

Resilience Is A Liability: Foundations Of NLP

Ultrastability — Why Enduring The Wrong Strategy Is Not A Virtue

THE IDEA

In 1948, the British cybernetician W. Ross Ashby built a strange machine called the Homeostat: four boxes wired together, each able to disturb the others. Nudge it gently and it would settle back to balance, the way a thermostat corrects around a fixed setpoint. But push it hard enough — disturb it past what its normal wiring could absorb — and something unusual happened. Instead of grinding uselessly against a disturbance it couldn't handle, the machine triggered a step-mechanism: it randomly reconfigured its own internal wiring, again and again, until it found a new stable arrangement entirely.

Ashby called ordinary correction “stability” — the same rules, holding steady, forever, but only within the range they were built for. He called the second behaviour ultrastability: survival that comes not from holding the rules constant, but from being willing to destroy and rebuild them when the rules themselves stop working. A thermostat is stable. A Homeostat is ultrastable. The difference matters enormously the moment the climate itself changes.

Source: W. Ross Ashby — the Homeostat's step-mechanism, 1948

OPEN WITH

“Resilience is a micro-tool. Apply it to a system crash and you're just bravely driving your car into the sea.”

THE BRIDGE — THREE CONTRASTS

- **AI:** backpropagation doesn't try harder on the same pathways — it rewrites its own internal weights.
- **WWII radar:** didn't "stay strong" against a bomber changing course — it destroyed its last prediction and recalculated.
- **The human flaw:** only humans romanticize enduring a dead strategy. Machines and surviving organisms mutate the map instead.

THE TALK

Resilience is a micro-tool. If you get a flat tire, be resilient — change the tire, push through the friction, get back on the road. Resilience is great for expected, daily resistance. But what happens when the road falls into the ocean? When a pandemic hits, or AI makes your entire business model obsolete overnight? That's a system crash. If you apply resilience to a system crash, you are just bravely driving your car into the sea. To survive a phase shift, you must drop the liability of resilience, break your own rules, and construct a completely new map.

THE NLP CONNECTION

Most self-development advice is stability advice: try harder, be consistent, push through. That's exactly right for ordinary resistance — a bad day, a hard conversation, a flat tire. It is exactly wrong the moment the ground itself has shifted, because more effort inside a broken rule just produces more of the same broken result, delivered with more conviction.

The practitioner's job, in that moment, is not to cheerlead resilience. It's to recognize when a client (or you) needs a step-mechanism — permission to stop defending the old rule and let a new one get built, even before it's proven to work.

A PRACTICE TO WORK THROUGH

Use this whenever you notice yourself — or someone you're working with — pushing harder against something that keeps not moving.

1. NAME THE ESSENTIAL VARIABLE

- ☐ State plainly what you're actually protecting by holding this rule steady — safety, income, identity, approval.

2. CHECK WHICH KIND OF PROBLEM THIS IS

- ☐ Is this normal weather (a hard day, solvable by more effort inside the current rule), or a changed climate (the rule itself no longer fits)?

3. IF IT'S A CHANGED CLIMATE, STOP CORRECTING

- ☐ Deliberately stop applying the old fix, even without a replacement ready yet. The step-mechanism cannot fire while the old rule is still being defended.

4. LET THE NEW RULE BE PROVISIONAL

- ☐ Treat whatever comes next as a working hypothesis to test, not a new permanent truth to defend just as hard.

TAKE WITH YOU

- Where have you been calling it “resilience” when it was actually a refusal to rewrite the rule?
- What's your current version of driving the car into the sea?
- If the road has already fallen into the ocean, what map would you build from nothing?

LINEAGE

Ashby, Bateson and the communications theorist Paul Watzlawick were part of the same cybernetics lineage that ran through the Macy Conferences — a line of thinking that later gave systemic therapy its core distinction between first-order change (trying harder inside an existing frame) and second-order change (changing the frame itself).