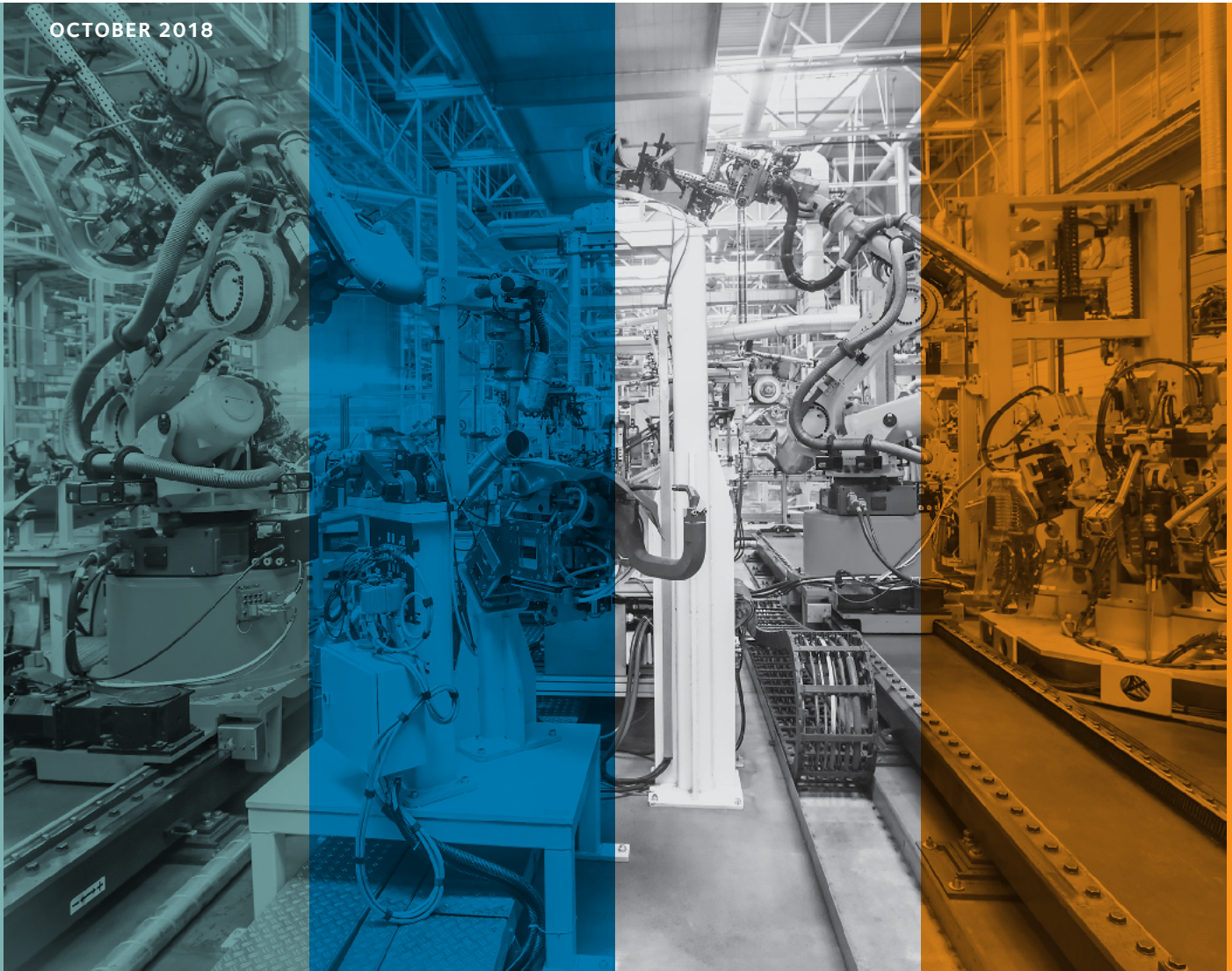


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The Paradox of Pressure

BY DANE JENSEN

Like death and taxes, pressure is a certainty. And, like death and taxes, pressure is not typically high on anyone's list of the things that contribute to 'the good life'.

Pressure is not new. I'm sure the first person who etched a pattern on a cave wall was worried what their peers would think and suspected they weren't *really* good enough to be

the first person to draw a horse. However, there are a number of things happening that make pressure a defining feature of the modern world – and it is my belief that in this so-called 'age of pressure' our responses to pressure ultimately determine how successful we are, and how much we enjoy our lives in the process.

WHAT IS PRESSURE?

