



INSTITUTE *for* HEALTH *and* HUMAN POTENTIAL



# Pressure Changes Everything

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New Competitive Advantage at Work



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After a year in which his team missed their revenue target on an already lowered business plan, Jim Breech, VP Customer Development for Walmart/Club at Unilever, said “I felt like I had failed and I was worried that my job was at risk. I started to doubt myself: was I making the right decisions, going in the right direction? For a short time, the anxiety of losing my job lead me to start managing in a way to not to lose my job. I was worried about pleasing the bosses so they wouldn't fire me”

We all experience moments of pressure like Jim did in which we feel like we have to deliver or we will suffer dire consequences. While Jim's story might be more extreme than some of us face, it is becoming more the 'norm' than the exception. Whether it is the important presentation we are making at a company meeting in front of our peers or the difficult feedback conversation we know we need to have with a talented but destructive direct report or the sales pitch to a potential 'game changing' client; in each case, something significant is on the line for us

Over the last seven years at the Institute for Health and Human Potential, we have collected a great deal of information about how people experience, perceive and navigate pressure. We have undertaken a multiyear study of over twelve thousand people who are under pressure to answer the question: What is it about the top 10 percent of the individuals we studied that helps them handle pressure more effectively and be successful?

This wasn't just anecdotal; we used cutting-edge multi-rater assessment to ascertain what these people did differently. This assessment allowed us to understand how an individual deals with pressure from a number of different data points – from peers, direct reports, managers, customers, and even family and friends - as opposed to relying just on the person's self-perception.

Each of the twelve thousand people we studied were assessed by anywhere from six to fourteen people, so in total we had more than one hundred thousand people assess the twelve thousand subjects. From this group of twelve thousand people, we identified the top 10% based on their manager's performance ratings and we came away with critical insights. Insights such as one that Jim Breech used when he faced the pressure of potential dismissal from his job. When we interviewed him, he told us:

Finally, I took a step back and looked at the broader picture and realized that there were only three people — myself, my wife, and God — that I needed to care about being judged by, and I decided to go down swinging. I took the pressure as a challenge as opposed to a threat, and it made all of the difference.” The result? Still lots of anxiety but also more courage in approaching as opposed to avoiding the big issues.

In this white paper, I will give you a glimpse of strategies that people like Jim used to navigate pressure more effectively. I will offer some of what we have learned from this data as well as our work with individuals and organizations around the world as well as in my partnership co-writing the book, *Performing Under Pressure*, with Hank Weisinger. I describe two ways that pressure can sabotage our performance and suggest two strategies to help you navigate pressure more effectively so that you can use pressure to your advantage as opposed to having pressure put you at a disadvantage as you navigate your career and organizational goals.





What is clear from the data and our work 'on the ground' may not come as a surprise to you: pressure is an enemy of success. Pressure diminishes our ability to think clearly, make effective decisions, work on a team, be creative and meaningfully connect with others. It impairs our ability to manage and lead others. When under pressure, air traffic controllers, pilots, and oil rig chiefs make errors in judgment. ER doctors and nurses can make inappropriate decisions and incorrect diagnoses. Actors forget their lines; politicians forget their talking points or otherwise stumble and fumble. Leaders and managers miss opportunities to build relationships and lose the engagement and critical discretionary efforts of their team and organization. At the same time, because so few handle people pressure well, those who can manage pressure a little better than others enjoy a distinct advantage in successfully growing their career, engaging their team and moving the organization forward. Given the way pressure is engulfing so many today, navigating pressure is becoming the single most important difference maker between people who succeed at work from those who fail and is why we see it as the new competitive advantage at work.

To help you navigate pressure more effectively, let's gain some insight into how pressure can alter our behavior, affecting us at work in at least two distinct ways.

## 1. Choosing Status or Expertise?

Heidi K. Gardner is an assistant professor of Business Administration in the Organizational Behavior Unit at Harvard, where she studies how pressure impacts team dynamics. Professor Gardner's research suggests that the teams she studies like to believe they do their best work when the stakes are highest — when the company's future or their own future rests on the outcome. They are certainly not alone; many believe that some people deliver their best under pressure. But that is not what happens. In extensive studies of teams at professional service firms, Professor Gardner saw the same pattern repeat itself: Teams become increasingly caught up with the risks of failure, rather than the requirements of excellence. As a result, they revert to safe, standard approaches, instead of offering original solutions tailored to clients' needs.<sup>1</sup>

She found that when teams face significant performance pressure, they tend to defer to high-status members, at the expense of using expert team members.

