

## Understanding Resilience: The Blind Men and the Elephant

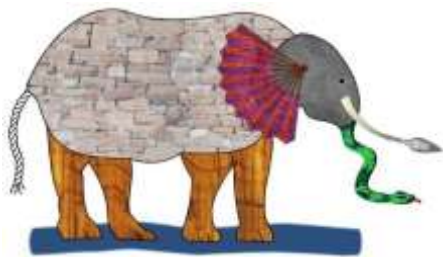
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Homeland security experts in and out of government have for the past decade used resilience in various ways for different purposes with a veritable host of meanings drawn from a variety of fields. There are lessons to be learned from the *Blind Men 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)



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.

Poem by Jerome H. Kahan  
(1938–?)



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

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

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 *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*, 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 *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* 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 *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* 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!”

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 *Fifth* expressed concern  
Whether a community would  
Be willing and able to devote time and  
resources  
To be capable of absorbing terrorist  
attacks or natural hazards  
And retain key functions while recovering  
from  
A range of threats from many sources.

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!"

The *Sixth* listened for the overall economic  
implications  
In terms of many indices such as GNP  
Worried that the less than robust economy  
might not be sufficiently strong to survive  
large-scale adverse events  
And wanted to find solutions to macro  
economic problems  
That Resilience as a concept might make

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!

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!*

#### MORAL

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.