As human beings we experience pressure whenever two things are present.

The first thing that has to be present is **importance**. We have to be doing something that is either important to us or at least perceived as important, because if we don't care about it, it's not going to create pressure.

The second thing that has to be there is **uncertainty**. Because even if we care about something, it's not going to create much pressure if we know how it's going to turn out. Pressure only exists when something matters to us and we don't know how it's going to go.

So, we experience pressure at the intersection of importance and uncertainty – but what really makes this pressure relentless is a third variable: volume. The sheer volume of important and uncertain events we are dealing with on a daily basis has expanded significantly.

Most of us are dealing with a **volume** of inputs that would have felt baffling to prior generations: emails, instant messages, Slack channels, and social media notifications combine to create a constant stream of information – almost all of which is invested with a sense of urgency.

Added on top of this constant hum is an unprecedented volume of bigger changes: the rise of digitization and automation has created significant uncertainty around job security. Massive political uncertainty is rocking the Western world. Demographic changes mean many of us are caring for aging parents against the uncertainty of a healthcare system already bursting at the seams.

This combination of importance, uncertainty, and volume produces what I call the 'pressure equation' – and right now, for many of us, all three variables are increasing.

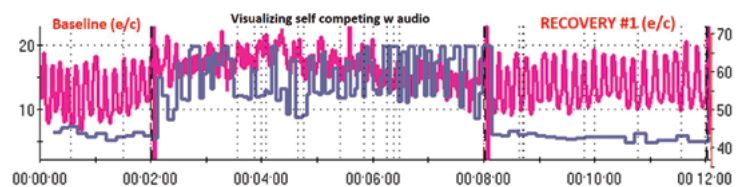
$$\text{PRESSURE} = \text{IMPORTANCE} \times \text{UNCERTAINTY} \times \text{VOLUME}$$

THE BIOLOGY OF PRESSURE

So, what happens to us when we operate under a combined load of importance, uncertainty and volume?

Our window into this comes through a field known as biofeedback. The R&D Lead for Performance Coaching's Resilience practice, Kara Stelfox, is an expert in the application of biofeedback. Her research allows us to measure body functions like breathing rate, heart rate, skin conductivity and body temperature to get an inside view of how the body reacts to different situations.

This graph is a screenshot from an actual session she did with an elite athlete to help them train their stress response:



The graph shows what happened to the athlete's heart rate (pink) and breathing (purple) over three phases of the session: a baseline, a pressure scenario (visualizing themselves competing – with audio piped in), and a recovery period.

In the baseline phase you can see the athlete was breathing at a steady rate of around five to seven breaths per minute. Their heart rate was varying from 45 to 65 beats per minute, and it was doing so in a very smooth oscillating pattern almost like a sine wave. Biofeedback experts call the distance of the travel from the peak to the valley Heart Rate Variability (HRV).

When we move into the pressure scenario, we see the subject's breathing got much faster, but it also became erratic. Heart rate was unsurprisingly elevated, but the nature of the heart rate changed: HRV reduced significantly. The peaks and valleys came closer together and it got much more inconsistent. There was no smooth sine wave up and down.

When our physiology changes in this way under pressure, we are in what sports psychologists call an activated state. When we move into an activated state our attentional focus gets narrower and narrower; we can pay attention to fewer and fewer things.

This has many implications for our performance as human beings.

First, it dramatically **reduces our capacity for empathy**. When you can only pay attention to one little slice of reality, there's no way you can hold your story and someone else's story at the same time.

Second, it **takes away our ability to absorb new information**, especially information that contradicts our existing biases or preconceived notions. We're much more likely to just go with what we already know or believe.

Third, it **limits our capacity for creativity** and exploration. When our attentional focus narrows, we go into a state known as functional fixedness. We become fixated on one particular solution, and we don't question it because it would take too much time to rethink and restart.

What's not at stake? In short, what are the things in my life that won't change regardless of the outcome?

Finally, it **makes it much harder for us to learn and integrate new skills**, because the act of absorbing new information is a huge challenge when we're activated and narrowly focused.

This list is essentially the worst-case scenario in the age of pressure, where we want people to be empathetic, question their biases, learn, explore and be creative. In short, our default responses to pressure rob us of the very tools we need to be successful in a fast-changing and uncertain world.

OPTIMIZING THE PRESSURE EQUATION

To escape these four traps, we have to go back to what creates pressure in the first place: the combination of importance, uncertainty, and volume. There are tools we can use to address all three of these root causes.

