

# Performance Under Pressure

Based on *Clutch: Why Some People Excel Under Pressure and Others Don't* by **Paul SULLIVAN** (Portfolio, September 2010) and *Shine: Using Brain Science to Get the Best from Your People* by **Edward HALLOWELL** (Harvard Business Review Press, January 2011).

**Are great leaders genetically programmed to resist pressure? No, says Paul Sullivan, who notes that champions of stress management all have the skills to limit the negative effects of stress. According to him, it's a matter of experience and preparation, at the individual and team level.**

In October 2007, one year before the bursting of the financial bubble, J.P. Morgan Chase was valued at \$161 billion, making it the fourth largest bank in the United States. Two years later, near the end of the crisis, the bank was listed at more than \$160 billion, making it the largest U.S. bank\*. Was it saved from the recession? Not really, since in March 2009, the group's market capitalization decreased by 60%, just like most of its competitors. Then how do you explain such a recovery from the crisis? Through the ability of Jamie Dimon, CEO of JP Morgan Chase, to make the right decisions—notably several strategic acquisitions—in a high-anxiety environment.

## PRESSURE: YOUR BEST ENEMY

In a hostile environment—characterized by uncertainty, less and less time for reflection, and social conflicts—the opportunities to be completely overwhelmed in the workplace are numerous. While pressure can be useful when a decision maker must act quickly, it can also be toxic and prevent any decisions from being made.

### ■ Dangerous Pressure

In situations of abnormal stress, decision makers use their resources to deal with the pressure. If it doesn't drop, behavioral troubles (fear, emotional sensitivity, etc.) quickly arise, making decision makers lose, little by little, all capacity to adapt. In this situation, they:

- **Can no longer decide.** They stop concentrating, making reflection impossible. They lose sight of the big picture and each decision seems insurmountable.

## MEMO

- **Inability to concentrate, nervousness, and a loss of confidence** are the three symptoms that block decision making in emergency situations.
- **The ability to stay focused, flexibility, and awareness of danger** distinguish performance champions from other managers under pressure.
- **Developing motivation, collaboration, and training** enables managers to reduce exposure to stress in their teams.

- **Get upset.** They virally spread the pressure they can no longer control to those around them (especially their teams), causing the work environment to rapidly deteriorate.
- **Lose their confidence** and that of their teams and superiors, who question their ability to make good decisions. They don't dare to act.

### ■ Positive Pressure

The feeling of being under pressure occurs when the organization adapts to a hostile situation. When it's not paralyzing, it provides a sense of urgency that pushes the decision maker to respond to the changing environment.

## WHY CERTAIN PEOPLE RESIST PRESSURE BETTER THAN OTHERS?

What distinguishes decision makers who can resist pressure from the rest? Some seemingly innocuous daily behaviors.

### ■ Characteristics That Help to Deal with Pressure

The champions of pressure management like Jamie Dimon have a few common characteristics:

- **The ability to stay focused at all times:** Being disciplined and consistent makes it possible to not lose sight of your goals and to stay in the race, no matter what happens.
- **Adaptability:** not letting your ego determine your choices. Accepting to change your mind and putting new ideas into practice, even those previously considered bad.
- **Thinking in the present:** not focusing on previous failures (that prevent action) or potential future successes that could

## Nokia Under Pressure

The example of Stephen Elop, CEO of Nokia since September 2010, is a case in point. When he arrived in the midst of turmoil (at the end of the 2000s, Nokia had missed out on the smartphone and in 2010 the Finish firm lost seven points of the market share in mobile telephony), one of his first actions was to create a sense of urgency among his employees. In an internal memo, he explained\*: "There is a pertinent story about a man who was working on an oil platform in the North Sea. He woke up one night from a loud explosion, which suddenly set his entire oil platform on fire ... As the fire approached him, the man had mere seconds to react. He could stand on the platform, and inevitably be consumed by the burning flames. Or, he could plunge 30 meters in to the freezing waters." By exposing his employees to pressure, Elop wanted to prepare for an uncertain future that required a new strategic direction (in this case, a major alliance with Microsoft, announced a few weeks later).

\* "Full Text: Nokia CEO Stephen Elop's 'Burning Platform' Memo," The Wall Street Journal, February 9, 2011.

## The Authors

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push you to make decisions for the wrong reasons (e.g., looking for a promotion).

- **Balancing fear and envy:** consciously associating danger and risk taking. This combination, taught to U.S. Marines sent to the field, enables stress champions to move forward in a situation of great uncertainty.

### ■ Toxic Behaviors

Some behaviors, however, are aggravating factors of stress for yourself and others:

- **Being incapable of assuming your responsibilities:** The inability to recognize bad decisions and to accept criticism adds to the feeling of pressure. This is because high-stress situations generally require managers to make unpopular decisions. In this context, assuming your decisions, even if they turn out to be bad, allows you to keep your teams' confidence. Employees aren't offended by errors themselves, but by when a manager doesn't acknowledge them.
- **Not knowing how to act quickly:** If, during times of calm, reflection is always an asset, it can be an aggravating factor of stress under high pressure. Moreover, the ability to act quickly and calmly when the pressure is high is what sets great athletes apart from the rest. Even in major tournaments, Tiger Woods "hits the ball on the eighteenth hole to win the way he would if he were playing with friends," says Sullivan.