<sup>1</sup> Heidi K. Gardner, "Performance as a Double Edge Sword: Enhancing Team Motivation While Undermining Use of Team Knowledge, Harvard Business Press, January 2012

This would be analogous to a team of physicians ignoring the expertise of the best surgeon in the group and deferring to another doctor who is not a specialist in the field because he or she is senior on the staff.

Gardner labels this phenomenon the performance pressure paradox. Here's how it develops: As pressure mounts, team members drive toward consensus in ways that shut out vital information. Without realizing it, they give more weight to shared knowledge and dismiss specialized expertise, such as insights into the client's technologies, culture, and aspirations. The more generically inclined the team becomes, the more mediocre the solutions they offer.

Have you witnessed this phenomenon on the teams that you work with? We have found that until it is pointed out to managers, it is often missed. If you lead a team, pay attention to the dynamics of your team. See if, under pressure, they begin playing it safe by deferring to status or by giving more weight to shared knowledge as opposed to specialized knowledge. Managers who have learned this key insight in our training programs have seen the quality of the solutions their team produces improve at the same time as the engagement level of the team increase. It's not surprising: when more individuals on the team feel like they have a voice and are listened to their level of engagement invariably goes up.

## 2. Getting Things Done or Doing Great Work?

Harvard Business School professor Teresa Amabile is in the midst of a ten-year study looking at, among other things, how time pressure in a corporate setting affects employee creativity. She is the Edsel Bryant Ford professor of Business Administration and director of research at the Harvard Business School and one of the world experts in creativity, and she has written numerous influential articles and books about the topic.

In her groundbreaking research into creativity in the workplace, she has done what few researchers have ever attempted: observed creativity as it was happening within teams who were supposed to be doing creative work.

"We believed that the best way to get real-time information on these individuals, the teams, and their work, in a relatively unobtrusive way, was to have the participants fill out an electronic 'Daily Questionnaire' (DQ) for us.

So every workday, Monday through Friday, the HBS computer emailed the DQ to everyone participating in the study; we asked participants to fill it out and send it back by the end of the day.

Each team did this through their entire project (or project phase) that we were studying (anywhere from five weeks up to nine months)."

Getting research of this magnitude — twelve thousand daily questionnaires answered by so many employees

in so many companies — is an unprecedented opportunity to see the effect of pressure on performance — in this case, on creativity.

“Over the course of my twenty-five-year career in research and teaching,” Amabile said, “I’ve been fascinated by the complex effects that time pressure (and other forms of pressure) had on my own creativity and productivity. And, in working with many companies, I’ve noticed an interesting phenomenon: Most managers — and employees — hold strong beliefs about how time pressure affects creativity.”

“Creativity” refers to how people approach problems and solutions — their capacity to put existing ideas together in new combinations.

“Perhaps the most surprising finding from our time pressure study is that time pressure really does seem to have an important impact on creativity, even though our intuitions are contradictory. I was very surprised to learn that, while our participants were giving evidence of less creative thinking on time-pressured days, they reported feeling more creative on those days. This helps me gain a bit of insight into those contradictory intuitions.

“In our diary study, people often thought they were most creative when they were working under severe deadline pressure. But the 12,000 aggregate days that we studied showed just the opposite: People were the least creative when they were fighting the clock. In fact, we found a kind of time-pressure hangover — when people were working under great pressure, their creativity went down not only on that day but the next two days as well. Time pressure stifles creativity because people can’t deeply engage with the problem.”

Amabile’s research found that people get confused about time pressure and the difference between getting stuff done and doing good work (in the psychological literature, this is termed skilled based performance versus effort-based performance). Yes, time pressure can stop us from procrastinating, get us off of our rear ends, and help us actually get more things done.

Yet, as Amabile and her colleagues pointed out, time (and other pressure) might make you feel more creative, but it does not help you do higher quality work.

In fact, it does just the opposite, usually with consequences to the project that is being worked on.

