

A NEW SKILL FOR A MULTI-ROLE LIFE

TRANSILIENCE

**RICCARDA
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INTRODUCTION

Dancing with Complexity

*To be just yourself, in a world that does its best,
day and night, to make you like everyone else,
is to fight the hardest battle a human being can fight.*

E.E. Cummings, A Poet's Advice to Students

When, at the end of a short exercise, I ask if anyone has found traits they'd like to carry from one role to another, a girl raises her hand: "I have: from athlete to student, I'd like to carry over being precise and competitive."

I'm at a high school, during a shared school management session, and once again I realize that transilience comes naturally to us: we grasp it instantly and we'd all know how to use it.

Yet, every time it surprises and moves me, just as it did the first time, more than ten years ago, when on the subway I ran into a participant from a workshop I'd led a year earlier.

As she greeted me, she exclaimed, "I am using transilience every day!"

At school, as well as in training classrooms, we're taught that we must look outside ourselves for the skills we "lack": we have to take assessments to identify the gaps we need to fill, and then take courses to bridge them - but these gaps keep reappearing over time as the world changes and challenges multiply. So, we take courses to learn how to relate to others, courses to enter the workforce, courses to manage change, courses to become creative, courses to develop leadership skills. Gaps, so many gaps, pointing to the things we don't know how to do, and courses, so many courses, to fill them, to fix what isn't working in us, to make us more "suitable."

But what if that isn't the problem? What if we already possess the skills needed for a new role on the horizon or for an existing one that's changing... but in other roles? What if the problem is that we don't see them and don't realize we can transfer them from one role to another?

I have read thousands of reflections on transilience collected by the Lifeed Observatory, which has engaged over 70,000 people in ten years, and the data open up a world of learning that rewrites what we thought we knew.

We are many things, and if we view them as a synergistic system rather than one in conflict, our resources can be transferred between our roles in every direction: from home to work, from sports to family, from difficult situations to ordinary ones and vice versa.

If we put into circulation the *things* we are and the resources they bring with them, our effectiveness, our awareness, and, above all, our self-confidence increases. We discover that being many things - however tiring, because it is true that time is limited - means having more resources at our disposal to succeed: it means being able to count on a broader "area" of ourselves. And it is a powerful discovery, especially if we make it when life challenges

us with a transition that throws into crisis who we have been up to that point.

Think of the effort we put into having a stable identity, into presenting ourselves to the world in a certain way, and how all of this wavers when something changes and we no longer know how to feel about ourselves or how others see us.

In those moments, we may reach a point where we no longer know who we are, and what saves us may be a perspective that recognizes that “we are all many things.”

The small car stopped on the bike lane of a two-lane city street. Nervous cyclists weave around it, risking being hit by cars; others stop and wait for it to move, grumbling louder and louder. The car doesn't move. Inside, an elderly woman is also motionless; she seems to be waiting for someone. Maybe she parked haphazardly, however it seemed most convenient to her, heedless of traffic rules? The tension mounts, and stereotypes rush in with explanations that offer no comfort: elderly, incompetent, overbearing...

I get close enough to peek inside the car and notice on the dashboard, loosely tacked on, a black-and-white photo of an elderly gentleman. It looks like a photo from a headstone; I sense that the woman's husband has recently passed away, and I imagine that in the past, he was always the one driving the car. And so, the incompetent, elderly driver becomes, in my eyes, a widow in distress: empathy kicks in and I forgive her everything. The anger subsides, and tenderness takes its place.

If we could see everything that people are, everything that happens in their lives, and what's in their hearts, we'd get angry less often and understand each other better.

For me, it's like this every time I walk into a room or walk down the street. I look at the people around me and see them as children, parents, friends, sisters, brothers, immigrants, scholars, sports enthusiasts, engaged in daily negotiations among the thousand things they are: many responsibilities that come with many characteristics, and therefore many abilities.

But I also realize, as I look at them and they look at me, how constant the effort is to hide such a wealth of identity, to present ourselves to the world in only one role at a time. Yet, the ability to acknowledge the complexity of our lives without fear goes even beyond our capacity for daily coexistence: acting with others while being aware of the multitude of things we all are changes social processes. It becomes a political act in which seeing multiple roles means "putting more on the line."

In the Oslo negotiations of the 1990s, the Norwegians who served as mediators had a simple yet radical insight: instead of keeping Israelis and Palestinians locked in a meeting room, they had them live together. The Norwegians established some unwritten rules: everyone ate together; they went for walks together; they stayed in the same building, with shared spaces; they were encouraged to share parts of their personal stories.

This decision to have them share meals, walks, and informal time together had a specific goal: to get them to stop seeing each other solely as “political enemies” and begin to get to know one another as people, fostering respect and an initial sense of trust.

