

# Performing Under Pressure

## INTRODUCTION

When you are on the witness stand in a courtroom, everything you say is recorded, interpreted, challenged, and judged against the letter of the law. A distorted fact, a failure to remember, the truth told unconvincingly, a stutter or two can all influence a verdict that brings irrevocable, life-changing effects to you and to others.

It is not surprising that such high drama is center stage in Pulitzer Prize-winning novels, Academy Award-winning films, and television Emmy winners, as seen through such unforgettable characters as Captain Queeg, Atticus Finch, Daniel Webster, Perry Mason.

Bob Andreatta, however, is not a fictional character but a flesh-and-blood human being. In his late forties with thick, wavy black hair and dark-framed glasses, Andreatta, a partner at KPMG, was being subpoenaed by the Securities Exchange Commission to give testimony on charges of backdating stock options at Apple and Pixar.

When we first met him in San Francisco in 2013, the experience had been permanently etched in his mind. He didn't need a Hollywood writer to dramatize his telling of what he'd gone through five minutes before he took the stand: "My head was exploding, the pressure was so extreme. If I was indicted or found culpable in any way, my reputation would be ruined, my credentials taken away, my ability to work in a public company gone. I felt like I might end up living in a van down by the river. I was afraid to say the wrong thing. I felt this was it, I was on the line."

Bob Andreatta had faced a particularly harrowing high-pressure moment—the outcome was *important* to him, the outcome was

*uncertain*, and he would be *accountable* and judged on the results. If there had ever been a time that Mr. Andreatta's performance mattered, in his mind, that was it.

We all experience moments of extreme pressure in our lives, times in which we feel like Mr. Andreatta—when we *have to* deliver the goods or suffer dire consequences. For most of us, these moments create a sense of dread.

Over the last twenty years, the two of us, one as a psychologist, one as a high performance coach, and both as researchers and consultants, have collected a great deal of information about how people experience pressure.

Our research has been conducted all over the world via workshops, seminars, business school presentations, clinical therapy, coaching sessions, and consulting activities with all sorts of organizations, including the US Navy and Army; the CIA; NASA; the Federal Reserve Banking System; the EPA; the FBI; the Department of Labor; the National Institutes of Health; the IRS; several NBA teams, Olympic athletes, and other elite athletes; Fortune 500 companies such as Goldman Sachs, Chubb Insurance, IBM, Estée Lauder, Avon, Intel, Merrill Lynch, SAP, Morgan Stanley, Bank of America, Medtronic, Prudential, Nationwide, State Farm, Johnson & Johnson, IBM, TRW, Hughes Aircraft, TRW, Hyatt, Microsoft, Pfizer, KPMG, and Fidelity; the Institute for Management Studies; the Security Industry Association; and The Young Presidents' Organization.

We have also undertaken a multiyear study of individuals who are under pressure and asked this question: What is it about the top 10 percent of the twelve thousand people (the top twelve hundred) we studied that helps them handle pressure more effectively and receive the most promotions? This wasn't just anecdotal; we used cutting-edge "360" assessment to ascertain what these people did differently. This 360 or multi-rater assessment is a method of systematically collecting observations about an individual's behavior and performance from a wide range of sources including peers, direct reports, managers, customers, and even family and friends (see Appendix A). This allows us to understand how an individual deals with pressure from a number of different data points as opposed to just relying on the person's

self-perception. Each of the twelve thousand people we studied was assessed by anywhere from six to fourteen people, so in total we had more than one hundred thousand people assess the twelve thousand subjects. We identified the top 10 percent based on their manager's performance ratings from all who assessed them. In addition, each month, one of our organizations, the Institute for Health and Human Potential (IHHP), sends out short questionnaires to more than ten thousand individuals around the world, asking such questions as "Do you feel you work better under pressure?" "Are you more concerned with failing in a pressure moment or more focused on succeeding in one?" Responses from tens of thousands of individuals have helped us identify the pressure patterns and pressure management interventions.

Dr. Weisinger developed a clinical assessment tool called the Pressure Inventory, which provided important insights into how people experience, respond to, and can manage pressure more effectively (see Appendix A for the full Pressure Inventory questionnaire).

Over the last fifteen years years, we've also sifted through vast amounts of research on every aspect of performing under pressure, drawing from social and cognitive psychology, sports psychology, neuroscience, and clinical psychology.

