

# Leadership Under Pressure

By Joe Whitefield

Let's start with a simple little test. Name something made of wool. Name a type of bear. You are probably thinking these questions are not so hard. How about wool socks, a wool sweater, or a wool coat. How about polar bears, black bears, or grizzly bears. Like you thought, no problem. Any average person can handle these with ease. As it turns out, these simple questions become considerably more difficult when a little pressure is applied.

Imagine being asked these questions and to respond in a split second. Now imagine it is part of a competition with others—with money at stake. Oh, I almost forgot, you are on national TV. These are the exact conditions if you are a contestant on the *Family Feud* game show. Now try it. Something made of wool—a sheep (real answer). A type of bear—papa (another real answer).

You see, something changes when pressure is applied. There are libraries filled with books written about the effects of pressure and stress on human performance. Historically, there are occasions where amazing feats were accomplished in the midst of great pressure.

This article will focus on the pressure more often associated with diminished performance—on situations in which physical

skills, mental skills, and even social graces suffer when otherwise gifted people feel various forms of pressure. And everyone, at some time or another, is exposed to pressure. Let's unpack the concept a bit more.

## PRESSURE SOURCES

In order to properly deal with pressure, we should begin with identifying the sources of pressure that cause so much disruption. We need look no

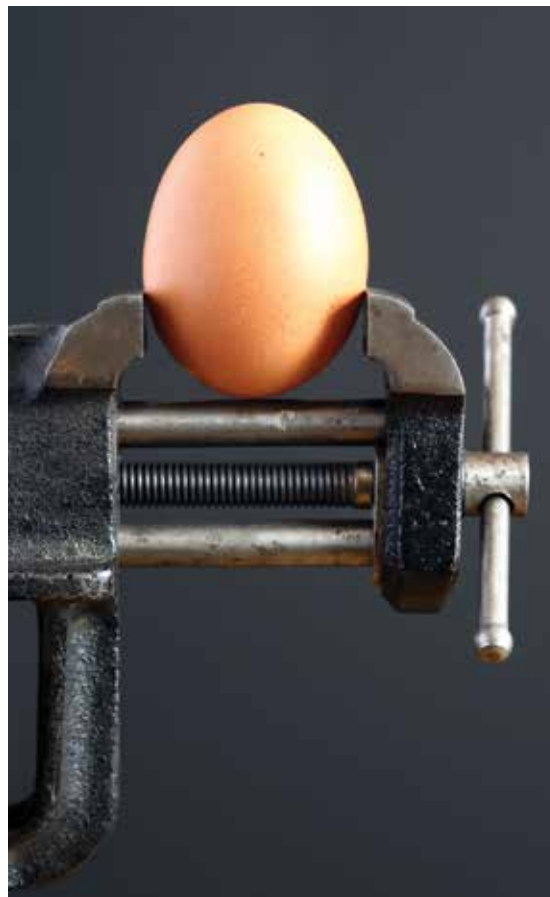
further than the basic pressures purposefully built into *Family Feud*. The first pressure source is time. If you want to evoke a response from people, put them on the clock. The tighter the deadline, the more stressed the person and the more strained or questionable the response.

Another source of pressure involves the stakes. Stakes refer to rewards and punishments that serve as incentives for performance. Revenue or budgetary goals, enrollment goals, and any number of performance goals often carry either positive or negative consequences. These consequences may even be of a personal nature ranging from diminished career opportunities to reduced job security.

Also, the element of competition plays an important role in establishing the stakes. It is one thing to fall short of a goal or expectation—it is another to lose to a competitor. The final source of pressure is publicity. Public performances are opportunities for societal judgments and review, causing anxiety for many people. Let's face it, if we make the headlines, it better be for something positive.

## DEALING WITH PRESSURE

Pressure affects performance—often negatively and sometimes dramatically. For this reason, it is a great test of both personal and organizational leadership. Leaders who produce positive results in the face of pressure are most valuable. It begins with effectively



managing stressful situations to positive conclusions without alienating others in the process. It requires a unique blend of qualities such as composure, decisiveness, commitment, and forbearance. To develop organizational leadership, it's important to bring this skill set into the group. If you are looking for ways to improve this area, consider the following:

- Self-identification—there is great value in knowing who you are at all times. Self-knowledge helps you know your values and priorities and how they establish expectations and predetermine many responses. Pressure has a smaller impact on activities grounded in a self-aware, value-based organization. It follows the old statement, “If you know who you are, then you’ll know what to do.”
- Don’t add pressure unnecessarily and/or remove pressure when possible—to many people, this sounds obvious. However, at issue here is how to use a source of pressure (say a deadline or financial bonus) to motivate performance. People respond differently to different incentives depending on the creative or physical nature of the task. Those faced with physical tasks requiring effort typically respond well to external incentives. But those given tasks requiring diagnostics and creativity to address a problem, may find an external reward to be a distraction that causes a loss of focus and poorer results.
- Low-stakes training—to the degree possible, help people gain experience in dealing with different levels of pressure. This helps them see the effects of pressure and lets us measure the effectiveness of their responses. Begin with lighter pressure and lower stakes, and increase both as appropriate to refine skills.

In short, facilities managers face challenges every day, many compounded by some form of pressure. In addition

to making things more complicated, pressure has the added effect of making the easy things hard by distracting or disincantizing people. Strong performance in the face of these pressure filled challenges is the mark of an effective leader. In order to perform better under pressure, it is helpful to

understand pressure and learn to handle it productively. ☺

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