

PART III: RESILIENCE, THE BASICS

Six Foundations of Building Community Resilience

As we've seen in the last two videos, resilience is an essential concept, but it's not always easy to explain. Even within academic circles there is no single agreed-upon framework for how to think about the resilience of systems—whether they're natural, human, or otherwise. Instead, people from many different backgrounds are taking the key insights of resilience thinking and drawing the lessons from it that suit their own needs. Well, this makes sense: the tools for building resilience in a Ponderosa pine forest are going to be different from the tools for building resilience in a city of 5 million people.

Last year, Post Carbon Institute surveyed the academic literature on resilience and talked to scholars, activists, and local leaders around the country to determine how the concepts of resilience might be most usefully applied in communities by people who aren't resilience scientists. We found an easily understood framework that speaks directly to the challenges communities face regarding equity, group decision-making, and their complex social and economic contexts. We identified six foundations that appear necessary for community resilience-building efforts to be successful. And these are:

- People,
- Systems thinking,
- Adaptability,
- Transformability,
- Sustainability, and
- Courage.

So let's walk through them one by one.

First, *People*: the power to envision the future of the community and build its resilience resides with community members.

Phil Myrick of the nonprofit Project for Public Spaces wrote, “We can try to outsource our problems to a new generation of green engineers, designers, and architects, but we will only see broad, lasting changes when *the people inhabiting these communities* create a vision for the future and lead the process for change.”

The goals of community resilience-building efforts are best focused on the needs of the people who make up the community—not just the needs of the most politically engaged or powerful stakeholders. But this also means that community members have to get involved in cultivating resilience as active participants and citizen-leaders.

You’ll recall from video 13 that resilience is the ability of a system to deal with disruption and change, while keeping its basic functions and structure—its “identity.” In a democratic society, we might say that the identity of a community comes from its members, and represents a shared sense of what the community’s core qualities are, and a shared vision of what things should be like in the future.

Therefore the process of building community resilience can sometimes start with a survey—we can try to describe a community’s identity by asking people: What are the values of this community? What defines this community, and why? What do we not want to lose? What do we need to change? These kinds of questions can only really be answered by community members.

Okay, #2: *Systems Thinking*. Understanding the complex, interrelated crises we face and what they mean for our similarly complex communities.

Doria Robinson of the Oakland urban farming group Urban Tilth puts it this way: “What are you trying to do, and what are the consequences? To me that’s systems thinking. It’s thinking about how one action here affects the whole.”

This means untangling some of the threads that tie various systems to one another, and what pulling on one part of the fabric might mean for the rest of it. For example, when RE-AMP, a coalition of environmental groups in eight Midwest states, set themselves the goal of cutting carbon emissions, they targeted the electricity system—shutting down coal plants and replacing them with renewable energy. But they quickly realized that going after dirty coal plants before clean energy replacement capacity was in place would backfire. Their solution was to bring environmentalists, utility companies, and policymakers all to the same table, so they could together understand the systemic challenges and come up with a systemic response. As a result of this dialog, RE-AMP helped close several coal power plants, and developed a plan for reducing greenhouse gas emissions 80 percent by 2030 across six Midwestern states.

Systems thinking is also important in terms of process. In systems thinking we choose from among many possible perspectives, and accept that we can't know everything we might want to know. In fact, recognizing that there is more than one way to see things is at the heart of systems thinking. And this is especially important when we are talking about human communities, where there are always diverse views and interests.

Number three: *Adaptability*. A community that adapts to change is resilient; but because communities and the challenges we face are dynamic, adaptation is an ongoing process.

Philosopher Eric Hoffer wrote, "In a time of drastic change it is the *learners* who inherit the future. The *learned* usually find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer exists."

For communities, resilience should be understood as ***a quality to continually cultivate***, not a goal to be achieved. Initiatives, activists, and

politicians come and go, but if resilience building is ingrained in the community culture, it can evolve as circumstances change.

Number four: *Transformability*. Some challenges are so big that it's not possible for the community to simply adapt; fundamental, transformative changes may be necessary.

