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THE ROLE OF SELF-AWARENESS IN DEVELOPING PROJECT MANAGERS' RESILIENCE

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Abstract. *This article aims to provide a complex attitude on how resilience among project managers can be developed through a broader perspective of self-awareness. In a world of rapid changes, uncertainty and overconsumption fostering a sustainable society becomes crucial for those societies and communities who look strategically to the future. The human factor plays an important role not only as the element of a sustainable society but also as the key for project managers, who with their teams always stand in front of innovations and changes. To act effectively in constantly changing conditions and successfully manage the projects, resilience as the competence whose importance is recognized both in theory and practice takes on a special significance. Although scientific literature reviews and examines the ways to develop this competency, because of its high complexity more comprehensive approach to developing resilience is missing. This article explores how a construct of self-awareness also characterized by exceptional complexity can serve for building resilience. Understanding this link and developing resilience in the complexity of self-awareness can lead to better results in personal development, project management, and the creation of a sustainable society.*

Keywords: resilience, self-awareness, project management, project manager, personal development, sustainable society.

Introduction

In contemporary organisations, project managers and their teams are the ones most affected by uncertainty and unpredictability. Seeking to thrive in complex and changing environments and successfully manage projects, resilience becomes one of the most important competencies in projects and project-based organizing. The individual resilience of the project manager influences the other team members as they follow the manager's example (Karlsen and Berg, 2020). Leaders are also those who can motivate their people in the face of adversity by modeling resilience and building a culture of determination and progress (Deep, 2023). Considering this approach to project management, the article focuses on resilience development in project management beginning from the project managers' perspective.

"Leadership resilience refers to a leader's ability to recover from setbacks, maintain high performance, and steer the organization toward its goals in the face of adversity" (Deep 2023, p.87). However, we frequently behave mindlessly in the way we deal with uncertainty, in the way we perceive it, in the way we understand it, and in the way we respond to it (Kutsch and Hall, 2020). The mindset the leaders choose matters a lot, because a negative attitude can lead to approaching the situation destructively, forgetting faith and values, and using an avoidance approach when facing life's tests (Breen, 2017). Instead of trying to predict the future, it is necessary to learn how to deal with uncertainty mindfully.

Although resilience's influence in project management and project managers' work effectiveness is recognized and examined in scientific literature, there is still a gap in considering project managers' resilience development utilizing self-awareness. In order to find the pathways for resilience development from this particular perspective, we chose to analyze the problem from the theoretical level first. Development-oriented studies, according to Ellis and Levy (2010), begin with the initial conceptualization of a problem and culminate in the evaluation of the impact of one or more factors affecting that problem. Seeking to connect project managers' resilience development with a conscious individual approach, the article aims to reveal how resilience among project managers can be developed through a broader perspective of self-awareness. To identify directions for developing project managers' resilience, we utilize insights gained by analysing theoretical dimensions and the components of resilience that best reflect the project manager's perspective. After this, we take initial steps to connect project managers' resilience development directions and self-awareness as the development method. Finally, we seek to verify whether self-awareness is a suitable method for project managers' resilience development, examining it as the process and outcome in the identified project managers' resilience development areas.

Directions for project managers' resilience development

The analysis from various research articles on the topic of resilience revealed three most common streams on which this concept is based in a broad sense: a) dimensions to analyze resilience; b) components/outcomes of resilience; c) development of resilience. The first two directions have been explored quite extensively, however, the third remains the least studied in the scientific literature. It can be assumed that less attention is paid to the development of resilience because of the complexity of this construct, which also causes difficulties in measuring the results of resilience development.

First, the complexity of resilience can be revealed through the many dimensions according to which this construct is analyzed (Table 1). It is important to note that the list of these dimensions can be continued by other current or future scientific research, as this table presents only the prime of them. The many dimensions of resilience analysis initially confuse, consequently forcing one to choose the most appropriate angles of analysis that will help solve a specific problem. Secondly, the components of resilience are almost endless, considering different authors and perspectives (Smith, 2017). In order to decide which components are important in particular situations and define paths for their development, we should also identify appropriate theoretical concepts and conduct analysis within their frameworks.

