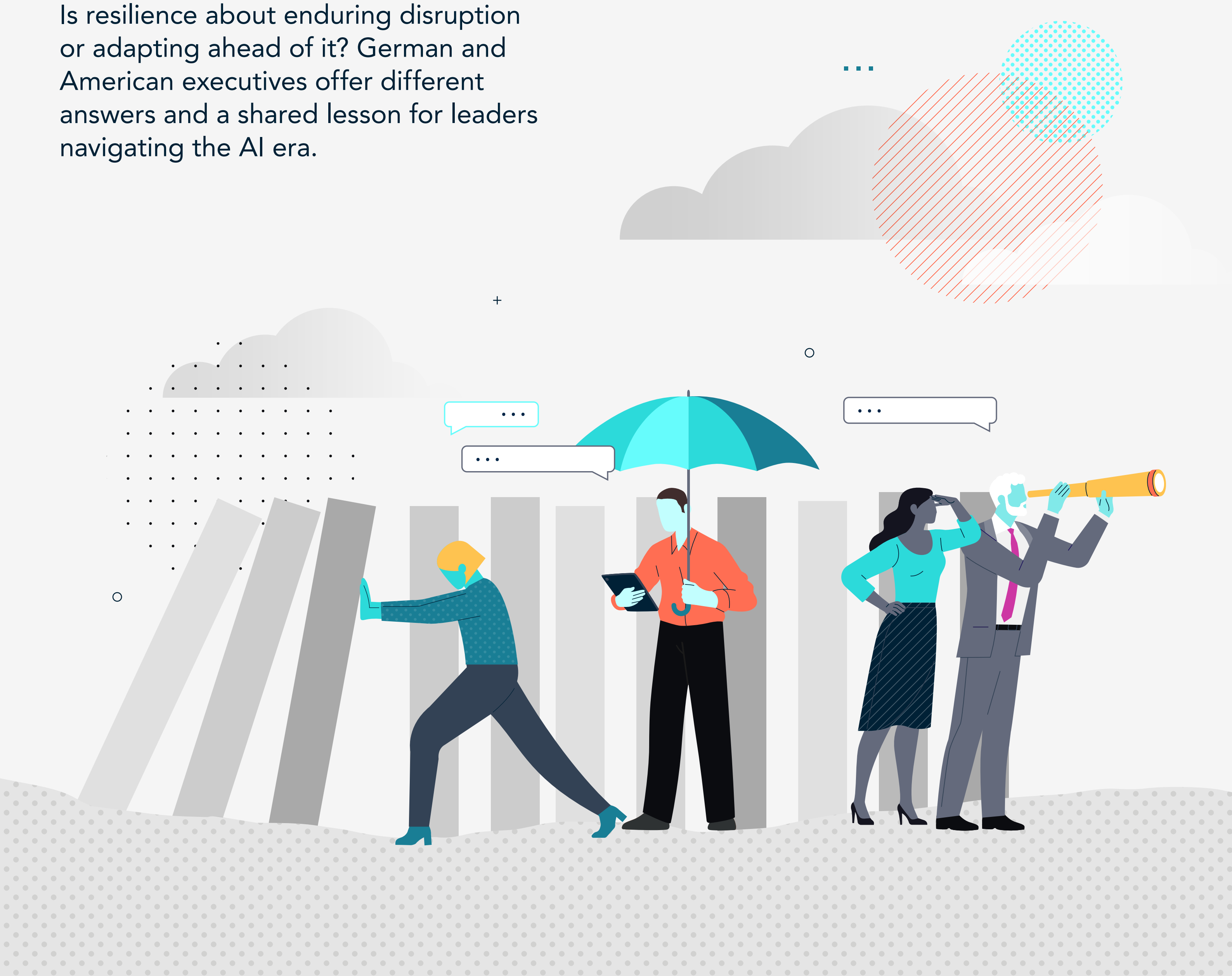
ARTICLE

Two definitions, one word: Why German and American leaders define "resilience" differently—and what each group can learn from the other

Is resilience about enduring disruption or adapting ahead of it? German and American executives offer different answers and a shared lesson for leaders navigating the AI era.



