

CASE STUDY

Sector: Energy

Building a Resilient Culture Southwestern Energy

By: Nick Petrie

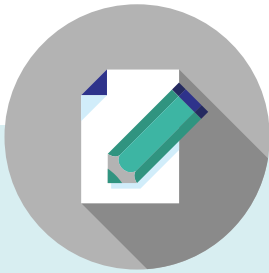




“It is rare that a leadership concept can grip an organization in such a powerful way and deliver game-changing results. We applied the learnings and approach presented in the ‘Work without Stress’ workshops and saw an immediate and positive impact on our team. Throughout the company, our leaders lead with a renewed sense of self-awareness and tangible skills to become more agile and resilient in the face of change, complexity, and challenge. Resilience can be learned; we are proof of that! We are now better equipped to consistently work smarter and add greater value.”

Bill Way

President & Chief Executive Officer
Southwestern Energy Company



Overview

Many organizations are facing change and disruption at a rate they have never seen before. While some organizations hope that their people will be able to handle the turbulence, others are proactively equipping their people with the skills, tools, and mindset to cope with this new environment. This paper tells the story of one such company, Southwestern Energy (SWN), who was going into a period of massive change that would require its people to 'perform in the storm'. They partnered with Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) to pursue the following objectives:

- Decrease people's stress levels during a tough, sustained period
- Increase people's physical and emotional energy in order to keep performing
- Create a scalable solution that would reach not just the top leaders but also employees at the front lines (in a cost affordable way)

The steps taken by SWN and others using this approach provide a roadmap for other companies who want to achieve similar results.



SWN—Building a Resilient Culture

The oil and gas industry has faced unparalleled external pressures in the last two years, pushing companies like Southwestern Energy (SWN) to institute changes that would affect the company and its employees. SWN wanted to help its employees reduce stress and the crippling effect it can have on team members and the business.

In order to quickly modify its processes and shrink expenses, SWN's leaders couldn't let their employees get frozen in the uncertainty that was affecting the whole industry. Leaders needed to make deep personnel cuts while changing some senior leadership and transitioning the business' focus. SWN needed to meet financial and operational targets safely while creating value for its shareholders.

SWN's leaders recognized that the changes in both the market and the company created high levels of uncertainty, coupled with a low sense of control for employees. Conditions were ripe for high levels of stress and anxiety unless SWN's leaders and employees strengthened their resilient strategies. SWN didn't want just resilient leaders—the company wanted everyone within the organization to become resilient. SWN needed an effective method for cascading this knowledge throughout the organization.

Southwestern Energy Profile

- Independent energy company in operation for more than 80 years
- Top 3 producer of natural gas in the contiguous US
- Primarily engaged in natural gas and crude oil exploration, development, and production
- Majority of workforce has not worked through the long-term, cyclical nature of the industry

According to much research over the last 30 years, the primary driver of stress is rumination, which is the regular replaying of negative past events or worrying about future events that you have no control over. Stress and anxiety have been shown to have negative effects on our health, productivity, and mood. While short periods of stress can be managed, rumination keeps us in a heightened state of anxiety and stress.





Reacting to Volatility and Proactively Preparing

CCL and SWN developed a two track Resilience process with one focused on ‘Leading Change’ and the other ‘Building a Culture of Resilience’. These two tracks had similar processes, yet targeted different outcomes. This case study focuses on the method CCL used to help SWN build resilience.

The key to building a culture of resilience within an organization is to model resilience at the top leadership levels. For this reason, CCL started resilience training at SWN with the top 130 leaders. Both CCL and SWN were convinced that once the senior leaders experienced the content, they would be very motivated to see it extended to their teams. CCL worked with SWN to design 3 high-impact, resilience-focused sessions that would complement the busy schedules of the company’s top leaders.

SWN invited leaders to attend the sessions, and nearly 80% of the leaders volunteered to participate. Leaders from outside of Houston (company headquarters) were flown to the corporate office to attend the 3 sessions with the intent that when they returned, the lessons could be shared in field locations as well. Leaders attended one session a day to learn about each topic, and lost very little work time while still accessing the new skills and language being presented.

Executive leaders kicked off each session, sharing personal experiences about past challenges and how they demonstrated (or failed to demonstrate) resilience. The executive team was determined to impress upon the participants that the mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing of each employee was important and worth developing.

Leader Resilience Sessions

- Designed for top 130 leaders
- Each 2 hour session focused on 1 resilience topic—mental, physical, or emotional
- Sessions included action plans for increasing resilience and converting workplace behaviors
- Executive leaders kicked off each session to demonstrate commitment
- Participation was encouraged, not commanded
- Sessions ran 3 times a day for 3 days, so leaders could find times that fit their schedules

“Going through the resilience course brought it to my attention and helped me be aware of when I was ruminating so that I could stop it. I think being aware and able to identify it helped me to hopefully do less of it.”