Table 1. Dimensions to analyze resilience
Source: the authors are listed in the table below

Dimensions to analyze resilience	Components of particular dimension
Resilience in the workplace (Alliger et al. 2015)	individual and team
Resilience according to territorial scope (Irani and Rahnamayiezekavat, 2021)	national, regional, urban area, urban, local, or household
Resilience from different perspectives (Ostadtaghizadeh et al., 2015)	social, economic, institutional, physical, and natural
Approach to the concept of resilience (Smith, 2017)	resilience as a process or an outcome
Approaches on resilience based on literature analysis (Smith, 2017)	asset, the systemic, and the developmental approaches
Fields of science (Ledesma, 2014)	psychology, psychiatry, developmental psychopathology, human development,

	change management, medicine, epidemiology, nursing, social sciences, and educational administration
Resilience cycle phases (Patterson and Kelleher, 2005)	deteriorating phase, an adapting phase, a recovery phase, and a growing phase
Development through obstacles (Howard and Irving 2013)	developmental assignments, developmental relationships, developmental experiences, and developmental training.
Resilience in project management (Fey and Kock, 2022)	perspectives of project team leaders, team members as a group or individuals, stakeholders, society, etc.

Naderpajouh et al. (2020) argue that projects and project-based organizing help to deal with uncertainty and constant changes and can be the area to develop longer-term resilience at the socio-ecological-technical level. This statement reveals why resilience development in project management is especially important in the modern world. The most appropriate perspectives to analyze resilience and identify potential development areas of this trait in project management are: a) individual resilience and perspective of project team leaders (Fey and Kock, 2022), b) systemic and developmental approaches to resilience (Smith, 2017).

Although in project management, both kinds of resilience - individual and team resilience (Fey and Kock, 2022) matter, when exploring the resilience development of a project manager, we should start from an individual level first and try to analyse this trait through the eyes of a project manager. The perspectives of resilience from various sciences has revealed three common features that are very important to understand resilience as the concept and necessary to set further guidelines to its development: the ability to withstand insecure, uncomfortable circumstances or periods; positive outcomes/growth despite these circumstances; and the aspect that all of this happens at an individual level of personality. Here, our findings reaffirm the idea of Howard and Irving (2013), that resilience at the individual level cannot be achieved without encountering obstacles. The project manager's perspective is very accurately revealed by the interviews with project managers from various industries that Shafi (2024) conducted and described in his research. The regularities observed in these interviews reveal that the role of a project manager is inseparable from open communication with stakeholders and team members, balancing structure with flexibility, maintaining clear project goals, changing or rigid regulatory requirements, setbacks, uncertainty, and proactive risk management.

Also, to understand resilience from the individual project managers' perspective, components or traits that constitute resilience in this particular case have been analysed. Recurring patterns revealed the importance of social factors when forming these traits. These findings led to Smith's (2017) systemic approach, which claims that resilience includes not only personal traits but also outer social factors that are very important in building resilience. Traits representing a resilient leader may be highly affected by social factors. From the project managers' perspective, this factor is even more obvious as project leaders' responsibilities are inseparable from the team and diverse stakeholders.

The broad list revealing the components of resilience was still open to supplement, once again confirming the complexity of resilience even in the narrowed perspective. These findings led to implications revealing that resilience development in project managers' cases requires a life-long learning approach, conscious choice to recognize strengths and weaknesses, openness to new ideas, inner strength, and courage to face difficulties. These observations confirmed the idea of the developmental approach, claiming that resilience develops in the face of challenges and is characterized by a more holistic and systematic view of resilience. According to Smith

(2017, p.10), "such a perspective would suggest working with awareness, and perhaps core beliefs and values, with a greater focus on identity and the self".