For decades, resilience has ranked among the defining attributes of effective leadership. Boards seek it, investors prize it, and executives increasingly cite it as essential for navigating geopolitical instability, economic uncertainty, and rapid technological change. At Heidrick & Struggles, we see resilience as a core competency for future-ready leaders.[1]

Over the past few months, we have explored the concept of resilience in conversations with 15 CEOs, board directors, founders, and senior executives who have built businesses in both the DACH region and the United States.

Executives shaped by the German business tradition tend to define resilience as the ability to build organizations that endure. Those whose careers developed primarily in the American technology ecosystem more often understand resilience as the ability to adapt before change makes adaptation unavoidable.

Each of these definitions offers its own unique strengths. Organizations built for durability often excel at disciplined execution, institutional knowledge, and long-term value creation. Organizations built for adaptability frequently outperform in speed, experimentation, and responding to disruption.

The challenge for today's CEOs is not deciding whether to prioritize endurance or adaptability but understanding when each is required—and building organizations capable of both.

Yet in an era defined by AI and accelerating change, neither model is sufficient on its own. Instead, both the German and American approaches to resilience can teach us important lessons about how to lead now. Leaders both shape and are shaped by their organizations, meaning that resilience is an issue of both personal leadership style and organizational design. The challenge for today's CEOs is not deciding whether to prioritize endurance or adaptability but understanding when each is required—and building organizations capable of both.

The conversations that follow explore how different leadership traditions arrive at that conclusion and what senior executives can learn from each.

One word, two leadership traditions

For many leaders with German roots, resilience begins with permanence. Across our interviews, these executives emphasized a vision of resilience that prioritizes long-term thinking, careful decision-making, and disciplined execution.

Alexander von Fritsch, Chief Executive Officer of think-cell, described resilience as the willingness to resist prevailing market fashions and instead focus on solving "the really difficult problems." The leaders who shaped him consistently made decisions based on what would matter in 10 years—not the next quarter—even when that meant accepting short-term setbacks.

Peter Schmid, Chief Executive Officer of Redcare Pharmacy, expressed a similar philosophy, arguing that leadership always requires balancing "long-term vision and short-term execution." Jan Siegmund, former Chief Financial Officer of Cognizant and ADP, likewise defined resilience as remaining strategically relevant through successive waves of technological change by identifying the few structural shifts that truly reshape a business rather than becoming consumed by operational noise.

In this framework, resilience is something that is deliberately built and maintained. Leaders put their approach into action by investing patiently in processes, governance, talent, and capabilities that compound over time.

Executives whose careers have largely unfolded within the American technology ecosystem described their approach to resilience differently. Rather than working to withstand disruption, they aim to lead their organizations into evolving faster than the disruption.

1 TA Mitchell, Sharon Sands, and Naomi Record, "Developing future-ready leaders," Heidrick & Struggles, heidrick.com.

Susan Jurevics, former Chief Brand and International Officer of Audible, captured this distinction most directly. "The original definition" of resilience, she observed, is "something that gets distorted...and then bounces back to its original shape." But, she argued, "it's not about going back to the original shape. It's actually about leaning into the distortion...with calm, clear focus."

Thomas Collins, Chief Executive Officer of Marlabs, reached a similar conclusion while leading a private-equity-backed transformation. Through this process, he discovered that success depended less on faithfully executing an established model than on abandoning parts of it. Being resilient meant constructing a new narrative and convincing the organization that transformation itself represented opportunity rather than a threat.

Britta Fleck, Director at Google, described resilience as an "agility quotient," arguing that leaders increasingly succeed by helping people reinterpret uncertainty as possibility through transparency, consistency, and continuous learning. Kay Oswald, Chief Executive Officer of Interblock Gaming, distilled the same idea into a simple phrase: fundamentally, resilience today is "decision-making under ambiguity."

The most resilient organizations ultimately require both the discipline to build lasting capabilities and the willingness to reinvent them when circumstances change.

None of these executives argued that organizations should choose between endurance and adaptability. Instead, they described different starting points that reflect the environments in which they developed as leaders. The most resilient organizations ultimately require both: the discipline to build lasting capabilities and the willingness to reinvent them when circumstances change.

