

Arnaldo De Lisio of Catalyst Advisors: Rising Through Resilience; Five Things You Can Do To Become More Resilient



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As a part of our series about “How Diversity Can Increase a Company’s Bottom Line”, I had the pleasure of interviewing Arnaldo De Lisio.

Arnaldo De Lisio is a partner at Catalyst Advisors, a recognized executive recruiting firm specialized in the life sciences sector. He is based in the firm’s London office. Prior to joining Catalyst Advisors, Arnaldo was a managing partner of a global life sciences recruiting firm headquartered in the United Kingdom, where he conducted board, CEO, and other C-level recruitment engagements for clients in Europe and North America. As a managing partner, he was part of the executive team that developed the firm’s strategy and led its growth. Arnaldo has deep experience working with companies in highly innovative areas of medicine, including immuno-oncology, oncology, and rare diseases. Earlier, Arnaldo was a start-up entrepreneur in Italy and a management consultant at Simon-Kucher & Partners in Germany, where he advised biopharma and pharmaceutical companies on pricing and reimbursement strategies. He holds a Global Executive M.B.A. from the Hult International Business School and a Master’s degree in Business Administration from the University of Molise in Italy.

The development of resilience requires challenge. It’s not typical to see setbacks as gains, but when put in the perspective of increasing the ability to bounce back from adversity even stronger than before, it fosters an appreciation for that mindset. It’s the philosophy embraced by Catalyst Advisors partner Arnaldo De Lisio, and he believes it’s what has fueled his success as an entrepreneur and his overall growth as an individual.

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Thank you so much for doing this with us! Our readers would love to “get to know you” a bit more. Can you share your “backstory” with us?

I’m Italian, from Campobasso, a small city in Southern Italy. I’ve been living in the UK for 15 years. I am a Partner at Catalyst Advisors, an executive recruitment firm entirely focused on the biotech and pharmaceutical sectors. Our firm is made up of top performers in our sector. We value collaboration, integrity, quality, and continuous development.

Outside of work, family, sports, and the outdoors are my passions. I live a frugal, family-centered life, together with my wife Taranjeet and our daughters, Jasmine and Sofia. They, along with extended family and friends, are what matter the most to me.

Sports and spirituality are at the core of my well-being; I was raised Roman-Catholic and found in my wife, who is Sikh, a life partner who shares with me the belief that our daughters can be raised to appreciate and value the teachings of both religions.

What are the top three factors you would attribute to your success?

Growth mindset. Genuine desire to build relationships. Openness to opportunities. I've always felt that when an opportunity has come my way, I've taken it. I've taken the risk, taken the gamble. For example, as a student I had multiple opportunities to study abroad, and I jumped at every chance. I lived and studied abroad in Germany and the United States. My focus has always been building relationships, no matter where I am or what the circumstances. On one occasion as a young adult, I had a car accident and needed money to repay the damage, and the chance came about for me to earn some money by going and picking apples near the Italian Dolomite mountains. It ended up being more than just a way to earn money, it became one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. I made lifelong friends and enjoyed nature.

What makes your company stand out from the crowd?

The laser sharp focus on the quality of our work. Our relentless execution and long-term relationship-building attitudes are also key. The extra care we take with the business executives we engage with and the honest advice we share are the things that separate us from the competition.

How has your company continued to thrive in the face of rapid change and disruption in your industry?

We play to our strengths, focusing on what we do best — being honest and competent advisors to our clients. To enable transformational recruitment for organizations, in a changing landscape, requires going the extra mile, to create comfort for the clients making decisions. Right now, companies are tasked with recruiting top executives without having met them face-to-face. It's a critical challenge, a paradigm shift. We're bringing our ability to orchestrate the process. We are using our life sciences sector knowledge and the deep relationships that we've cultivated with individuals to help companies pivot their traditional recruiting practices to fit the new norm. We already go above and beyond most firms, as a matter of course, making sure no stone is left unturned in the process. This gives us an ability to provide added assurance about a potential candidate before making the recommendation. And our work doesn't stop at signing the deal; embarking on the new course, transitioning...our work continues, to ensure that the incomer fits well for the client and the organization benefits. That's our commitment.

According to a recent KPMG study, resilience is the underlying trait of most successful businesses. How would you define “resilience?”

The surface definition is the ability to bounce back from any setback. It can be a small or a major one. Going deeper I would say it's the ability to see setbacks in context over the long term and understand that they make you stronger.

When you think of tenacity and endurance, what person comes to mind? (Can you explain why you chose that person?)

A major source of inspiration for me is professional tennis player, Rafael Nadal. Not only is he one of the greatest tennis champions, but he is also a great example of tenacity and endurance, coming back from major injuries that might have ended most careers — and not just coming back, but coming back more flexible, stronger, and better overall, with a different game, a new strategy and an entirely fresh outlook to address the changing game.

Was there ever a time that someone told you was impossible, but you did it anyway? (Can you share the story with us?)