By choosing the theoretical perspectives that best fit the problem in the three streams of resilience, we could see the big picture and identify the essential directions necessary for developing resilience in the case of a project manager (Figure 1). The main directions for project managers' resilience development identified during this analysis were: a) focus on development at an individual level, b) influence of social factors, c) feedback from the team and stakeholders, d) life-learning approach, e) conscious choice to face difficult situations and overcome them.
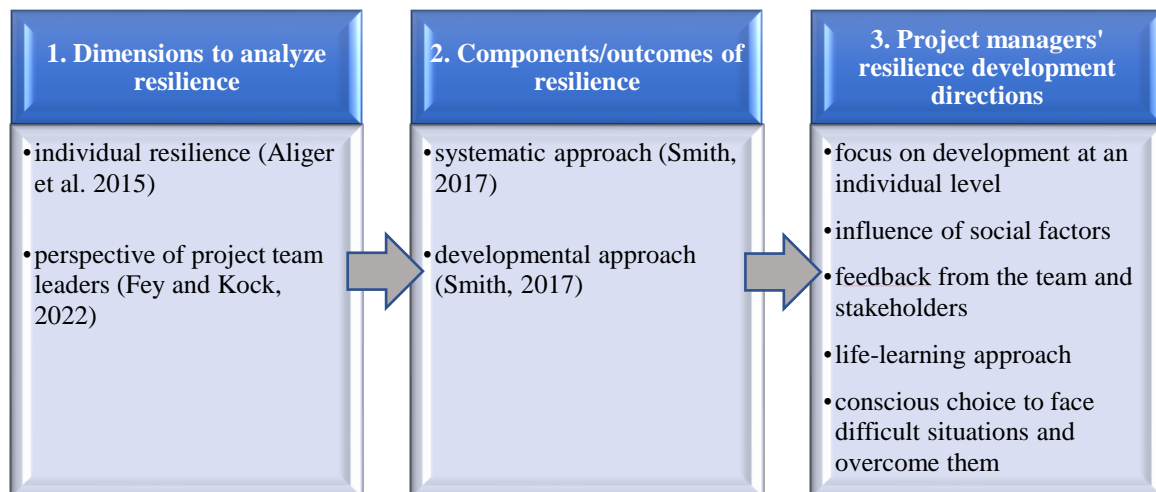
1. Dimensions to analyze resilience	2. Components/outcomes of resilience	3. Project managers' resilience development directions
• individual resilience (Aliger et al. 2015) • perspective of project team leaders (Fey and Kock, 2022)	• systematic approach (Smith, 2017) • developmental approach (Smith, 2017)	• focus on development at an individual level • influence of social factors • feedback from the team and stakeholders • life-learning approach • conscious choice to face difficult situations and overcome them

Figure 1. Theoretical analysis of project managers' perspective and identification of resilience development directions
Source: created by the authors

Methods for resilience development

Jansen and Wieland (2024) acknowledge that resilience is a trait that can be honed and strengthened, metaphorically likening resilience to muscles that grow stronger with consistent exercise through strategies such as positive self-talk, leveraging support networks, and extracting insights from challenges. Deep (2023) notes that resilience in leadership can be developed utilizing training programs, coaching, difficult assignments, forcing people outside their comfort zones, etc. To foster resilience at the organizational level, it is essential to incorporate resilience psychoeducation into employee development programmes, utilize mindfulness training programmes, and cultivate physical activity (Fernandez et al., 2020). According to Willey (2018), self-awareness can also be used as a tool to build resilience. The abundance of resilience development methods and the complexity of the resilience construct suggest that at the organizational level, resilience development can be limited due to time, finance, human and other resources.