How definitions of resilience shape organizations

Leadership philosophies rarely remain confined to individual executives. Over time, they shape how organizations allocate capital, manage risk, innovate, make decisions, and respond to disruption. Across our interviews, the different definitions of resilience described in the previous section consistently manifested themselves in different organizational behaviors.

Organizations built around durability tend to optimize for reliability. Decision-making is deliberate, processes are carefully engineered, institutional knowledge is preserved, and leaders invest considerable effort in reducing uncertainty before committing resources. These organizations frequently excel at quality, customer trust, and sustained execution over long time horizons.

Organizations built around adaptability optimize differently. They emphasize speed over completeness, experimentation over certainty, and optionality over optimization. Decisions are treated as hypotheses rather than permanent commitments.

This difference in approach reflects a different answer to the same leadership question: How should an organization prepare for an uncertain future?

Several executives pointed to Germany's remarkable record of building companies that remain leaders in highly specialized markets for decades. Tobias Hartmann, Chief Executive Officer of Cars Commerce, attributed this to organizations that deliberately invest in deep expertise, carefully designed operating models, and capabilities that competitors struggle to replicate. Oliver Steil, Chief Executive Officer of TeamViewer, similarly argued that European organizations excel at solving exceptionally complex technical problems because they emphasize analytical rigor and long-term capability building.

The trade-off, however, is that these same strengths can become constraints when markets evolve quickly. Kay Oswald observed that German organizations often strive to perfect solutions before bringing them to market, while American companies are generally more willing to launch earlier, learn faster, and improve continuously.

Gunnar Wiedenfels, Chief Financial Officer of Warner Bros. Discovery, extended that observation beyond product development. He argued that organizations frequently devote enormous attention to the risks of taking action while paying insufficient attention to the strategic risks of waiting too long. In rapidly changing markets, inaction can become the greatest risk of all.

The same distinction emerged in discussions of innovation. Peter Schmid noted that America's entrepreneurial advantage often begins with a willingness to imagine futures before proving they are achievable. Valerie Feldmann, former Senior Vice President at Verizon, experienced a similar difference in day-to-day management. American teams, she found, often begin by testing hypotheses, whereas German teams more frequently begin by ensuring every analytical pathway has been explored before deciding where to focus.

Moritz Kothe, Chief Executive Officer of Tellent, described the distinction through another lens. He noted that American organizations tend to orient discussions around customer outcomes, while European organizations more often begin with internal processes. Although subtle, he believes that that difference enables organizations to adapt more quickly because leaders remain focused on the problem they are trying to solve, rather than the process they are following.

But while they described the pace of an organization's response as crucial, our interviewees also challenged the assumption that speed alone creates resilience. Lisa Sherwell, Chief People Officer at SUSE, cautioned that organizations can move so quickly that they undermine the psychological safety employees need to question assumptions, reinvent their roles, and adapt successfully over the long term. Susan Jurevics similarly argued that organizations cannot continuously reinvent themselves without preserving "islands of stability": shared values, purpose, and a clear sense of direction that remain constant even as strategies evolve. Valerie Feldmann echoed that view, observing that throughout her career, organizational values—not structures—have provided the most durable source of continuity during periods of change.

For senior leaders, the practical exercise is to audit which lever — structure or learning — your organization defaults to under pressure, and to deliberately build up the other.

Taken together, these interviews reveal an important distinction. Durable organizations reduce uncertainty through structure, while adaptive organizations reduce uncertainty through learning. Either philosophy brings sustained advantage, but neither approach alone is enough. For senior leaders, the practical exercise is to audit which lever — structure or learning — your organization defaults to under pressure, and to deliberately build up the other.

AI challenges the limits of both models

Across the interviews, AI emerged as a catalyst exposing the assumptions underlying existing leadership models.

For leaders whose instinct is to reduce uncertainty before acting, the challenge is becoming increasingly apparent. "AI has only accelerated change for almost every company in the world," observed Philip Lacor, Chief Revenue Officer at Personio. "And if companies don't change faster than they did before AI, then they're going to have a problem down the line." Waiting for a complete picture before making decisions—a hallmark of many highly disciplined organizations—may no longer represent prudent risk management. In an AI-enabled environment, the greater risk may be waiting until certainty arrives.

