

HRD

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YEAR IN REVIEW



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HOW TO DO MORE WITH LESS - WITHOUT DYING

As the end of the year approaches, many will be feeling worn out, stressed and ready for time out. Is there an effective way to handle workplace stress? Yes, there is, says **Michael Bell**

RECENTLY, I was at a function and ran into an old friend who runs a small business. Pleased to see a familiar face in the crowd, I walked over, shook hands and innocently asked, "How's things?" His response wasn't good. He owns a café in a trendy inner-city Brisbane location, and business is down – his customer base has dried up. Over the past couple of years, the mining and engineering firms that formed the backbone of his customer base have experienced a series of restructures to the point where more than half of these employees have been retrenched, evidenced by the vacant office space in the stylish building above.

This is a real-life example of the impact our sluggish economy is having on business. My heart went out to my friend who is struggling to generate new customers. Although I don't know them, I can't help but feel for those who were retrenched, and wonder what they are doing now that work in their industry has evaporated. However, the employees who remain in firms impacted on by restructures and downsizing are also experiencing tremendous changes and pressure. Many of us can connect with their reality:

"The good news is your job is secure; the bad news is you are now responsible for the extra workload of those in your department who have been retrenched!"



The fallout

In the corporate world, the pressure of doing more with less plays out in many different ways. When budget cuts result in a reduced workforce, remaining employees are expected to manage additional responsibilities. Alternatively, a sales team may find itself

chasing increased targets with fewer resources. In these situations, it becomes essential for organisations and teams to work cohesively. It is at these times that the need to innovate, prioritise, communicate, influence and lead is greatest. However, the latest findings from neuroscience and psychology suggest

that pressure – including the pressure of doing more with less – negatively impacts on performance. Regardless of the task, pressure ruthlessly diminishes our judgment, decision-making, attention and performance. As a result, our ability to ‘do our best when it matters most’ is compromised. This begs the question: how can we overcome the pressure of doing more with less?

A road map for coping with pressure

Psychologist Hendrie Weisinger and Dr JP Pawliw-Fry, performance expert, partner and co-founder at the Institute for Health and Human Potential (IHHP), provide a road map to overcoming pressure in their *New York Times* bestselling book, *How to Perform Under Pressure – The Science of Doing Your Best When it Matters Most*. The book is based on a 10-year study of over 12,000 people and explores the science behind the debilitating effects of pressure. Interweaving empirical studies 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.

Pawliw-Fry and Weisinger define a high-pressure situation as one in which each of the following consequences of our actions are at play:

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

Three key insights the authors share in their book that help us strengthen our capability to deal with this pressure are:

1 Nobody performs better under pressure. This is a key finding of their research. 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. The realisation that we don’t need to be better than we are is

powerfully liberating and absolutely critical to maximising performance under pressure. The aim, therefore, is simply to do our best; to perform to our potential.

2 Know the difference between stress and pressure. Every stressful situation – conflicting priorities; a long, unproductive meeting; or a looming deadline – can feel like a pressure situation with a material impact on our success. Yet the outcomes of these situations aren’t always important in the long

“So often in pressure situations, we feel that to avert catastrophe we need to morph into someone we’re not – a ‘superhero’”

run. If we treat all stressful moments like pressure moments, we waste precious emotional and physiological resources.

3 Don’t succumb to cognitive distortions. One of the more subtle ways that pressure influences our brain and behaviour is by altering our thinking and distorting how we see events. These cognitive distortions are so powerful that they often create feelings of anxiety, loss of control, helplessness and even anger. When we feel overwhelmed, we can view everything as a crisis and believe that everything is the highest priority.

How to Perform Under Pressure also provides 22 actionable ‘Pressure Solutions’ we can apply in the moment. Three key strategies that will help us do more with less are:

1 Be present – here and now. When we have multiple demands, and limited resources, our mind will focus attention and often fixate upon the ‘what ifs’ – the potential problems of not getting important things done. We can find ourselves reliving yesterday’s frustrations, or fearing tomorrow’s challenges. A helpful strategy here is to bring attention to the moment and learn

to focus on the issues we can address here and now. In so doing, we spend LESS energy and brain space on what ‘may be’ and MORE energy and cognitive power on what ‘is’.

2 Focus on what you can control. Focusing on things we can’t control (like budget cuts, lack of resources, etc) increases our stress levels. For example, if a deadline you’ve been working towards is suddenly shortened, rather than focusing on the unfairness of the situation, focus on what

you can control – asking for help, reprioritising other deliverables, delegating, etc.

3 Shrink the importance of the pressure moment. It’s well documented that the more important we appraise a situation to be, the more pressure we feel. If you’re overwhelmed by all the tasks you have to complete, you’re likely to overexaggerate their importance, which downgrades your cognitive abilities. Instead, minimise the significance of the pressure moment. This helps you counter the pressure distortions and gain a more realistic perspective.

In the book, Pawliw-Fry explains that the top 10% performers in an IHHP study were not impervious to the stress and pressure of having to do more with less. They experienced all the same distortions and anxiety but had insights and strategies to successfully deal with them. You can, too! **HRD**

Michael Bell is director Asia Pacific at IHHP and an expert on leadership and performance. For the past 10 years, he’s worked with leaders, corporations, and professional and amateur athletes, helping them elevate performance, enhance leadership and implement positive organisational change.