Sipondo and Terblanche (2024) notice a growing research emphasis on coaching as a method to develop resilience. According to them, coaching is an effective method that provides a confidential space for discussing difficulties, developing skills, and fostering open discussion about challenges. Smith's (2015) study revealed coaching as a useful resilience-building intervention by leaders. For coaching to act as an effective method, the following conditions must be met: dedicated time for coaching sessions in the period from 6 months to over a year, an experienced coach, homework for the coachee after or before each session, coachee's efforts

to develop (Sipondo and Terblanche, 2024). DiGirolamo (2015) also highlights the importance of a strong relationship between coach and coachee as a part of growth and inspiration. If we analyze coaching using the above-identified 5 directions for resilience development, which we have identified by analyzing resilience from the individual project managers' perspective, the shortcomings of this method can be identified. Coaching can hardly turn into a life-learning method as it is time-consuming and requires a coach, whose experience and skills also highly affect the results when using this method.

Self-awareness as a method in project managers' resilience development

In the times of the VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) world, the growth mindset is not an option but a necessity, thus, we need a method enabling leaders' development in any circumstances, regardless of the organization's resource limitations. Self-awareness as a project managers' resilience development method is able to fill the gap that can be caused by resource constraints, because it takes place at the individual level and has no time or place limitations. To help understand why self-awareness can be used as a method to develop resilience from the perspective of project managers and to disclose how it can be beneficial from this point of view, we will rely on the following structure: 1) to check whether self-awareness, as a method, responds to the above five directions for developing project managers' resilience; 2) to show the content and the process (London et al., 2023), analyzing self-awareness from the perspective of the project manager in each of these directions.

Focus on development at an individual level

According to Ashley and Palmon (2012), self-awareness in almost all conceptualizations emphasizes that individuals evaluate themselves against some salient standard or goal. Based on this observation, the authors state that self-awareness helps individuals to understand whether they need to moderate a behavior, emotion, or course of action. While self-awareness can be a very effective method for improving, achieving goals, and becoming resilient in project management, for a project manager to utilize this method, it is first necessary to understand how it works. The process of self-awareness can be described as self-evaluation, process, and attention (Carden et al., 2022) (Table 2). According to the authors, the last stage is the most important in the development of self-awareness. Only if we can stop and recognise our unconscious reactions, here is the point where we can project desired changes and results in our behavior, and thus start working on individual growth. Self-awareness also allows leaders to assess their growth and effectiveness and change their behavior when necessary (Puhan and Malla, 2024).

Table 2. The process of self-awareness
Source: Carden et al., 2022

Self-evaluation	Awareness of others' perceptions through feedback seeking, awareness on interpersonal dimension (impact on others, behavior impact on others).
Process	Self-awareness as an ongoing developmental process.
Attention	Point of attention to immediate thoughts, emotions, physiological responses, and behaviors.

Influence of social factors

Eurich (2018, p.4) distinguished this construct into two types: internal self-awareness and external self-awareness. While internal self-awareness reflects on the above-mentioned development direction, understanding of external self-awareness helps to evaluate the fit of self-awareness in this particular direction. External self-awareness „means understanding how other people view us," evaluating our thoughts, feelings, behaviors, strengths, and weaknesses (Eurich, 2018). According to London et al. (2023, p. 262), external self-awareness is based on self-evaluation generated from feedback of other people as well as "our perceptions of how people relate to us and the effects our behavior has on others, and the extent to which we act in ways that are sensitive to others". If leaders' self-perception matches how others see them, it is more likely to empower, include, and recognize others (Puhan and Malla, 2024). According to the authors, the development of external self-awareness also leads to more empathetic behavior and an approach to people with different views. External self-awareness directly relates to better relationships with team members and, in that way, helps to support the project manager's resilience.

Feedback from the team and stakeholders

Self-awareness is highly affected by the feedback. The sources of feedback are: feedback from people familiar with the manager's work, from the manager's own experiences, and insights generated from psychological tests and inventories (Nesbit, 2007). To develop managers' self-awareness, it is very important to manage reactions and emotions that are influenced by feedback, especially negative one. Self-awareness helps to recognize feedback not as criticism but as a useful source of development, refusing judgment and defensiveness. It is important to emphasize that to receive feedback, the project manager must actively seek to receive it (Suarez Enciso et al., 2024).

