



Four Things Effective Leaders Do Under Pressure

(That Fire-Fighting Leaders Ignore)

A People Acuity Leadership Report

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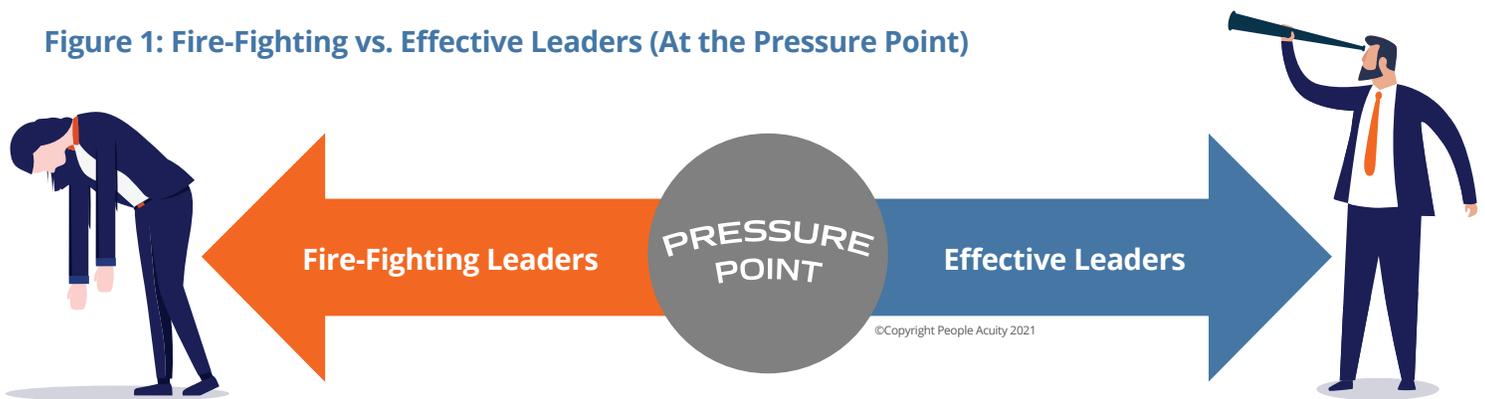


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If you're like most people, you wouldn't want the pressure of being a general in the midst of a heated battle, making life and death decisions. Yet, research tells us there is little difference between the feelings military leaders have under pressure and that of today's business leaders navigating our complicated fast-paced economic environment. Your decisions may not literally involve life and death, but the feelings you experience can keep you awake at night nonetheless, and leave you feeling weighted and overburdened.

There is a widening gap today between leaders who have learned how to harness pressure and use it as catalyst to increase effective execution, and those who are simply stuck in it. You can see these differences summarized in Figure 1 and the accompanying table shown below.

Figure 1: Fire-Fighting vs. Effective Leaders (At the Pressure Point)



Fire-Fighting Leaders	Effective Leaders
Create success by focusing on task progress Stay stuck in deficit-oriented (what's wrong) thinking Hold scarcity mindset about time (there's never enough) Go it alone – end up beaten down, drained, overwhelmed Use a frenetic, reactive approach to constant change Get stuck in blame, instability, finger-pointing Procrastinate, always working against impending deadlines Allow challenges to divide and confuse people Constantly driven by urgency; unaware of impact	Create success by creating the conditions that lead to it Leverage strengths & success patterns (what's right) Keep abundant view of time (enough to do the important) Delegate in win-win ways – to grow, lift, inspire others Filter changing needs against purposefully chosen priorities Use genuine curiosity and non-judgment when triggered Plan weekly and daily to re-prioritize what's important Seize adversity to bind people – turn it into a positive story Driven by what's important and creating a positive impact

As you can see, there is a Grand Canyon-like divide that separates leaders who effectively execute under pressure from those who become its victims. These leaders focus first and foremost on leading themselves, knowing they cannot positively influence others if they are caught in a negative swirl of frustration. Their self-leadership guides them to choose their responses carefully, guarding their own mental and physical energy as sacred, and taking responsibility to create their own conditions for success.

Fire-fighting leaders, on the other hand, are so caught up in the thick of thin things and responding to the newest urgency that they are often on edge, too rushed and too tired to pay attention to their impact. They get easily caught in expert-mode, telling people what to do, and rushing from one task to the next. Fire-fighting leaders find it hard to slow down and tune into the needs of anyone (including themselves), because pressure is driving them – and there is little thought ever given to leading themselves (or guiding others) wisely through it – not to mention finding a way to leverage pressure as a force for good.