The unwritten rule was: not just formal meetings, but shared time. At breakfast, they met in sweatpants, not in suits and ties. At lunch, they talked about their children, their fears, their exhaustion. In the evening, some smoked together; others shared stories of what it was like to grow up in Jerusalem or Gaza. The “enemy” slowly ceased to be an abstract concept and became a face, a story, a tone of voice.

*A tactic that is almost a “protocol of relational transilience”:
the context changes: not a formal table, but a home, meals, walks;
rigid roles are suspended: not just “minister/Palestine Liberation
Organization representative,” but a person who eats, laughs, gets bored,
talks about their children;*

*new associations are activated: the “enemy” is linked to stories, faces,
and everyday gestures, not just labels and conflict.*

From the perspective of transilience, Oslo is a perfect laboratory: the content of the negotiations changes, and so does the setting of the roles. The official representative, the expert, the politician remain in those roles, but alongside them, others emerge: the parent, the friend, the temporary colleague in a shared experience. In that hybrid space, people can shift resources from one role to another: the listening they use with their children, the patience they use with elderly parents, the curiosity they use with friends.

It is this silent shift that opens the possibility of an agreement. The conflict does not vanish, but the “other” is no longer just a label: they are someone with whom you have broken bread. In this sense, even before it was a political treaty, Oslo was an experiment in how changing the space around people can change what people are able to see in themselves and in others.

The outcome? However futile it may seem to us today, that was the first and only time Israel recognized the PLO as the representative of the Palestinians, and the PLO recognized Israel’s right to exist.

Transilience is a concept (more precisely, a “meta-competence”) born with “*master*”—the learning method I created with Andrea Vitullo in 2013—because we needed a new word¹ to define the capacity our resources have to “travel from one role to another”. We had seen this clearly with mothers, who brought a new kind of maternal leadership, a new meaning of power, and many other key skills to their professional roles, but we sensed that it wasn’t limited to them.

Transilience translates the identity complexity
we all possess into an ability.

We are all many “things,” among which we juggle every day. But the narrative we construct highlights only one aspect: scarcity. The scarcity of time, attention, and energy that means we

must “divide ourselves” among the many things we are. Science, however, tells us that this is only part of the story.

Research on the complexity of the self reveals that we are made to live with this multiplicity and can benefit from it. Having many roles is like having many places at our disposal: places where we expend our energy, certainly, but also where we can invest, find motivation, and express different dimensions of ourselves. This research also shows that we can learn from ourselves and from who we have been. When we take on new roles, we do not start empty-handed: we already carry a wealth of meanings and resources that support us, while also being enriched and transformed by each new experience.

Our very biology, as neuroscience confirms, is programmed to change by breaking patterns: this is what makes us the wonderful species we are –or could be.

Complexity is within us, and this is a crucial insight today, as complexity is part of our lives through the constant changes we undergo, both as individuals and as a society. The constant effort to simplify and be “less” than we are is no longer sustainable: it leads us to live in a fiction of reality that offers no real solutions. But, above all, it is unnecessary: if we learn to accept and use our human complexity, we will realize that we have everything we need to understand, choose, and decide, even in the face of the complexity of a changing world.

Taking a closer, more courageous look at
the richness of our identity will show us
that, instead of fearing it, we can dance with
complexity: first within ourselves, and then
outside ourselves.

From this self-knowledge arises a new kind of leadership, one that draws strength from what we usually avoid: from the aspects of our lives that we today call obstacles or disruptions, from the personal and caring dimensions, from the places where we invest our intensity and feelings.

Because, as transilience demonstrates, it is in those realms that we naturally recharge and find meaning: it is there that we develop the abilities that give us an edge, that allow us to sense things before we understand them, and to feel what we will later be able to think.

And it is there that our motivation to continue being agents of change is born, along with our ambition for a humanity that will always have something more and better to offer: a special vision, one worth living for.

It is a vision that overturns old models of power: one in which the desire to act arises from a self-awareness that broadens the scope of responsibility and, consequently, our horizons; that stops the waste of resources and, in doing so, recovers just what the world needs.

This book, in introducing and describing the new competency of transilience, draws on over ten years of research conducted with research centers and universities using data collected by the Lifeed Observatory, which has been working with companies since 2015 to activate life-developed competencies in the workplace.

The book is structured into five chapters.

In the first two, we examine the origins of the problem in a society that systematically diminishes our identity and wastes our skills, generating stress and conflict, and how this can change if we begin to view our complex identity as a set of resources we can mobilize through transilience.