John, Manager





Cascading Resilience for Greater Reach

People are often motivated to change, especially when they see profound differences in those around them. But these changes don't usually last, setting the organizational culture back and causing frustrations throughout the organization. SWN's leadership team didn't want employees to develop ineffective habits or return to old mindsets. They knew that to thrive, resilience had to become the new normal: They needed their leaders to be accountable for implementing resilience throughout the organization.

SWN's senior leadership team had already been exposed to the concepts of resilience, but the information needed to spread throughout the organization in order to build a culture of resilience. CCL worked with SWN to develop a multifaceted approach for cascading resilience throughout the company's workforce. The CCL Cascading Resilience method reached nearly 1,000 employees within a few months. Each of these employees was able to learn about resilience through virtual and face-to-face sessions with their leaders.

Cascading Resilience

- After the workshops, each leader set up a 30-minute meeting with their team.
- Leaders played a short video to support the teaching of the resilience content.
- Teams then engaged in discussions about how the content applied to them individually and collectively and how they could apply this tool as a team.
- Participants internalized these videos and tools, often taking the information to family members or other networks.

The Four Steps of Resilience

- Accountability Partners
- *Each-One Teach-One* Videos
- Accountability and Best Practices Call
- Measurement of Changes

"Emotional resilience was hard, but good. I hear presentations where people say, 'I want you to know where I stand on this' or 'these are my beliefs on this.' It's working really well at Southwestern."

Steve, General Manager



Appointments and Calendaring: Accountability Partners

It is much easier for people to make a lasting change if that change is announced publicly and clearly supported by organizational leadership. After the initial workshops in both the *Leading Change* and *Building a Culture of Resilience* tracks, the participating leaders formed accountability partners. These partners helped keep each other accountable for proposed changes and helped celebrate victories. At the end of the workshop, partners shared with each other what they were going to work on and spelled out their immediate action plan. Partners also immediately made appointments to check in on their results after two weeks. These pairs were critical in helping the leaders commit to—and ultimately change—their behaviors.

Accountability Partners Shared

- What actions they had taken.
- What happened as a result.
- What they would do next.



Targeted Videos and Facilitated Discussion: *Each-One Teach-One*

The next step in cascading resilience throughout SWN was implementing the *Each-One Teach-One* modules. These modules included a set of pre-recorded videos accessible via a private Vimeo account. Each video included concepts of resilience and rumination that were tailored to SWN and its employees.

“I took the sessions to my group with the videos, and it resonated with them. It helped emphasize the highlights and important parts of the broader sessions. We were able to fill in with more examples and talk through some stuff that would help the team get the same value. Not everyone can go through everything, so being able to have the short videos helped others be exposed to the resilience concepts.”

John, Manager

For 3 months, the participating leaders received a monthly 7-minute video with a set of 3–4 facilitation questions on a key topic from the workshop that was relevant to their teams. The leaders played the video to their teams and facilitated a discussion using the questions as a guide. These sessions helped employees ask questions, share challenges, and apply the tools for resilience. The intimate nature of these sessions and leaders’ authenticity provided employees with a safe place to air their fears rather than becoming stuck in them.



Video 1: What really causes stress?

Video Capture of *Each-One Teach-One* module. The 7-minute videos provided leaders and their teams with a resilience topic. The accompanying questionnaire provided facilitation questions.



SWN's leaders found that the *Each-One Teach-One* modules gave them a simple process for developing direct reports, creating a common language, scaling and spreading the learning, and reinforcing their own learning and application of the tools. Words like "rumination" and "stress" became catalysts for discussion and change. Rather than remaining a byline on a training module, "resilience" became the vernacular of the company. Many leaders created check-in sessions to gauge their team's progress and engagement. Employees were encouraged to process the internal pressures they felt in the volatile business environment without ruminating and creating stress.

Module Facilitation Questions

- How does this content apply to you?
- How does this apply to us as a team?
- How could we implement this as a group?

"All the discussion around resilience, led by leaders, made it okay to have these sensitive discussions. It's rare, at work, to have an employee admit feeling stressed or worried about the sustainability of the organization. But we were doing it—leaders were initiating those dialogues. We were building peer networks to help employees support each other and get through the challenging times."

Elizabeth, HR Director



Following Up

The final element of building a resilient organization is following up to ensure that best practices are implemented and knowledge is effectively cascaded throughout the organization. Sixty days after the initial modules were presented to more than 100 top leaders, senior leaders and the HR Department hosted hour-long accountability and best practices meetings. During these meetings, senior leaders met with their immediate teams or their direct reports to ensure that the *Each-One Teach-One* sessions had occurred.

