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HRD

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HANDLING PRESSURE

PERFORMING UNDER PRESSURE

Understanding that we don't need to 'be better than our best' when the pressure is on helps us manage these moments more skilfully, writes **Michael Bell**

JUST OVER 10 years ago, I left the security of a global multinational organisation to start up my own business. Soon the pressures of my new reality descended like a tsunami. Luckily for me, I had performance expert, friend and long-time mentor Dr JP Pawliw-Fry from the Institute for Health and Human Potential (IHHP) in my corner, and he coached me through this challenging time. As I reflect on this tumultuous yet exciting period, my biggest challenges stemmed from managing the uncertainty that accompanied my career change and my new

corporate executives rise to the occasion and perform under pressure. In fact, JP (and co-author Hendrie Weisinger) recently published real-world case studies – as well as proven strategies to maximise performance under pressure – in the *New York Times* best-selling book *How to Perform Under Pressure – The Science of Doing Your Best When it Matters Most*. The book is based on a study of 12,000 people and explores the science behind the debilitating effects of pressure. Interweaving empirical studies

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role as company director. With JP's guidance, I learned to worry less about circumstances and more about my response to them.

Fortunately, I'm not the only one to benefit from having JP in my corner. He's built a career – and global research and training organisation IHHP – on helping Olympic and professional athletes and

and neurological research with first-hand accounts from athletes and executives, the book offers a fascinating exploration into understanding – and overcoming – pressure in our work and personal lives.

Weisinger and Pawliw-Fry define a high-pressure situation as the 'perfect storm' in which all three of the following consequences



of our actions are at play:

- the outcome is important
- the outcome is uncertain
- you are responsible for, and being judged on, the outcome

Debunking the pressure myth

The key finding from their research? Nobody performs better under pressure. I know this is a tough fact to swallow. Many of us will point to those unique individuals (often our sporting heroes) who seem to rise to the occasion and perform better when the chips are down. The legendary Michael Jordan of the NBA may come to mind. Certainly 'MJ' performed better under pressure ... didn't he? The cold hard fact is that he didn't! In study after study, the performance statistics demonstrate that when the pressure is on, metrics fall, even with



legendary athletes. What Jordan did do, and what sets him and other 'clutch' performers apart from others, is this: they perform closer to their best in pressure moments.

What I find most interesting about this fact is that understanding that we don't need to 'be better than our best' when the pressure is on helps us manage these moments more skilfully.

How does the pressure of uncertainty play out in the workplace?

William Bell, general manager of Infinity dealership of Peoria, Arizona, describes how the pressure of uncertainty impacts on his organisation – his sales and leadership teams – and his industry at large.

"The reality of performance measures in the automotive sales industry is this: yesterday's successes don't matter nearly as

much as today's results. Successes are quickly forgotten; yesterday's failures, on the other hand, have 'a long tail'. If we have had a good run of sales to target, month on month, then one poor performance may be seen as an anomaly. But only until the next month's sales are calculated. When you're having a tough month, you're tempted to look back and point to how well we did last month, but no one cares. What we are always measured on – what truly matters – is this month's sales.

"On the last night of the month, we stay back until midnight or one o'clock in the morning making sure that all sales are recorded and reported. Then we are all back here at 7am the next morning, the first day of the month. The sales manager walks up to the big whiteboard in his office and erases all evidence of last month's sales. The team looks up to see we are now '0 for 70' (sales to target), or '0 for 95', whatever the target might be. Over time, month in/month out, this can be exhausting.

"It's tough, but it's how the industry works; you get accustomed to it, or you get out. When you are successful, it is extremely gratifying; but when you're struggling, it is extremely taxing. 'Yesterday's hero, today's zero' is a saying that sums up the industry. 'What have you done for me lately?' is another saying that points to the pressure we all feel each and every day. 'Sure, you've had eight good months this year, but what are you doing for me today?'

"Where the culture is to be the best of the best, to win at all costs, even one failure (one bad month) is not acceptable. The result is high staff turnover. Very few can take the pressure over the long term."

Pressure solutions

Professionals across all industries must learn to perform well under pressure if they want to succeed. The most successful business people have learned to thrive, despite the daily pressures they face, and have developed a range of strategies that help sustain them over time (even though most aren't consciously aware of it). In *How to Perform Under Pressure*, these techniques are called 'Pressure Solutions' – actionable techniques to implement in pressure moments that help maximise performance and successes. **HRD**

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Four of the 22 Pressure Solutions from the book *How to Perform under Pressure* include:

- **Don't try to be better than your best.** So often in pressure situations, we feel that to avert catastrophe we need to morph into someone we're not – a 'superhero'. This is precisely what is so crippling about a pressure moment – the belief that we need to be better than we are, when deep down we know that's not possible. The realisation that we don't need to be better than we are is powerfully liberating, and absolutely critical to maximising performance under pressure.
- **Recall you at your best.** A member of your sales team is anxious about their sales figures. After reassuring her she'll hit target, she's still anxious. Instead, ask her to imagine a time when she had a successful run of sales – when she topped the sales ladder – and ask her to reflect on that experience. This approach is far more helpful as it instils confidence based on track record, allowing them to maximise their success.
- **Realise you have multiple opportunities to succeed.** This presentation, sales call or interview isn't your only chance at success. There are plenty of other opportunities. Your entire future doesn't hinge on this one moment.
- **See potentially positive outcomes.** After experiencing a significant change – an accident, job loss, etc. – pessimistic people view the situation as permanent, becoming depressed, angry and bitter. Optimists, however, believe that good times will persist and bad times are only temporary. Believing that bad times are short-lived makes it easier for optimists to try harder, recover from setbacks and be more resilient.

How might applying these insights help you better lead and inspire others to be their best when it matters most?

Michael Bell, director Asia Pacific at the Institute for Health and Human Potential, is an expert on leadership and performance. Michael has extensive knowledge and experience as a speaker, coach and trainer, specialising in the topics of emotional intelligence and performing under pressure.

