



Leadership Under Pressure

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Who I am

Professional profile

- Board member and independent executive advisor.
- Former Senior Vice President, Novo Nordisk Foundation.
- Specialist in evaluation, analysis, Theory of Change, ROI and impact management.
- PhD in International Finance
- Censor and supervisor in economics



Leadership track

- 30 years of leadership experience in public and private organisations.
- 27 years as Government Administration Professional
- 12 years in enterprise foundation
- Worked at the intersection of economics, strategy, research, innovation, funding and impact.

“Let me start
with a real
situation –
my father’s
former
company”



- CEO in “successful” company
- Everything looked fine externally
- But inside: teams were afraid to speak
- Problems known at middle level
- Not reaching top (my father)
- After a couple of years:
 - There was a major failure and nearly bankruptcy
 - not because nobody knew
 - but because nobody said it clearly
- ☞ “In most organisations, 2 out of 3 employees say they withhold concerns or ideas in high pressure environments”
- ☞ “Most leadership failures are not because leaders don’t know. It’s because they don’t hear or listen.”

The path for my presentation

1 The real test of leadership

2 Pressure: what it does to us

3 Good leadership in hard moments

4 Theory of Change as discipline

5 Failures, lessons, preparedness

6 Reflections worth taking home

Good leadership in one line: moral clarity + useful action



Direction:
Leader know where
we are going and the
goal



Trust:
Leader is worth
following



Judgment:
Leader must decide
on sound ground

Good leadership in one line: moral clarity + useful action



Direction:
Leader know where
we are going and the
goal

Command



Trust:
Leader is worth
following

Comfort



Judgment:
Leader must decide
on sound ground

Intellectual performance

The Biology of Leadership under pressure (1/3)

What happens to the brain when the stakes are high?

The Amygdala Hijack

Under high pressure, the brain's **"alarm system"** overrides reflection, judgment and self-control. This impairs logical reasoning, impulse control and empathy.

The Biology of Leadership under pressure (2/3)

The Organizational Ripple Effect

**A leader's stress is
"contagious"**

**A team mirrors the leader's
nervous system.**

Panic at the top leads to
decreased psychological safety
across the team

The Biology of Leadership under pressure (3/3)

Leadership becomes more visible under pressure

53%

of leaders become more closed-minded and
controlling in crisis rather than open and
curious.

Pressure reveals habits and influences emotional discipline.

Pressure comes in many forms

Time pressure

Little time, resource lack,
large consequence.

Moral or Political pressure

What is legal is not always
what is right.

Human pressure

Fear, conflict, fatigue,
motivation and trust.

What good leadership looks like in hard moments

Calm and clarity

- Slow the emotional tempo.
- Name the reality without drama.
- Analyse the situation before decision

Candor and courage

- Invite bad news early.
- Protect expertise.
- Decide before consensus turns into delay.

The room is watching your nervous system

In many tense meetings, **the first thing people read** is not the slide deck, the strategy or the numbers. They read **the leader's nervous system:** breathing, face, tempo and tone.

Before people trust your decision, they must trust your steadiness.

The danger of clever panic

A smart leader under pressure often becomes too fast, too certain and too verbal.
Pressure rewards people who can separate urgency from haste.

Decision Drift

is when high-pressure environments encourage leaders to move too quickly, causing them to make decisions before they have done sufficient "homework".

Speed matters. But speed without disciplined thinking is just expensive improvisation.

Resilient Leadership – Countering “Decision Drift”

If 'Clever Panic' is the disease of leadership under pressure, **be strong and courageous ('Chazak Ve'ematz')** is the cure.” That was the reason PNR failed.

Strategic Stillness

True courage is the ability to resist to move too fast and **instead fight for values.**

By being "strong and courageous," a leader gains the internal stability to complete their "homework" before acting, ensuring that speed never outpaces judgment.

Psychological safety matters most when stakes rise

Crisis/pressure implication

When fear silences people, leaders lose information, signals, practical intelligence and early warnings.

The leader who punishes truth will later pay for ignorance.

WeWork: Lesson from a “Failure Leader Case”

'WeWork story

- Hyper growth, massive valuation
- Weak governance
- Founder's (Adam Neuman) erratic behavior
- Internal warnings ignored
- Passive Board of Directors

Failure mechanism lesson

- Truth filtered upward
 - Culture punished dissent
 - Groupthink
 - Narrative > reality
- 👉 “The problem was not the market. It was that nobody could say no and speak the truth.”

How Theory of Change helps under stress

1

Impact

What outcome are we trying to create and for whom?

2

Pathway

What chain of effects do we expect?

3

Assumptions and Risks

What could break this logic? Find signals!
What are the risks we are facing?

4

Evidence and Learning

What will we monitor in the next 2-4 days or weeks? What do we learn and need to change?

How leaders prepare for clever decisions under pressure

- Rehearse decision principles before the crisis.
- Build a trusted inner circle that can disagree.

- Sleep, tempo and physical state are decision assets.
- Train the habit of asking: what do we know, not know, and assume?

Preparing for the unexpected

Pre-mortems

Ask: if this decision fails badly,
what probably caused it?

Scenarios

Prepare for likely, severe and
improbable but devastating
events.

Lesson from a “Failed Startup decision”

Scenario

Situation:

- Product not converting
- Founder sees drop in sales
- Immediate pivot

Instead of

- Diagnosing cause

They:

- Change product, price, messaging all at once

Failure mechanism lesson

Outcome:

- Lose signal
- No learning
- Worse performance

👉 Mechanism: panic leads to multiple variables changing

👉 Line: “Under pressure, they stopped learning.”

A Jewish jokes about leadership

A board asks the rabbi, "What is the secret of leadership?" He says, "First, learn to listen." They reply, "And then?" He says, "I said first, learn to listen."

Reflections for you

What do I become under pressure?

More open — or more controlling?

Who can challenge me in my company?

Do I have people who can tell me what I do not want to hear?

Am I prepared for clever decisions under pressure?

Train crisis decision principles and the ask: what do we know, not know, assume?

Am I preparing for the right changes (ToC)?

What should I protect/achieve and what chain effect do I expect?

Thank you for you
attention