These check-ins provided the same benefits as the accountability partners, but also gave the leader participants a broader scope to gather ideas for implementing changes. During these meetings, each person answered 3 questions, which provided the leaders with feed-forward suggestions for making quick and relevant changes that fit with SWN's culture. This method turns change into a process, rather than a single event, and gives everyone an opportunity to see changes happening within themselves, their teams, and their organization.

It helped increase the leaders' motivation to take action, created a sense of progress, and enabled them to share best practices with their peers. SWN also started incorporating feedback from these sessions. For example, fitness instructors were asked to come in and provide stretch breaks during all-day meetings, and the dietician had a record number of calls, working with more employees to develop healthier habits to enhance their physical resiliency.

Accountability Meeting Questions

- What actions have I taken?
- What happened as a result?
- What have I learned that I will take forward?

“The biggest learning for me was avoiding rumination. I didn't know it, but [it] was the single biggest thing that affects me in my attitude to life in general. I was always looking behind me at all the mistakes I made. The guidance is to snap out of it. Take the learning and move forward. ‘Don't dwell on the past’ was a real eye opener for me.”

Riley, Team Lead

“I think we are coming around. We had been an organization that was afraid to talk about negative things. But we realized that not talking about them was worse than talking about them. If we can remember this point, we'll be there.”

Steve, General Manager



Measuring Impact

The final step for cascading resilience is to measure changes. After a year, SWN leaders retook the resilience survey. The results were impressive—in the retest of the group, we saw every single scale move in the direction of greater resilience, except for Avoidance Coping which was already strong.

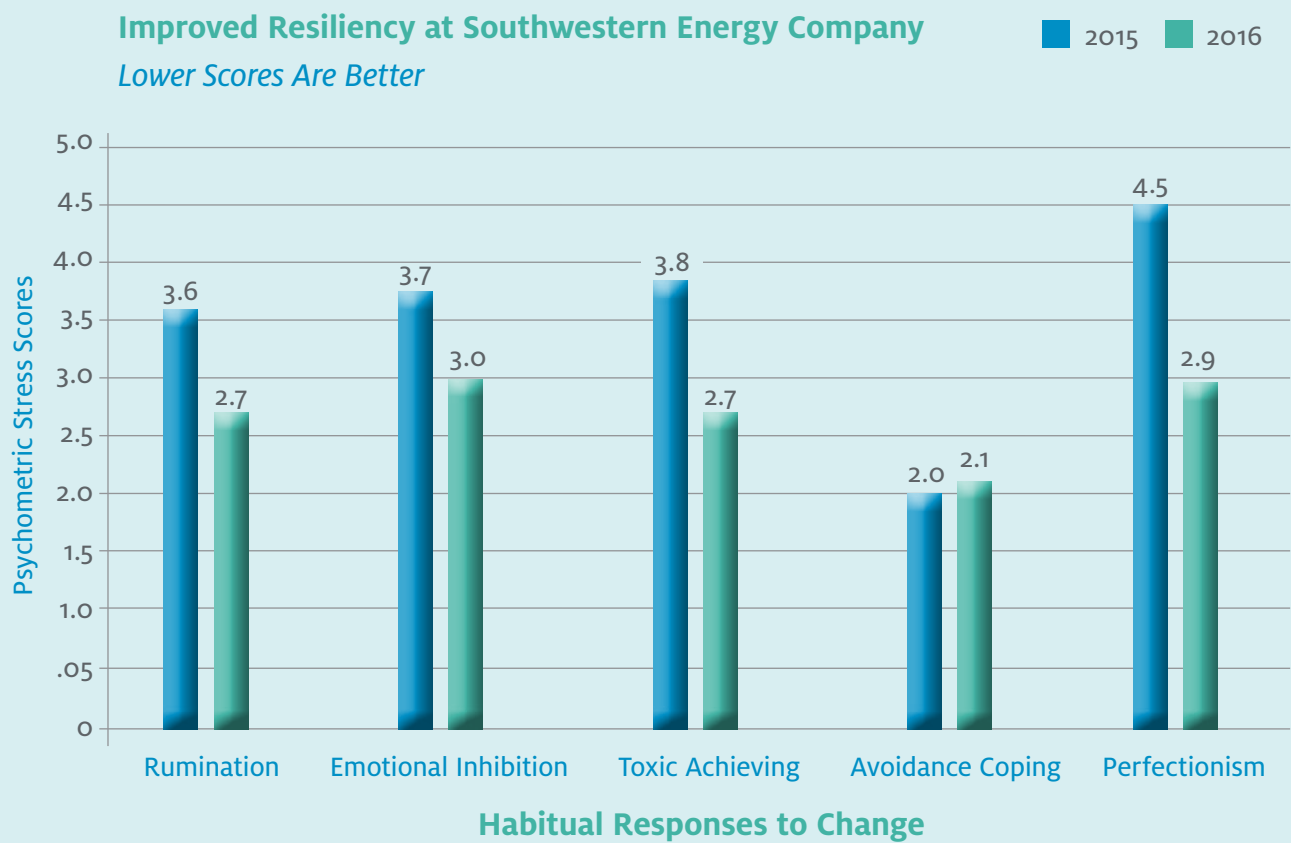


Figure 1. Resilience at Southwestern Energy. The decrease in all fields shows an improvement in 2016 over previous resilience scores.



