Understanding Resilience: The Blind Men and the Elephant

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Homeland security experts in and out of government have for the past decade used resilience in various ways for different purposes with a veritable host of meanings drawn from a variety of fields. There are lessons to be learned from the Blind Men and the Elephant — a poem written by John Godfrey Saxe (1816–1887) based on a parable believed to have originated in the Indian subcontinent that has also been associated with a range of religious traditions.

Following is the Saxe version of this parable. Adjacent to each stanza are versus of an alternate version of the poem aimed at informing the homeland security and emergency management communities. This modern setting entails six academic experts working in their own specialized fields who attend a conference on resilience. At this event, Professor Eric Schminkenfutter, a worldwide expert, will present a briefing titled “more than there is to know” about resilience. Since all seats were taken, our six actors sit in an adjacent room and hear the delivery, without seeing the words and pictures on the briefing slides. Each was asked afterwards to give their own short impressions of what the famous briefer had said and each vigorously explained how resilience is defined in his/her specialized discipline. The alternative version of the poem captures their impressions.

Blind Men and the Elephant

Poem by John Godfrey Saxe
(1816–1887)

Poem by Jerome H. Kahan
(1938–?)

It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.

It was six scholarly experts
To publishing and conferences much inclined,
Who listened to a Resilience maven (an expert’s expert)
(Though each from their own academic
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The First approach’d the Elephant,
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
At once began to bawl:
“God bless me! but the Elephant
Is very like a wall!”

The Second, feeling of the tusk,
Cried, — “Ho! what have we here
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me ‘tis mighty clear
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a spear!”

The Third approached the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
Thus boldly up and spake:
“I see,” quoth he, “the Elephant
Is very like a snake!”

The Fourth reached out his eager hand
And felt about the knee.
“What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain,” quoth he,
“Tis clear enough the Elephant
Is very like a tree!”

perspective),
That each by hearing such a presentation
Might insert the meaning of this elusive term in his/her mind.

The First listened almost too attentively
Thus spilling much coffee
And making an awful mess
At once began to bawl:
Upon my PhD, Resilience
Is about people and societies struggling to cope with stress

The Second listened carefully
As a builder of mighty edifices would be prone to do
And said ‘tis mighty clear my views to make
That the wonder of Resilience enables my structures
When experiencing an earthquake or other such disaster
To bend but not break.

The Third listened as a business executive might do
Concerned over supply route viability in case of an adverse event.
And suddenly jumped up to observe that Resilience though redundancy will limit my losses
And allow a rapid return to full operations
As prior any such incident.

The Fourth made sure the room was eco-friendly
Taking neat notes as the speaker went on
Based on some quick calculations,
This listener opined
We need to strengthen the resilience of our ecosystem
Before it is gone!
The *Fifth*, who chanced to touch the ear,  
Said: “E’en the blindest man 
can tell what this resembles most; 
Deny the fact, who can, 
this marvel of an Elephant 
is very like a fan!”

The *Sixth* no sooner had begun  
About the beast to grope,  
Then, seizing on the swinging tail  
That fell within his scope,  
“I see,” quoth he, “the Elephant  
Is very like a rope!”

And so these men of Indostan  
Disputed loud and long,  
Each in his own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly in the right,  
And all were in the wrong!

And so these homeland security experts  
Disputed loud and long about the meaning  
of Resilience  
Each in his/her own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly in the right,  
And all were in the wrong!

MORAL

So, oft in theologic wars  
The disputants, I ween,  
Rail on in utter ignorance  
Of what each other mean,  
*And prate about an Elephant*  
*Not one of them has seen!*  

So, oft in homeland security policy making  
The participants, we ween,  
Rail on in utter ignorance  
Of what each other mean,  
*And prate about a concept*  
*Not one of them has seen!*

The poem illustrates how perception is based on what a person is able to see or touch. In the story, each of six blind men touch parts of an elephant, but the individual characterizations of the same animal elephant are based only on what each blind man is able to perceive. This parable has been used to illustrate a range of truths and fallacies. At various times it has provided insight into the relativism, opaqueness, or inexpressible nature of truth, the behavior of experts in fields where there is a deficit or inaccessibility of information, the need for communication, and respect for different perspectives. More directly, the poem warns the reader that preconceived notions and perceptions can lead to misinterpretation.