In *The Leopard*, a novel about the 19th century unification of Italy, a character says, "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." In other words, to keep some of the things you care about, you sometimes have to give up other things. This is the essence of transformation, as opposed to mere adaptation.

If adaptation happens too slowly or is constrained, challenges can build up and outpace our ability to cope and eventually they threaten overall resilience. For example, when automobile manufacturing started moving out of the Midwest, many communities were so dependent on the industry that mere adaptation wasn't an option. It wasn't just a matter of attracting a new car company to fill in the gap; they needed to radically rethink their whole economic basis—and the social and governance implications of that radical change. In other words, these communities needed to change a part of their identity (while hopefully retaining their most valued *qualities*) and undergo a transformation to a new state that could be resilient under the new conditions.

Resilience building usually tries to maintain the basic function and structure of a given system in the face of disruption. But transformational efforts are purposefully disruptive to the system, changing some of its functions and structures so that it can build resilience in ways more suited to a new reality that's simply non-negotiable.

Community resilience-building efforts can be transformational by tackling aspects of the community that *need* fundamental change, and by sowing the seeds of transformation generally for when change is needed in the future. For

example, resilience-building efforts might aim to allow and create space—regulatory space, economic, social, and even physical space—for experimentation and novelty within governments, businesses, and neighborhoods, as well as *seeking out* innovations from the margins (which is where transformational change often starts).

Number five: *Sustainability*. Community resilience is not sustainable if it serves only us, and only now; it needs to work for other communities, future generations, and the ecosystems on which we all depend.

Jeremy Caradonna in his recently published history of sustainability says, “We’re at a crossroads in our civilization. There are two paths to take: continue with business as usual, ignoring the science of climate change and pretending that our economic system isn’t on life support—or, remake and redefine our society along the lines of sustainability.”

Resilience helps us understand how our human systems work and how they might adapt or fail to adapt to changes over time. Sustainability helps us understand, in a more general sense, our extremely complex relationship with the natural world, and the consequences of getting that relationship wrong. Where resilience is process-oriented and, in ways, value-neutral, sustainability forces us to confront deep questions and uncomfortable potential futures.

Sustainability is a non-negotiable yardstick against which all our actions, goals, and plans have to be measured.

If we don’t find strategies to keep the human project operating within the limits of the biosphere, that project will ultimately fail.

Which leads us to our last foundation...

Number six: *Courage*. As individuals and as a community, we need courage to confront challenging issues and take responsibility for our collective future.

Community resilience building is not an engineering problem solvable just by knowledge and skill. It's a social undertaking, involving thousands or even millions of people and their most meaningful relationships, hopes, and fears. It confronts us with the threats of the E4 crises and compels us to engage with people in our community with whom we may disagree—maybe quite strongly. That's where courage comes in.

We need motivation and emotional strength to take on that kind of work. Individuals need courage to speak out about their views and needs, and to make themselves personally vulnerable. Communities need courage to create space for difficult conversations, to make far-reaching investments and policy changes, and to risk sharing political and economic power.

Even finding agreement on which problems are most urgent can be contentious. For example, an urban planner we interviewed recalled a public meeting about community resilience in Oakland in 2015; climate change was on the agenda, but she said community members were more concerned about gentrification because that was the immediate threat forcing them out of the community. Well, it may take courage to remind fellow community members that, regardless of the validity of other concerns, climate change has impacts that are so broad and deep that we simply can't shunt it aside.

Courage brings us back around to the first foundation, **People**, because it is the people of the community who will build resilience—and they are the ones who need courage for all the pieces of resilience building:

- Courage to work with other **people** and share in taking responsibility for the community.
- Courage to tackle the complex, **systemic** issues we face.
- Courage to learn from experience and **adapt** our thinking and methods.
- Courage to accept uncertainty and make big **transformations** when necessary.

- And courage to commit to far-reaching and long-term resilience building that's truly **sustainable**, for generations to come.

Well, those are the Six Foundations to keep in mind as we begin to look more at the nuts and bolts of resilience building. So far we've been speaking mostly in generalities. We've seen what resilience is and what qualities foster it. In the next few videos we'll look more closely at what it means in terms of each of a community's, and a society's, primary systems, and consider a few specific examples of resilience in action.