Yet our interviewees were equally clear that speed alone is not enough. Organizations that continuously adapt without preserving institutional strengths risk creating a different set of problems: decision fatigue, constant organizational churn, and employees who struggle to distinguish meaningful transformation from perpetual change. AI therefore raises the standard for adaptability. It is no longer enough to move quickly; leaders must also create stability to allow their organizations to absorb continuous change without losing cohesion.

Several executives also argued that AI is changing the nature of executive leadership itself. Tobias Hartmann suggested that experience is increasingly becoming "table stakes." As AI democratizes access to information, leaders differentiate themselves less through accumulated knowledge than through the quality of the questions they ask, the assumptions they challenge, and the judgment they apply to increasingly abundant information. Alexander von Fritsch expressed a related concern from a different perspective. His fear is not that AI will replace executive judgment, but that leaders may gradually stop exercising it, outsourcing curiosity, imagination, and strategic thinking to increasingly capable systems.

The human dimension of resilience also becomes more important as technological change accelerates. Kay Krafft, Chief Executive Officer of Relias, argues that the anxiety AI creates is often misdiagnosed; employees worry less about being replaced than about being asked to absorb more work, faster, with less clarity about what "good" looks like. His view is that the first step toward building resilience is making change a routine operating rhythm rather than a series of announcements. Then, he notes, leaders need to be specific, naming what AI will do, what will stay human, what type of reskilling is planned, and acknowledging what leadership genuinely doesn't yet know.

Resilience can no longer be treated as a fixed trait, but must become an active, continuously renewed practice.

These interviews suggest that resilience in the AI era is as much about sustaining, energizing, and helping their teams to adapt through continuous transformation as it is responding effectively to technology itself. In other words, AI is illustrating and deepening the value of those leaders who can balance both approaches to resilience simultaneously. For senior executives, this is the clearest signal yet that resilience can no longer be treated as a fixed trait, but must become an active, continuously renewed practice.

The takeaway for senior leaders: Building adaptive durability

The executives interviewed for this article differed widely in industry, geography, leadership style, and career experience. Yet they converged on a remarkably consistent conclusion: resilience is no longer best understood as either endurance or adaptability. The organizations best positioned to thrive increasingly combine both. They preserve the institutional strengths that create stability while developing the capacity to evolve before circumstances demand it.

This insight has implications well beyond the comparison between DACH and American leadership traditions. In our work with CEOs and boards, organizations rarely fail because they lack either discipline or innovation. More often, they over-index on one at the expense of the other. The challenge is therefore not choosing between competing leadership philosophies but deliberately building organizations capable of both sustained execution and continuous reinvention.

Five leadership implications

Balance durability with adaptability.

Resilient organizations build processes, governance, and institutional knowledge that create long-term stability. At the same time, they also create mechanisms for challenging assumptions, experimenting, and changing course before disruption forces them to do so.

Treat resilience as an organizational capability.

Resilience is something leaders build into the culture, decision-making, governance, and talent of an organization—not just a characteristic of individual executives.

Create stability without creating rigidity.

Employees need constants they can trust, particularly during periods of rapid technological and organizational change. Those constants are rarely processes alone—they are values, leadership consistency, purpose, and clarity of direction.

Reward curiosity as much as expertise.

As AI democratizes access to knowledge, competitive advantage increasingly shifts toward leaders who ask better questions, challenge assumptions, and remain intellectually curious throughout their careers.

Continuously rebalance your organization.

No organization permanently achieves the right equilibrium between endurance and adaptability. The most resilient leaders continually reassess where their organizations have become too cautious, too reactive, too process-driven, or too change-oriented and adjust before performance suffers.

The conversations that informed this article began with a simple question:
What does resilience mean?

The answer proved surprisingly complex. German and American executives often begin from different assumptions, shaped by different business traditions and leadership experiences. Yet those differences ultimately point toward the same destination.

In an environment defined by AI, geopolitical uncertainty, and accelerating change, resilience can no longer mean simply protecting what exists or constantly reinventing it. It increasingly means building organizations that are capable of doing both.

The organizations that sustain performance over time will not necessarily be those that change the fastest or preserve the longest. They will be those whose leaders know when to do each and who build cultures, teams, and operating models capable of moving confidently between the two.

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