A few years ago, I was a director in a firm and had two young daughters, and my wife also had a full-time job, yet I felt the strong pull to do an executive MBA program. A full two-year program. With so much on our plate, my wife was against it, and many said that it would be impossible. But I knew it was achievable, so I did it. It started an incredible new chapter of my life and career; I felt stronger afterwards. Through the interaction and teamwork with bright classmates, I learned so much about leadership, emotional intelligence and so many other valuable lessons including how my resilience is key to my success.

Did you have a time in your life where you had one of your greatest setbacks, but you bounced back from it stronger than ever? (Can you share that story with us?)

In 2009, my wife and I suffered the loss of our first child, a boy, who was born prematurely while we were in Italy during the Christmas holiday. It was the hardest thing I've ever endured, not only because of my personal suffering, but because I was the closest to see my wife's pain. We had the support of family, we had our respective faiths and decided to spend three weeks in India (where she is from) afterwards and had an incredibly spiritual experience.

Within a few months of losing our son, my alopecia areata, which I have had since childhood, went to alopecia universalis, and I lost all of my hair.

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felt a great sense of healing the minute I became completely bald. It gave me an incredible strength.

Did you have any experiences growing up that have contributed to building your resiliency? (Can you share a story?)

Alopecia certainly gave me the experiences and coping mechanisms that have helped me become who I am today. I remember just crying in front of the mirror as a child and telling myself, “One day, it will get better.” It made me who I am today and has been a driver in my resilience. Being uncomfortable with your looks moves you to take different strategies. For me, it made me more extroverted, pointed me towards music and sports. I played table tennis competitively beginning at about 12 years old. Sports was an incredible source of learning. It teaches you the importance of deliberate practice and the fun of enjoying practice and seeking improvement, not perfection. It also teaches you the value of competition but that it’s not always about winning. I was privileged to have these experiences and extremely supportive parents, and a large, loving family. I had a wonderful childhood. There were personal hardships, but I was privileged in many ways.

What strategies do you use to strengthen your resilience? (Resilience is like a muscle that can be strengthened. Please share a story or an example for each)

I have a morning ritual. For me it’s important to start the day right, very early, before my family wakes up. Having two hours of peace where I can pray, meditate, do muscular awakening and stretching, and exercise. Having that non-negotiable appointment with myself determines the rest of the day and I feel like I’ve already taken some important steps to tackle the day’s climb. I’ve also learned to trust and respect myself. I’ve had coaches and mentors throughout the years provide consistent feedback that I’m hard on myself. I believe that it helps for a while, but now I believe loving myself more, understanding myself, and allowing myself to start over if I make a mistake and knowing I can have a better day tomorrow is important. The other thing I’ve learned about resilience is that having a supportive partner by your side can be so helpful. When pressures are intense from outside, having someone that I can talk to immediately makes me feel better.

Because being physically active is core to who I am, training for triathlons has been a great discovery as well and an illustration of adaptation. If your muscles are sore from one pursuit, you can go to another, while still moving forward with your practice and progress, and then go back. Running one day, swimming the next.

How can leaders create a more resilient workforce?

In my field, in my own team, I start by ensuring that I am resilient myself, that I’ve done my homework, know my purpose and see clearly where I’m headed. Another commitment has been to find talented people who have got the right set of behaviors,

including eagerness to grow and develop. If they are open to mentorship, I think we can build a solid organization together. My commitment to those who work with me, if they trust me as a mentor, is to challenge them to figure out their role and purpose in their own career path. The goal is to help them be well grounded, not only in business but across all dimensions so they can be strong performers, strong executors, and bring a greater level of energy that results in increased resiliency.

Extensive research suggests that people who have a clear purpose in their lives are more likely to persevere during difficult times. What are your goals?

I feel like a mountaineer that has climbed 4,000-meter peaks, and now I'm looking at 8,000 meters ones. There's more to achieve. My goals were to succeed as an entrepreneur and achieve security for my family, but I also have a desire to continuously develop to build something that doesn't exist yet and make a contribution to the society. To make sure our firm operates at the highest levels in executive recruitment within life sciences, my goal is to attract outstanding leaders to our clients' organizations. The same goes for our team, I want to develop leaders that can be impactful. It's important to attract peers who challenge us. That's how we'll grow. Not just building for the sake of scale, but to increase quality and raise the game.

What is your favorite quote or personal philosophy that relates to the concept of resilience?

I grew up Roman Catholic, specifically influenced by the Franciscan order and the values of that community, which include a focus on humility. There is one song with a verse that says, "Every simple man carries within himself a dream; with love and humility, he will be able to build it." Every time I've felt low, at rock bottom — I've remembered this verse, started to sing the first two lines of this song and immediately regained my strength. Nothing could bring me down.

Thank you so much, that was very interesting! How can our readers get in touch with you?

You can learn more about me at catalystadvisorslp.com, or connect with me on LinkedIn.