Let's start with **importance**. The fundamental skill in importance is to **keep things in perspective**. There are two components to this.

The first is to make sure we're not mislabeling things that are urgent as important. This often happens in the crush of the day-to-day. It's easy to give undue weight to something just because of a deadline, whether or not it's actually important. The Eisenhower Matrix – a 2x2 grid that combines urgency and importance – is a great decision making tool to use here.

The second is to ask ourselves one critical question: what's *not* at stake? In short, what are the things in my life that won't change regardless of the outcome of this particular situation? This is not to diminish the importance of an event, it's just to make sure we're not overloading it with importance. Often as human beings we over-weight the stakes because we lose sight of the bigger picture.

The value of keeping importance in perspective is well illustrated by one of the most decorated winter Olympians of all time, Johann Koss, a Norwegian long-track speed skater who set 3 world records and won 3 gold medals at his home Games in Lillehammer.

In the days leading up to his races, Johann had moments where he was almost paralyzed by the crushing expectations. I had a chance to sit down with Johann last year and he told me that "the fear of failure was so strong – I felt like failure [at the Olympics] would create failure for the rest of my life."

This is a perfect example of someone who is over-weighting the stakes. *Of course* the Olympics are important. He has trained his entire life for this moment. But failing at the Olympics does not make him a failure as a person. In fact, Koss credits part of his success at Lillehammer to a conversation he had with a sports psychologist prior to his performance, where she was able to help him see what was truly at stake and what was not at stake in that situation. And with that perspective, he was able to turn a corner and bring home three gold medals and set three world records.

When it comes to **uncertainty**, the antidote is to **take direct action on the things over which we have control**.

The book *The Net and The Butterfly* by Judah Pollack and Olivia Fox Cabane talks about certainty and uncertainty as two buckets balancing on a scale. The point the authors make is if we want people to carry heavier loads of uncertainty, we need to help them load up that certainty bucket to keep them in balance. The best way to do that is to take direct action.

When taking direct action, however, it's necessary to use the right tools. A failed attempt at taking direct action can inadvertently increase pressure by making us feel helpless. In organizations, the problems people are solving have changed but the problem-solving tools we teach are often still rooted in very traditional business mindsets.

We help people get really good at getting the right answer, making decisions with logic instead of emotion, increasing efficiency of processes and using data to build confidence. These skills are valuable, but at the same time we need to recognize that many of the problems we're confronting require innovation mindsets. How do we tap into people's emotions with storytelling? Can we increase user empathy to create more customer centric solutions? How do we encourage exploration rather than, or in addition to, efficiency? How do we use prototypes to inspire confidence where there isn't data?

Innovation mindsets give us new tools for direct action. These tools can include skills like generative problem solving, design thinking, strategic foresight, prototyping, relationship building, communication and empathy. We can also use tools like analytics, machine learning and artificial intelligence to lead us in the right direction.

The third component of pressure we can affect is **volume**.

When it comes to volume, the skill we often turn to is time management. This is a trap.

What happens to people who get really good at time management? I've asked this question to hundreds of people in workshops and I always get the same answer: "they get more volume." Now, I'm not saying time management isn't important – but in most organizations, if you manage to open up a space on your calendar – it's highly likely someone is going to grab it.

And so, the antidote to volume is not necessarily time management, but to **pursue growth**. This means ensuring the volume of work we take on is helping us evolve in ways that matter to us. Ultimately, growth is what gives meaning to pressure. We can be handling the same load, but we'll experience that pressure very differently if we feel like we're getting better as a result of it rather than if we feel like it's just sitting on top of us.

ORGANIZATIONS IN THE AGE OF PRESSURE

If pressure is truly a defining aspect of modern organizational life, how can we weigh in as leaders of talent and stewards of learning? I believe there are three major things we can do:

First, build employee perspective-taking skills. Enhance their ability to see things in perspective and recognize the ups and downs that accompany daily life. When your people are able to keep in mind what's not at stake, they can ease the weight of pressure.

Second, teach skills for new kinds of direct action that are rooted in innovation mindsets. In many organizations, people are trying to tighten new nuts with old wrenches. Give people new, appropriate problem-solving tools for the challenges they face.

Third, equip leaders with coaching tools. When people are able to harness the growth-producing potential of pressure, we can transform high-pressure environments into growth-producing environments.

It's our firm belief that the organizations who will win in the future are those who are able to operate under pressure without losing their capacity to learn, be empathetic + creative, and question their biases. Learning to optimize the pressure equation can help you do just that.

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