## HOW TO PREPARE YOURSELF AND YOUR TEAMS

Is the ability to withstand pressure innate? While some natural behaviors can help to better deal with stress, Edward Hallowell, author of *Shine\*\** says that resistance to pressure in a hostile environment can be developed, for both individuals and teams.

### ■ Self-Development

- **Focus on key objectives:** Giving yourself a specific goal helps to stay on course and to avoid simply reacting to the environment. Setting a clear objective can also help to prioritize decisions. The risk for leaders is, in effect, trying to ...

••• control everything and ending up spreading themselves thin, while some secondary objectives could be set aside temporarily. Leaders must make compromises. The question is, what do they accept giving up to achieve their goal? During humanitarian disasters, the first action for NGOs is, for example, defining priorities. Thus, the management of the water supply generally occurs before food or care.

- **Train yourself to become an expert in your field:** Military personnel, special forces, and firefighters repeat their tasks until they become reflexes. This is what allows them to reduce errors under pressure. It's also what characterizes great athletes. Interviewed by Sullivan during a tournament to understand how he managed to win every time, Tiger Woods said: "I've put myself there, in that situation, more times than anybody else. I also failed more times than anybody else. But along the way, you do succeed." In sum, most managers who succumb to pressure are not good enough in their daily tasks to reduce errors in times of stress.

### ■ Supporting Your Teams

How can you help your teams unleash the best of themselves in times of intense pressure? Hallowell calls on managers to respect five key principles:

- **Select:** Put your employees in positions where they are not only competent but also thrive to get them to improve their performance significantly. Satisfied employees accept occasional pressure more easily.
- **Connect:** Get your teams to help each other, especially in times of stress. Under pressure, the natural tendency is isolation. Collaboration allows employees to share problems and to resolve them with greater ease.
- **Develop a game culture:** The game is what differentiates

humans from computers, it's what makes it possible to overcome certain rules when the environment changes. The manager's role is to enable teams to think outside the box and to bring them out of their comfort zone to get them to innovate and to find solutions to stress themselves.

- **Make teams grow:** To prepare teams for unexpected pressure situations, managers must be demanding and challenge them. However, stimulation (something positive to put things into motion) and harmful stress (paralyzing when it becomes toxic) should not be confused. Always promote dialogue to understand teams' difficulties and be reasonable in your demands.

- **Show recognition:** Do not limit celebrations to great successes or the achievement of goals. Supporting teams, especially when pressure is high, also means emphasizing various details: a good atmosphere in the team, efforts, progress, and so on.

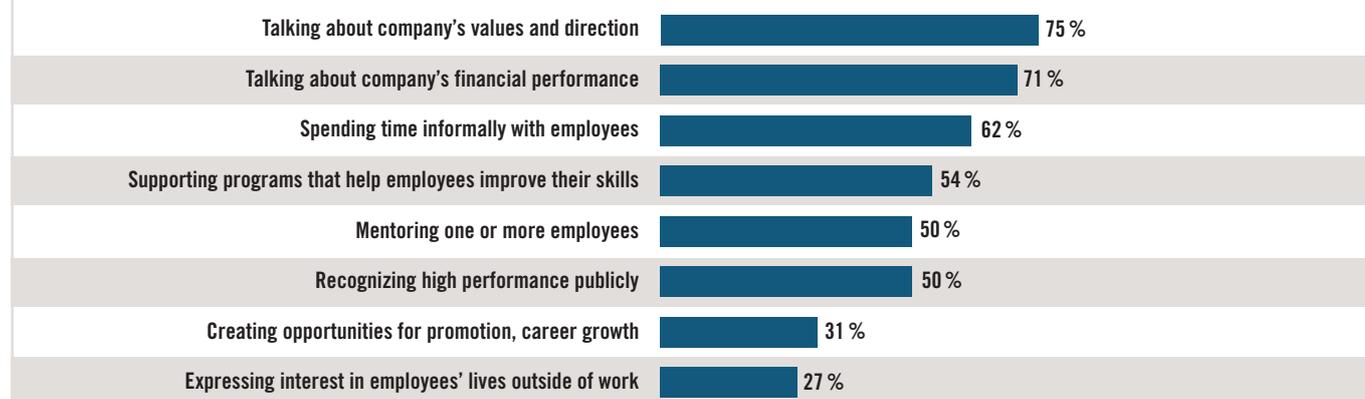
Although they have evolved in very competitive worlds (which are challenging for their employees), companies like Google, SAS, and Whole Foods Market know how to make down time to take off the pressure. Some of them allow their employees to spend part of their working time on topics that interest them personally (Google), others offer free gym classes (SAS), and some promote work-life balance (Whole Foods Market). But they all know that tense situations are inevitable and that for employees to be high-performing over time, they need to blow off steam every now and then. ■

\* In December 2010, Wells Fargo passed ahead of J.P. Morgan Chase in terms of market capitalization.

\*\* Harvard Business Review Press, January 2011.

## Conversation Starter

In 2009, McKinsey surveyed more than 1,600 leaders to understand how they helped their teams to overcome the pressure of the crisis.



Source: "Leaders in the crisis: McKinsey Global Survey Results", *McKinsey Quarterly*, summer 2009.