



Big idea

Resilience

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Yesterday was the first anniversary of the July 7 bombings, and, aside from taking part in the series of events held to mark their anniversary, Londoners went about our business as usual. It was testimony to our resilience, the media and politicians told us. We refuse to be cowed.

All this is a lovely compliment, but last July was not the first time our resilience was tested. Even before then, resilience had become one of the hottest buzzwords among military and business analysts.

Boffins in Downing Street's Strategy Unit had written countless reports name-checking it. The Ministry of Defence had commissioned all manner of research into the resilience of our big cities in the event of terrorist attack. Cranfield University had even set up a whole research centre dedicated to understanding it.

The impetus behind all this interest in resilience is the conviction that organisations of all kinds need to do more to anticipate high-impact, low-probability disasters - whether natural, accidental or deliberate.

Resilience gurus start with the assumption that modern societies, as they are much more networked and interdependent than those that went before, are especially vulnerable to system breakdown. The one exception is usually said to be the new technologies, such as mobile phones and the internet; as networks such as these lack an organisational centre, runs the argument, they are much harder to disrupt. As a consequence, many of the suggestions made for fortifying our resilience are about remaking everything in their image: making everything more flexible and more diffuse. In his recent book *The Resilient Enterprise*, for example, the MIT professor Yossi Sheffi argues that companies can become more resilient by decentralising operations and building flexibility into everything they do, so that a single shock to the corporate system does not have to precipitate its collapse. Rejig your company's operations in this way, Sheffi advises, and you can even steal a competitive march on your rivals. In the right hands, the threat of disaster can be an opportunity for innovation.

This is all very well, but the results of last year's bombings are now in. The targeting of the attacks near mainline stations was a naked attempt on the part of the bombers to take out key transport routes and cause maximum disruption to the urban metabolism. Londoners, nevertheless, remained calm and went about their business. Likewise, terrorism turned out to be but a flea on the elephant of our economy, which was hardy enough to bounce back within a matter of hours.

The irony of all the talk about the resilience of flexible networks, however, is that the technology fell flat on its face.

According to last month's report into the July 7 bombings, rescuers could not use their radios underground, nor communicate with each other via their different radio systems. Those who relied on mobile phones found the system overwhelmed by the huge volume of calls shooting through it as Londoners tried to reach family members. The network failed to take the strain.

The London Resilience Partnership, the umbrella group for London's emergency services brought into being after 9/11, promises to do better next time. But the real lesson to be learned from all this is that we should be wary of learning too many knee-jerk lessons from catastrophes; that Londoners have always been resilient, and hardly need anyone to flatter their stoicism; that a highly integrated metropolitan population like London can quickly close ranks and withstand more than it thinks; and that we are more resilient when we get through things together, rather than when we split everything up.

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