In the third chapter, we explore the scientific mechanisms that make transilience possible: breaking stereotypes, self-enrichment, and self-efficacy are resources that already belong to us, but which need to be reactivated to reveal a completely new landscape brimming with possibilities.

In the fourth chapter, we see what happens when transilience comes into play: even though it is a skill that we naturally possess, today it requires a conscious effort to begin using it, and a reward for results to motivate us to do so.

In the fifth chapter, we place this ability within a broader context: we imagine what a “transilient society” would look like, what resources we would recover, and how our perception of the change and uncertainty in which we

live would shift. Transilience makes us better suited to the contemporary world, but for this to happen, many things must change.

To help us picture a concept this new, in these pages we will find:

1. **scientific foundations** of transilience, with sidebars for readers who want to go further;

2. **concrete examples and results** of its application in various contexts: from the workplace to prisons, from illness to aging, from caregiving roles to volunteer work;

3. **quantitative and qualitative data** showing the richness of our identity complexity and the opportunity, including in economic terms, of making our resources transilient;

4. **voices and first-hand accounts** from people who have experienced transilience and, through their own reflections, have made it real and immediately usable in everyday life (to them goes all my gratitude for the openness and generosity with which they embraced it);

5. and finally, **a few prompts for trying it out right away**—seeing what happens.

We already have transilience within us: it comes naturally to us.

What prevents us from using it is a culture that simplifies and reduces us, forcing us to live in permanent conflict between the things we are.

To reclaim it, we must know that it exists, understand how it works, and, above all, change the narrative of what it means to “be all that we are.”

Showing all parts of ourselves with confidence, to ourselves and to the world, is not an expression of a big ego; it is not an act of vanity: it is taking responsibility for all that we can be and do.

And, as Simone de Beauvoir said, the time has come to accept *the great adventure of being ourselves*.

Afterword

by Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic²⁴

I first met Riccarda Zezza in Rome, where we were fellow panelists at an event on gender and leadership, an area we are both passionate about, albeit from different starting points. I was presenting my book *Why Do So Many Incompetent Men Become Leaders?*, and Riccarda was in enthusiastic agreement with its premise, having read the book before. She was also, as she later confessed, a little perplexed by the messenger, yours truly.

How, she wondered, could an overconfident Argentine man, raised in a culture not famous for feminist subtlety, be the one making the case that women are often better leaders? The incongruity amused her. It amused me too, by the way. But it also revealed something deeper that lies at the heart of her work.

No matter what we think, people *are* capable of separating, compartmentalizing, and activating different aspects of themselves depending on context. The same person can be competitive at work, nurturing at home, stubborn with friends, and reflective alone. Our identities are not

fixed objects. They are dynamic repertoires. As Riccarda's work has shown so powerfully, we are many selves at once, and we can mobilize them deliberately.

So yes, I grew up in chauvinistic Argentina, and I am probably prewired for masculine overconfidence. But the scientist in me (a role I came to learn or acquire later in life, but which may still be fueled by some contrarian or anarchic Argentine DNA) prefers evidence over instinct. And the evidence shows that, on average, women often display stronger leadership traits in areas such as empathy, integrity, and collaborative decision-making. The message matters more than the messenger. That conversation in Rome was the beginning of a friendship and professional relationship that has shaped my thinking ever since.

Fast forward a few years, and I have watched Riccarda's work with enormous admiration. As an entrepreneur, thought leader, and activist, she has always had a remarkable sensitivity for interpreting the spirit of our times. She sees emerging patterns before they become trends. She understands that the future of work is inseparable from the future of identity. But what makes her contributions unique is not intuition, but rigor. She brings an academic mindset and intellectual honesty to every project, grounding bold ideas in data, psychology, and lived experience.

This book is her best yet.

At its heart lies the concept of transilience, an idea Riccarda revived from academic obscurity and reinterpreted as a meta-competence that enables people to carry skills, behaviors, and insights across the many roles they play.

As she explains early in the book, transilience is “the ability to move resources from one role to another,” whether from parenting to management, from volunteering to strategy, or from crisis to growth.

It sounds simple, but everything that looks or seems simple is deceptively complex and hard to master. For decades, organizational life has treated people as if they had one identity at a time. You are a manager, or a parent, or a volunteer, or a friend. Work-life balance is framed as a trade-off, a zero-sum game in which time devoted to one role is stolen from another. As Riccarda shows with both powerful data and stories, this narrative is wrong. Humans are not single-role creatures; we are multi-being creatures. We do not just juggle roles, we integrate or fuse them – and at times, it isn’t that easy to make sense of this by finding a wider meaning or logic that unites our own disparities and complexity. But there is a huge reward and prize for doing so...

