

The Strategy Summit

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Building resilience for an era of change

The Managing Partners' Forum's third Strategy Summit, hosted by Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, introduced two speakers whose personal and professional lives have been shaped by their strategies for adaptability and resilience for an era of change.

Caspar Craven, a businessman and adventurer shared his four steps for building resilient teams. This was developed from lessons learned from building businesses and planning life-changing, high-risk adventures. In 2011, when his data analytics consultancy, Trovus, was struggling, Craven decided to go back to basics and re-learn what it takes to be a leader. This produced a set of shared authentic values that would transform the business, which was sold for a seven-figure sum in 2015.

In the same year, Craven sailed around the world with his wife and three children, aged nine, seven and two. Although Craven himself was a veteran of round-the-world yacht racing, none of his family had any sailing experience, so he needed to plan carefully for every eventuality. He applies the same combination of detailed preparation and strong personal commitment to his business and personal challenges. The following is a summary of his four-step strategy for resilience:

1. Build resilience long before you need it. The first step is to build foundations that unite your team. This starts at the initial planning stage which is about working together to creating the vision of a shared future that everyone can engage with.
2. Create a culture of we, not me. If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together. This means bringing everyone along on the journey. Even at home, before sailing around the world with his wife and three young children, Craven and his family spent time together creating a set of shared values. They were: love, laugh, go prepared, learn something, understand each other and take action. Values define behaviours, and behaviours define outcomes, he explains.
3. Focus on the people, not the numbers. In business, especially, employees don't engage with goals that are numbers. Take the time to identify people's strengths and place them in the right role. For example, a team member at Trovus, who struggled in a sales role, flourished as head of customer success. When planning his round-the-world trip, Craven gave each of his children roles and responsibilities that gave them a sense of importance – the feeling that they were contributing to the journey's success – and helped them learn useful skills that interested them, such as navigation and fishing. The journey gave them a unique education. Don't forget to laugh, he says –

laughter was the second family value after love. If people do what they are good at and they have fun doing it (not all the time, but laughing together brings people closer), they will be more committed and productive.

4. When things go wrong, remember $E+R=O$ or Event + Reaction = Outcome. Some events will always be outside your control, especially in times of crisis, but you can decide how to react and what to do about them, and that often affects the eventual outcome. Craven and his family had to deal with a complete power failure 500 miles from land in the South Pacific. His reaction was to return to the values that his family had established at the outset. They introduced something new that also made everyone laugh – a practical necessity that incorporated one of their shared values: the ‘bucket and chuck it’ toilet. They then used the stars to navigate their boat to safety. Living your shared values through adversity brings your team (or family!) closer.

Craven’s practical optimism, which can be applied to any challenge, was followed by a very different talk from Ronan Harrington, the founder of Alter Ego, whose underlying premise was to have the courage to let change be transformational. He started with a quote from Carl Rogers, ‘What is most personal is most universal’ and told us that his most formative memory was the death of his brother, in an accident, when he was a child. Consequently, he was driven to become an early achiever.

Harrington was the youngest futurist at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and subsequently director of a law firm (RPC LLP) at the age of 27. Harrington believes that resilience is the capacity to be shaped by your experiences. “We don’t so much solve our problems as we outgrow them. We add capacities and experiences that eventually make us bigger than our problems,” he says.

Harrington’s talk covered four main points:

1. What the FCO taught him about interdimensional change
2. The evolution-designed brain
3. How to build resilient cultures in firms
4. Learning from failure: how Harrington tried to apply these theories in practice to a law firm

Like Craven, Harrington focuses on mindfulness and adaptive behaviour change, with the goal of not defaulting into perpetual reaction mode, which creates stress and burnout. This Mindfulness builds personal resilience, breaking our addiction to overthinking and being distracted, including by constant digital notifications.

Harrington’s ‘Mixed Mental Arts’ strategy incorporates six skills to manage thoughts and emotions and build resilience:

1. Breaking our addiction to overthinking
2. Hacking the body’s stress responses
3. Neutralising unhelpful thought patterns
4. Navigating overwhelming experiences
5. Re-learning relaxation
6. Reclaiming emotional autonomy

But personal resilience is not enough. Organisations need structural resilience too, which means embracing flexibility and effective communication and feedback. For professional services in particular, this can require a major culture change. Harrington worked for RPC as what he describes as an 'animateur', or someone who would bring the firm's vision to life. Some of his unconventional approaches worked. He introduced the board to mindfulness, and all 80 partners to visualisation – where they brainstormed a shared vision of the law firm of the future. Ultimately, Harrington's brutal honesty, which he described as being vulnerable enough to communicate his true feelings – which the managing partner appreciated and bought into – created problems, when he advised trainees that if they were not happy at the firm, they should feel free to leave! His final act of vulnerability/courageous communication was to record his exit interview as a podcast!

Harrington's strategy seems extreme, but it was instantly effective. The Q&A session that followed included Sara Maccallum, senior partner at Boodle Hatfield, who shared some of her personal and professional challenges on the way to her senior leadership position, which she described as her 'stewardship' of the 300-year-old firm which regularly has to adapt to major changes in the business environment.

The key message from this thought-provoking event was about developing a strategy for resilience so that change is embraced as an opportunity to bring out the best in people and organisations, rather than a threat: we were advised to be prepared for the unexpected and be courageous in adversity.

Ultimately, resilience means bringing the best of humanity into the equation by planning carefully and inclusively, adapting to the unexpected with good humour and optimism and learning from experiences, including mistakes, and enabling your leadership and your people to navigate that journey. It is also about learning from each other and being inspired by change trailblazers like Craven and Harrington.

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