Lifelong learning approach

The development of self-awareness is also a very complex process that requires different theories and methods. London et al. (2023) refer to theory-based strategies, adult development, experiential learning, and motivation theories, and practical methods for self-awareness development (reflective practices, coaching, leadership programmes, art-based programmes, self-assessment via instruments, feedback). Because of the complexity of self-awareness development, it is important to accept it as an ongoing process, which will not necessarily produce quick results in identified areas of development and which may become a lifelong learning approach for development. Westover (2025) describes self-awareness as an ongoing process of observation, reflection, and refinement rather than a goal. Learning oriented approach encourages not to be afraid of challenging situations and to accept them positively as a learning opportunity (Park and Park, 2019).

Conscious choice to face difficult situations and overcome them

Since project management is particularly characterized by uncertainty, it can be argued that the role of the project manager itself reflects a conscious choice to face complex, unknown situations, deal with them, overcome them, and accept obstacles as an inevitable part of the job.

Naderpajouh et al. (2020) notice that the discourse shift from risk to resilience replaced the focus from external disruption to the internal strength of the individual facing these disruptions.

Kreibich et al. (2020) argue that self-awareness affects goal monitoring in a two-phase process. According to the author, the project manager needs to identify whether the obstacle, which can manifest as a physical, mental, social, or situational setback, conflicts with the pursuit of his goals (*conflict identification*). Second, the project manager needs to find strategies to deal with the conflict challenged by the obstacle (*conflict resolution*).

Theoretical model for project managers' resilience development through self-awareness

Theoretical insights presented in the article lead us to combine them into a coherent model presented in Figure 2. The model is dedicated to helping project managers understand how to practically develop resilience using self-awareness and present changes in project managers' behavior that could be achieved following this framework.
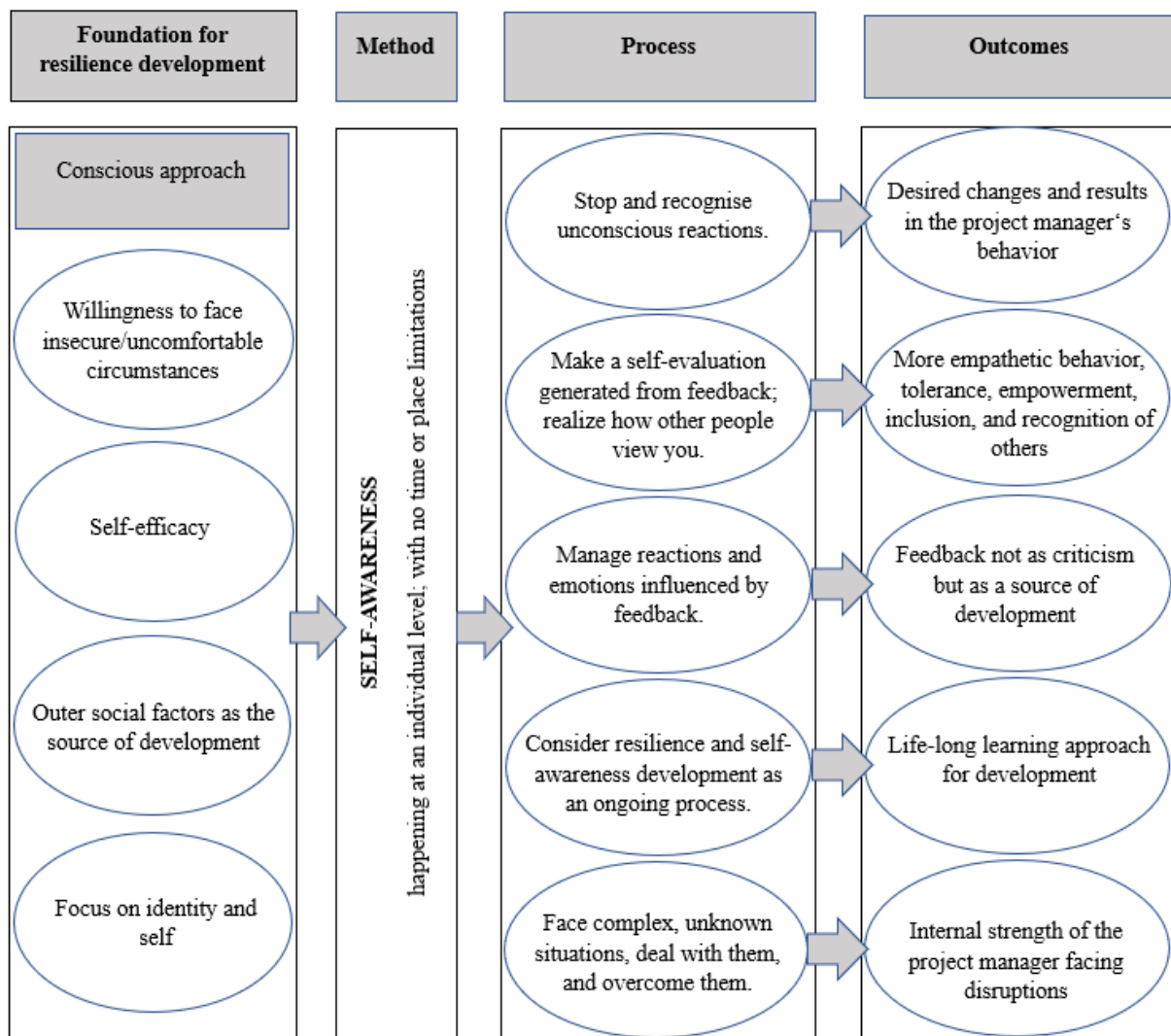