Indeed, research on self-complexity has long suggested that people with richer identity repertoires cope better with stress, adapt faster to change, and develop more re-

silient skills. Riccarda takes this insight further. She shows that identity complexity is not merely a psychological curiosity. It is an economic resource, a leadership capability, and a social innovation. In one striking example in the book's introduction, she recounts how participants in her workshops discover that traits developed in one domain can strengthen performance in another, such as bringing the precision of sport into study, or the patience of caregiving into management.

This is transilience in action. It is not about adding new skills, but about recognizing and redeploying the ones we already possess.

This idea is deeply aligned with what we know from organizational psychology. Leadership development programs often try to install new competencies, when in reality most of what leaders need is already latent *within them*. The real challenge, though, is activation. The best leaders are not those who accumulate skills, but those who mobilize them across contexts.

Riccarda's work also resonates with another theme that has become increasingly central in my own research: the growing importance of psychological maturity, particularly in the age of AI. As artificial intelligence makes knowledge cheaper

and expertise more accessible, the differentiators of leadership shift toward curiosity, humility, judgment, and empathy. These are the kinds of skills that emerge across multiple roles in life. Parenting, caregiving, volunteering, mentoring, even friendship become training grounds for leadership.

Transilience gives language to this intuition. It explains why a manager who learns patience as a parent may become a better leader, or why a volunteer who learns reliability becomes a stronger colleague. It reframes life transitions not as interruptions but as accelerators of growth. As Riccarda writes, transitions challenge identity but also expand it, turning crisis into capability.

This insight could not be more timely. We live in an era of constant disruption. Careers are nonlinear. Roles multiply. Technology changes faster than institutions. In such a world, resilience is not enough. We need transilience: the capacity to carry our resources across boundaries and reinvent ourselves without losing coherence.

The book also tackles a deeper myth about identity. Modern culture pushes us toward simplicity. We are told to be authentic, to be consistent, to find our one true self. Riccarda shows why this is misguided. Authenticity, understood as rigid self-expression, can trap us in outdated roles. Growth requires flexibility. We must sometimes behave in ways that are not instinctive but necessary. We

must stretch beyond our default dispositions. In short, we must become more than we are.

This idea may feel uncomfortable. It challenges popular narratives about authenticity and work-life balance. But it is consistent with decades of research in psychology. The self is not a fixed object we possess. It is a process we enact. As Hazel Markus and others have shown, identity is constructed moment by moment through context and goals. Riccarda takes this science and turns it into a practical framework for organizations.

The modern workplace is full of hidden talent. Employees bring skills from family life, community work, hobbies, and personal challenges that are rarely recognized in performance reviews. Riccarda's work with thousands of people shows how mapping identity complexity can reveal unexpected capabilities and boost both confidence and effectiveness.

In a world obsessed with reskilling,
transilience reminds us that we already possess
many of the skills we need.
We simply fail to see them.

This is why I believe Riccarda's book is not just an intellectual contribution but a practical one. It offers a new way to think about leadership development, diversity, and organizational design. It suggests that inclusion is not only

about fairness, but about unlocking hidden competence. It shows how transitions such as parenthood, illness, migration, or career change can become sources of strength rather than stigma.

Perhaps most importantly, it restores dignity to complexity.

In an age of algorithmic simplification, we are constantly reduced to categories: e.g., job titles, demographic labels, performance metrics. Riccarda reminds us that people are richer than their résumés. Identity is not a single narrative. It is a network. And leadership, ultimately, is about helping people bring their full repertoire to the table.

I have seen this in my own work with executives. The leaders who grow fastest are those who integrate their identities rather than suppress them. The scientist who becomes a mentor. The athlete who becomes a strategist. The parent who becomes a better negotiator. They succeed not by becoming someone else, but by activating more of who they already are.

Because if our identities are richer than we
think, then our possibilities are too.
We are not prisoners of our past roles.
We are authors of new combinations.
Riccarda's book shows us how.

In closing, let me return to that first meeting in Rome. Riccarda teased me about the mismatch between my stereotype and my argument. She was right. But she was also illustrating her own thesis. We are all more than our defaults. We can activate different selves. We can become a richer and more expansive, adaptable version of ourselves if we learn to leverage and use all the psychological tools we possess, and harness the richness and diversity of our own identity to rise to every challenge, and live a more expansive and interesting life. Riccarda Zezza has spent her career helping people do exactly that. With intellectual rigor, entrepreneurial courage, and moral clarity, she has given us a language for understanding the complexity of modern identity. With this book, she gives us a map for navigating it.

Read it carefully. Then read it again. And then, like so many of the participants in her workshops who later tell her they use transilience every day, try it yourself. You will discover that you are more than the sum of your parts, and more interesting and powerful than you assumed.