According to Amabile, “When creativity is under the gun of time pressure, the project that group was working on usually ends up getting killed: it does not get supported by the company and it loses funding. Time pressure may drive people to get more done, but it causes them to think less creatively.”

## WHAT TO DO?

Since it is impossible to live a life without pressure, the key is to negotiate your reactions to it — to gain insight into how pressure affects you and puts you at risk, and then to learn techniques of pressure management. As Al Doddington, a highly successful senior executive at CIBC, one of North America’s largest and most profitable banks and a client of ours put it: “We can’t change how much pressure people are going to feel, but we can change how they deal with that pressure by providing them with learning on how to be more effective under pressure.”

Here are two strategies for managing pressure found in our book *Performing Under Pressure: The Science of Doing Your Best When it Matters Most*. (Of course, there are many more strategies found in the book but this should give you a start in getting better in the difficult moments you face).

### 1. A Crisis or a Challenge?

What we learned in doing this research and writing this book is that individuals who falter less under pressure than others use a different road map for handling pressure than others. They inherently understand that pressure will affect them, causing them to experience strong physical sensations and a decrease in cognitive function so that when it occurs they don’t have a reaction to the reaction. They expect - even welcome - the strong physical, emotional and cognitive manifestations of pressure and don’t add more to what they are experiencing in the moment because of an overreaction. Part of this different road map comes from how they ‘see’ the both the sensations they are experiencing and the situation they are facing.

**For instance, do you see your high-pressure situations or moments as threatening, or challenging? Do you embrace such moments, or dread them?**

Our data indicates that an overwhelming majority of individuals in the working world see pressure situations as threatening — as do-or-die.

Seeing pressure, and the accompanying physiological sensations that comes with it, as a threat has a very real outcome: it undermines our self-confidence, elicits fear of failure, and, importantly, impairs our ability to focus. Part of the way it achieves this is through a change in our neurochemistry.

Our blood vessels and our lungs are lined with smooth muscle (not to be confused with skeletal muscles found in our legs or arms which we have voluntary control over); when we see a pressure situation as a threat, our body changes our ratio of noradrenaline to adrenaline. It releases more noradrenaline than adrenaline which acts to involuntarily vasoconstrict these smooth muscles. So blood pools in the blood vessels as opposed to getting to the rest of our body and our brain. Our lungs become constricted by noradrenaline so there is less oxygen exchange. The end result is that we tire far more easily as we get less oxygenated blood to the tissues that need it and we lose focus because our brain does not get enough oxygen. All of these results handicap our performance at the very moment we need to be most effective.<sup>2</sup>

On the other side of the coin, individuals who perceive a task or situation as either a challenge, an opportunity, or fun, - who expect and welcome the sensations and the situation - rather than see it as a threat, are far more likely to perform up to the level of their ability, increasing their chances for success.

Feeling challenged is an inherent performance steroid — your body releases more adrenaline than noradrenaline, which means the smooth muscle in your blood vessels dilate, as do your lungs, and now you have more oxygenated blood going to the tissues that need it. Your body has more energy and your brain can think more clearly. This is why some people are able to maintain focus while others lose theirs in pressure situations.

When we perceive a pressure moment as fun, the arousal we experience is enjoyable and exciting, rather than uncomfortable and unsettling. Positive arousal translates into enthusiasm, a powerful emotion in overcoming anxiety and fear (we devote a full chapter to enthusiasm in the book). Think of the high-pressure situations you've been in, and the times you've performed well. You were probably enjoying the moment, despite the pressure.

Before you go into a high-pressure situation, reframe it as a challenge or an opportunity. Expect to feel the heat. Tell yourself that this is simply your body and brain getting ready to perform.

Such a positive mind-set has equally helped the Olympic athletes and the leaders we work with in performing closer to their best in the moments that matter.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Jamison, University of Rochester, Laboratory for Clinical and Developmental Research, interview conducted 2014

## 2. Letting Go of a the Need to Be Perfect or Over Perform

The second strategy to doing our best under pressure has to do with deconstructing a belief that many of us hold: in order to be successful in a pressure situation we need to be perfect or better than we have ever been before.