Figure 2. Framework for project managers' resilience development through self-awareness.
Source: created by the authors

The figure also includes the new definition of self-efficacy. According to Bandura & Wessels (1997, p.1), self-efficacy can be defined as "people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance". Project managers' confidence to perform necessary actions, as well as the other elements of the conscious approach presented in the first column of the Figure, form the foundation for the model to be implemented. As this framework is composed solely of theoretical insights, this leaves room for empirical testing in future research.

Conclusions

The importance of self-awareness in developing resilience is recognized and extensively studied in scientific literature. However, due to the complexity of self-awareness (Ashley and Palmon, 2012), it is still difficult to understand how this method will work from the individual perspective of a project manager, leaving self-awareness in project management not to be fully exploited.

The theoretical analysis of self-awareness as a method in identified project managers' resilience development directions allowed us to reveal how this complex method would work in each of the directions. The whole theoretical study disclosed that great results can be achieved using self-awareness in project managers' resilience development, and led to the conclusion that self-awareness has an advantage over other resilience development methods as it proceeds at the individual level with no time or place limitations. However, for this method to be more widely used in practice, it is necessary to help project managers understand the basic principles and the benefits of self-awareness in more detail. Such circumstances leave room for empirical research that could confirm theoretical claims and provide more knowledge on this topic.

The analysis of components building resilience and self-awareness revealed that several components overlap in both constructs. As the outcome of resilience and self-awareness, we can see empathy, feedback seeking, self-efficacy, locus of control, continuous learning and growth, high performance, value-based behavior, authentic leadership, etc. However, without a conscious choice of the leader to grow, without understanding the gap between current and desired situations, without constant efforts to understand our inner state, behavior, strengths, and weaknesses from intrapersonal and interpersonal perspectives, it would be almost impossible to develop resilience. Consequently, self-awareness as a method can be effective in resilience development if the manager himself understands its meaning and can accept self-awareness and its strategies.

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