The bottom line—pressure is the enemy of success: It undermines performance and helps us fail. When under pressure, air traffic controllers, pilots, and oil rig chiefs make errors in judgment. NBA players, World Cup soccer players, champion golfers frequently miss their usual shot under pressure. 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. Corporate executives, managers, and sales professionals make poor decisions, and parents have less patience with their children. Pressure is more than a nemesis; it is a villain in our lives. Here are just some of the findings we've assembled over the last five years that we'll elaborate on throughout this book:

**Pressure adversely impacts our cognitive success.** There are many tools that make us successful. But at the top of the list are our judgment, decision-making, memory, and attention. Whether we are adding up numbers, identifying relevant data, analyzing information,

listening to a client, or appraising a job applicant, pressure negatively impacts us. A financial advisor, a real estate agent, or an attorney under pressure to produce can do disservice to a client.

**Pressure adversely impacts our behavioral performance.** Divers, mountain climbers, basketball and baseball players, golfers, field goal kickers, chess players, quarterbacks and their receivers, concert pianists, mechanics, construction workers—all have their psychomotor performance skills compromised under pressure. Your son or daughter under pressure in the classroom may miss answers he or she “knows” on the midterm or final. If you are parallel parking and feel pressure from an impatient driver behind you who can’t go around, you’ll likely hit the curb or cut the wheel too sharply and have to start over, delaying the other driver further and embarrassing yourself.

**In pressure moments, most people don’t do their best.** Are you one of those people who are amazed by those who seem to thrive under pressure? Well, you may want to reconsider that amazement. Contrary to conventional wisdom, we discovered that more often than not, when people want to do their best, they don’t. Pro athletes rarely do better than their average in pressure moments, and most—even the great ones—do worse! The fact is, people *frequently* perform far below their capability in pressure moments. Parents may not expect their C students to ace the SATs, but many parents are in for a shock when their A student scores a hundred points or more lower than expected. Thousands of college graduates, and even seasoned managers, exit job interviews thinking, *I should have said . . .*

**Pressure is often camouflaged.** The influence of pressure on derailing your performance is often disguised. We have found that many conventional tools, such as incentives or praising results, used to motivate ourselves and others, and improve organizational effectiveness, are actually pressure traps; these disrupt performance, stimulate cheating, encourage absenteeism, and, most noticeably, intensify our daily feelings of pressure.

**Today we feel increased pressure in our lives.** In today’s fast-paced world, where we are connected to our jobs and to our work 24/7, pressure is almost unavoidable. Take a look at the comments of some of the people who have taken our Pressure Inventory:

*Every day at work, I feel the pressure, like I'm being squeezed  
like an orange.  
It sounds like a cliché, but I feel my office is a pressure cooker.  
Every client call is critical. The pressure is relentless.  
I feel my life is under a deadline.  
Every day is do or die. I call it pressure to produce . . . that's  
what I feel every day.  
I have nothing left when I get home.*

We live in a high-pressure time, where every day we feel we are *on the line*. More than ever before, working folks *feel the heat . . . that they have to produce, perform, get results or else . . .* And so we do. Every decision, meeting, presentation, negotiation, or pitch that we make feels as if it has a major impact on our career. A single misworded or hasty e-mail can spell disaster. In an age where many of us can lose our jobs at any time, a single ill-considered utterance can derail years of hard work; think of Mitt Romney's now famous 47 percent line in the 2012 presidential campaign.

Many factors have increased the perceived pressure in our lives: the recent economic meltdown, the fierce competition for jobs, the advent of the global economy, the erosion of job stability, the intensified competition to get into top colleges, universities, and graduate programs.

A manager of a prestigious Fifth Avenue store in New York City told us, "Every morning I wonder if I can meet our sales goals. The butterflies *start right away*." A financial advisor told us, "I worry about whether I can keep making my condo payments." We call this feeling *pressure anxiety*—the perpetual feeling of uncertainty, fear, even dread about whether or not you can produce, whether or not you have what it takes to make the grade, knowing that if you can't or don't, you might be "weeded out" or, at the very least, have your career or professional goals stymied.

There is a clear and present danger to pressure anxiety: It often becomes generalized to other aspects of our lives. The perpetual feeling that you have to perform, and the underlying doubts as to whether or not you can continue to produce, leads to stressed conversations and relationships at home. Who wants to talk about a vacation or home improvement or grapple with medical or dental bills when all we

experience is the pressure to finance them? Under pressure, parents often unleash their distress on their kids—making more demands, expressed with a shorter temper. Often the feelings become so unmanageable, emotional conflict is experienced regularly. All of a sudden, we feel as if we are under siege from every front. Considering the demographics that show that people are working longer hours, and that the working world is becoming more competitive, pressure anxiety seems to be increasing.

