adversity Response Profile™ (ARP) to measure these four dimensions of a person's response to difficulty. Basically, the test evaluates your response to a series of hypothetical situations. Say your boss strongly disagrees with a decision you've made. To what degree do you feel that the consequences of this situation will affect all aspects of your life? Conversely, to what degree do you feel that the consequences will be limited to this particular situation?

For people with low AQs, the typical response to adversity is a feeling of powerlessness and despair that suits out any

evidence that the situation may not be as dire as it initially appears.


Stoltz classifies such people as Quitters. By contrast, high-AQ types, the Climbers, remain optimistic and resilient in the face of difficulties, focusing on what they can control and how they can positively influence situations. Those in the middle – they comprise 80% of the workforce, Stoltz estimates – are referred to as Campers. They handle most adversities relatively well, but they also have a fair amount of untapped potential. Moreover, difficulties wear them down more than they should.

The very act of noticing your response to a difficult situation can lead to profound changes in your ability to handle adversity.

Though patterns of response to adversity are hardwired into the brain, they can still be changed, Stoltz insists. Having measured the AQs of more than 100,000 people and provided in-depth consulting to some 100 companies, he's convinced not only that people's AQs can be permanently strengthened, but also that a high AQ is "an exceptionally robust predictor of success."

To improve your AQ, begin by simply listening to your response to a difficult situation – the very act of noticing your response disrupts your explanatory style, initiating chemical changes in your brain, says Stoltz. From there, conduct a searching analysis of the situation to uncover aspects that lie within your power to improve. Then, identify specific steps you can take to increase your control over the situation or to minimize the adversity's reach or duration – and take them.

There's nothing complicated in all this, nor is the AQ approach the only way of addressing your patterns of response to adversity. But some of the most profound changes begin with just the slightest shift in awareness or perception. The four dimensions Stoltz identifies – control, ownership, reach, and endurance – provide a handy framework for bringing about such a shift.



Adversity Quotient
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