By now, it should be clear to you that pressure has a powerfully negative effect on people. This is not a negative view – it is simply the truth of pressure. If you deeply understand this insight, you approach pressure situations differently.

For instance, the top 10% group we studied was far from perfect. Pressure still affected them. But they did not believe they needed to 'rise to the occasion' and generate a mythic superhero performance (even though it might have appeared that way to people on the outside) to be successful. Trying to do so, counterintuitively, is a losing strategy, even if it is our most frequent attempted response to an anticipated pressure moment.

Take the pressure of starting a new job. We tend to think, I have to show I am worthy. I have to prove myself. In sports, this leads to the athlete "pressing," or trying too hard (especially after getting a big new contract). In psychology, this is called a reinvestment strategy — the individual attempts to cope with the situation by increasing his or her effort, which numerous studies show has little effect and, in fact, intensifies anxiety and stress, which can lead you to do worse.

Taken to an extreme, if you fall into this belief you stop trusting your capabilities, and worse, you start doing things that do not help you succeed. You start moving away from the strategies and mind-sets that got you in the first place to the position that made you successful. You stop trusting others on your team and, in fact, are more apt to blame them and create conflicts.

Deeply understanding the reality of pressure is especially important when we are in positions of leadership. If we can anticipate that our team will naturally press more in a pressure situation, believing that the path to success comes from being perfect or being better than they have even been before, we will coach and 'show up' differently as a leader. We will be more aware of what they need and don't need in the moment to be successful. We might more clearly see that pushing them to try harder is not an effective strategy - driven more by our own anxiety to do well than what is best for them in the moment.

Also, when a manager or leader understands the intricacies of pressure, he or she can spot when pressure is beginning to exert some the effects on themselves or their team that we described earlier in this paper. For instance, remember that when a team is under pressure, they might overly defer to team members who have higher status as opposed to higher expertise. They become overly concerned with the risks of failure, rather than the requirements of excellence and as a result,

revert to safe, standard approaches, instead of offering original solutions tailored to your clients' needs.

It starts by becoming a 'student of human behavior'. Acutely understanding what the brain does under pressure and then using this insight to become more aware of how pressure can sabotage our best intention. This is what allows us to get 'underneath' pressure, limiting its deleterious effects. It sets the stage for employing some of the powerful tools to manage pressure we describe here and in the book we have refined working with Olympic athletes and individuals from some of the top organizations in the world. The great news is that these are exquisitely learnable strategies that anyone can learn and use immediately to do their best when it matters most.

'It starts by becoming a  
'student of human behavior'



## About IHHP

The Institute for Health and Human Potential (IHHP) is a global research and learning company that specializes in helping organizations and leaders leverage the science of performing under pressure. We offer Training, Leadership Assessments, Coaching, Keynotes and the Performing Under Pressure book. Our expertise is sought by Fortune 500 companies, the world's top business schools, the U.S. Military and Olympic medalists. We have a Canadian office in Toronto, a U.S. office in Chicago and an Australian office covering the Asia Pacific region.

We provide the following solutions that allow organizations to develop sustained learning programs:

### Performing Under Pressure Book

Co-authored by Dr. J.P. Pawliw-Fry, this New York Times bestselling book offers the latest science on how your brain responds under pressure, and many empirically tested strategies to help you overcome its sabotaging effects.

### Keynote Speakers

Be inspired by the world's leading experts on Leadership, Emotional Intelligence and Performing Under Pressure.

### Training Programs

We offer these follow up programs - both in-class and virtually - as part of our world-class training curriculum:

Performing Under Pressure: The Science of Emotional Intelligence  
Performing Under Pressure: Doing Your Best When it Matters Most  
Performing Under Pressure: The Three Conversations of Leadership

These training programs can be delivered on-site by IHHP Senior Facilitators or at our Public Programs. We also offer certification that enables your trainers to deliver our Performing Under Pressure curriculum.

### Assessments

We provide web-based 360 and individual assessments that provide feedback on the core competencies of Emotional Intelligence and Performing Under Pressure.

### Video Sustainment

This five part video series reinforces the learning from the training program and focuses on how the strategies taught in the keynote or training programs can be applied,

### Coaching

One on one in-person and telephone coaching provides support and accountability to each person as they work to achieve the personal development goals committed to in the training program.