## Our Mission

A finding that continually intrigues us is that most of the thousands of individuals who've participated in our research take a *haphazard approach to managing pressure* in their lives. Very few think about how to handle pressure moments better—until it's too late. Few have strategies grounded in the latest science of the brain or in psychology. Like many of the Olympic athletes and businesspeople we have worked with, they simply model what they have observed from others and hope it works. Sometimes these strategies are helpful. But many times they are not. Our mission in this book is twofold:

First, to provide an easy-to-use playbook of *pressure solutions*—accessible strategies and techniques that individuals can use immediately to *depressurize* a situation—to immunize themselves against the sabotaging effects of pressure, so they can perform their best in those critical moments—a presentation, an interview, a test, a crucial negotiation, a sales call. Pressure solutions are short-term strategies for overcoming pressure.

There is an important caveat here which we will reiterate throughout the book. Managing the pressure of the moment *does not* necessarily equate to success. *The best you can do is your best*—which in truth might not be good enough. An athlete can make a Herculean effort and not have it be good enough. Your son or daughter can ace the SATs but still be denied admission to his or her first-choice school.

Our point is that managing the pressure of the moment will allow you to perform closer to your *capability*, which increases your

likelihood of being successful. Managing pressure puts you in a position to succeed because it lets your experience and skills do the talking.

The second part of our mission is supported by our research into the twelve thousand subjects described above and the plentiful research of other psychologists. It strongly suggests that helping people manage pressure in their lives is an *untapped strategy* for unleashing their creative and intellectual potential. This strategy allows them to *consistently* perform up to the level of their capabilities, rather than having their capabilities dismantled or compromised by pressure.

Accordingly, we provide the nuts and bolts for building the attributes that allow individuals to consistently do their best when they are in pressure moments. These attributes include confidence, optimism, tenacity, and enthusiasm, which we collectively refer to as COTE. Metaphorically, these attributes offer users a COTE of Armor. Instilling them in yourself offers a long-term strategy for consistently defeating pressure and doing your best when it counts the most.

## Overview

*Performance Under Pressure* is organized into three sections.

*Part 1* provides readers with an understanding of the nature and science of pressure. Among the points we emphasize are these:

- ♦ The crucial differences between pressure and stress, and how those differences impact us
- ♦ *Why we feel* the heat in a pressure moment
- ♦ *How* we inadvertently put pressure on ourselves—and others
- ♦ *Common* pressure traps and how they make us “choke”
- ♦ *What* pressure does to our brains—and how it affects our thinking

We’ve found that the more familiar you are with the impact of pressure in your life, the more adept you become in successfully coping with it.

*Part 2* provides readers with twenty-two powerful, often counter-intuitive pressure solutions, strategies to use when you are in the midst of a pressure moment—or about to encounter one. You will find pressure solutions for all sorts of pressure moments, both at work and in your personal life. These solutions can be applied instantly. So if you are currently in the midst of a high-pressure situation that you feel ill-equipped to handle, peruse this section *now* for a quick fix.

*Part 3* offers long-term strategies to help you build a *COTE of Armor*, a metaphorical suit you can wear daily. The emotional blending of confidence, optimism, tenacity, and enthusiasm make up the fabric of that coat. With these attributes, you can immunize yourself against pressure so that your capability isn't diminished or compromised by it, giving yourself your best chance to succeed. We've found that the process of developing these attributes provides individuals with more insight about themselves, helping them to navigate their entire lives more effectively.

All of the individuals in the organizations we've worked with, from US Navy officers to CEOs and NBA coaches, are like you—they all experience acute pressure on a regular basis and yet have to deliver, time and again, in the face of it. With our help, over time they have come to understand that while mastering technical knowledge or expertise in their field provides them with a leg up, their true ticket to success often comes from being able to respond well under pressure. The information contained in this book has helped to give them specific strategies, as well as a long-term program, to handle pressure situations better. And it will help you, too—not just in the high-pressure, intense moments you experience at work, but in situations that matter in every facet of your life.

So if you find yourself in a situation like Bob Andreatta—whose head was “exploding” five minutes ahead of testifying before the SEC—the morning of an important presentation, interview, sales call, difficult conversation, or audition, this book is for you. You will be taking more control over your performance. You'll be better able to respond to the pressure, and in the process you'll feel more confident and optimistic. You will be using the cutting-edge results from what the neurocognitive and psychological sciences have to offer. Under

pressure, you will experience less distorted and distracted thinking, less indecision, and abundantly more creativity. We believe that when you walk into pressure situations, you will see them more as challenges than crises, and you will walk away feeling confident that you performed in a way closer to what you are capable of, not less.

Our first matter of business: acknowledging the power of pressure so that you know exactly what you are up against, and why pressure is *always* the villain.