Even more significant were the changes that specific individuals made who had previously been very stressed. Several leaders moved their score considerably towards greater resilience. In interviews with these employees, it became clear that the workshop had been a game-changer for their ability to reduce stress in their lives. Each person interviewed felt that not only had they grown, but the organization as a whole had become more resilient as well.

“We’ve had so many changes with layoffs and structure change. I would say as an organization, we are stronger and better. I think this [process] had an impact. There was lots of discussion about it, with lots of people talking about it. I would love to have [the trainer] come back in for a refresher. I thought he did a great job.”

John, Manager



Habitual Responses to Change

We have found that measuring results motivates leaders to continue making changes and also gives them a benchmark on how much progress they are making. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the improvements made is that these decreases in stress occurred during a time of significant change and layoffs. One participant also had extreme personal changes occur during the same time, and the resilience portion helped her through those changes as well, demonstrating that these workplace skills translate to other aspects of employees' lives as well.

"I took those scores from the survey to heart, and have been really trying to work on my work/life balance. I have half as many people calling me, but I'm trying to adhere to schedules. I whiteboard 2 rules: 1, Don't sweat the small stuff, and 2, It's all small stuff."

Lisa, *HR Business Partner*



The Impact

SWN is still facing a turbulent commodities market. Yet the company is arming its employees with information to help them transition and change. As employees learned the concepts of resilience, the company began to benefit as employees grew willing to make physical, mental, and emotional changes. Employees, and even whole teams, took visible actions to enhance their resiliency. Around the office, you could hear staff checking themselves and each other about rumination and stress. And most importantly, colleagues helped each other strengthen their resilience skills.

The company felt a new energy moving forward. SWN's employees learned this content for the rest of their lives, enabling them to implement resilience practices in their personal and professional lives. Pressure is inevitable, especially when facing economic uncertainty and industry downturns. But now the employees of SWN are more energized and less stressed because of what they learned.

Resilience Tools

CCL provided many different takeaways and tangible tools for participants. For example, participants received nutritional feedback as part of the Physical Resilience module. They also received additional information about resilience topics. Each tool provided another avenue for success.

“I’m more engaged with the plans for the future and what we are doing to achieve certain goals rather than looking to fix mistakes of the past.”

Riley, Team Lead

Learn more about working with CCL to create custom solutions that will transform the resiliency of your organization.

“You go to different types of leadership training, and a lot of times you come out with a feeling that you have it or you don’t. What struck me about this was that every bit of it can be learned, and by anybody at any level. That is pretty cool to hear.”

Steve, Manager



About the Author

Nick Petrie is the coauthor of the book *Work Without Stress*, which is based on 30 years or research on why some people gets stressed and others don't. He is a senior faculty member at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®). He works with CEOs and their teams to create resilience strategies for their organizations, particularly in periods of significant change. He is the lead researcher of CCL's research projects on 'How to lead change' and the 'Future of Leadership Development in Silicon Valley'. He holds a master's degree from Harvard University.

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+1 800 780 1031 +1 336 545 2810 info@ccl.org



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CCL - Americas

www.ccl.org

+1 800 780 1031 (US or Canada)

+1 336 545 2810 (Worldwide)

info@ccl.org

Greensboro, North Carolina

+1 336 545 2810

Colorado Springs, Colorado

+1 719 633 3891

San Diego, California

+1 858 638 8000

CCL - Europe, Middle East, Africa

www.ccl.org/emea

Brussels, Belgium

+32 (0) 2 679 09 10

ccl.emea@ccl.org

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

+251 118 957086

LBB.Africa@ccl.org

Johannesburg, South Africa

+27 (11) 783 4963

southafrica.office@ccl.org

Moscow, Russia

+7 495 662 31 39

ccl.cis@ccl.org

CCL - Asia Pacific

www.ccl.org/apac

Singapore

+65 6854 6000

ccl.apac@ccl.org

Gurgaon, India

+91 124 676 9200

cclindia@ccl.org

Shanghai, China

+86 21 6881 6683

ccl.china@ccl.org

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