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It doesn't occur to ineffective leaders that pressure can become a significant and positive accelerator if it is used to ignite, grow, and inspire others to stretch into their potential. For these leaders, it tends to bring out their worst, and leave them feeling disconnected and utterly alone. As you are beginning to notice, it is no small feat to develop the kind of self-leadership needed to become effective in responding to - and leveraging pressure - as a tool to grow, inspire, and ignite people.

Let's turn our attention to the things that help strong self-leaders make pressure their ally instead of their enemy - and turn it into a catalyst to accelerate effective execution. Notice which principle might help you best right now with the pressure you are facing - and, if honored, which might most help you inspire and guide others to execute more effectively.

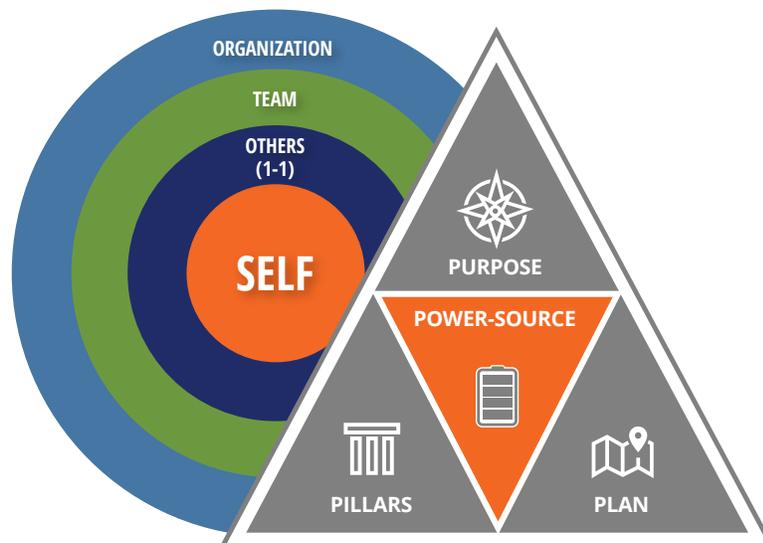
Making Pressure a Positive Execution Accelerator

Effective leaders use four guides to positively influence themselves and others under pressure, and to ensure that work can be executed more effectively and efficiently. If you were one of these effective self-leaders, you would consistently choose to:

- **Align with PURPOSE.** This involves being mindful of creating a clear, intentional positive impact on others in each moment and interaction - and remembering to always honor what truly matters most.
- **Prioritize work around key PILLARS.** This includes setting your pace through the creation of personal goals that have a clear line of sight to team and organizational objectives.
- **Follow a simple, focused PLAN.** This means organizing your work around your highest priorities, keeping them front and center, and moving them methodically forward.
- **Activate an inner POWER-SOURCE.** This involves creating conditions for your own success through leveraging your strengths as tools to help you meet your own unique needs, respond to your triggers, and help you deliver your best work.

These simple principles not only help you lead yourself during times of high pressure, but they also have a positive ripple effect that influences all four levels of leadership in an organization (*see Figure 2 below*). When you lead your Self to respond favorably to pressure, it creates hope and confidence in Others (1:1), supports stronger Team efforts, and strengthens Organizational outcomes. It creates a positive, synergistic, inside-out effect.

Figure 2: Principles Under Pressure - Creating Inside-Out Impact



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Let's examine each of these principles in turn and consider how they relate to your own self-leadership – and how they might in turn help you more effectively influence Others, Teams, and even your Organization.



PURPOSE

In a recent conversation between senior leaders from an Asian-based Global 1000 company, a philosophical leadership question was raised that stopped the group in its tracks: *“What is the difference between purpose and goals – and why does it even matter that we distinguish between them at a time when we are overwhelmed by so much to do?”*

Leaders looked at each other with blank stares on their faces as this important question seemed to dare them to find an answer. Finally, one courageous leader spoke up and shared a personal story to illustrate the answer that was beginning to emerge in his mind.

With a small catch in his voice, he began, *“Yesterday, one of our dear family friends died from COVID. I showed up to work today from my home office feeling deeply weighted by sorrow. But I told myself that I would use the pain to help me remember my purpose as a leader – to ignite courage in others, and to help them find their own inner strength to fight their battles and be successful. This purpose motivated me to show up more fully and to conscientiously choose how I would engage with others, even though I feel an added pressure today on top of an already heavy load. I feel my purpose lifting me and fueling my energy to achieve the goals I’ve set for myself today, rather than caving under the weight I feel.”*

You could have heard a pin drop. His story helped others think about the power of their own leadership purpose, especially in times of high pressure.

Part of the gift in purpose is its ability help you form a positive story that makes meaning out of any situation and turn it into a chance to make a legacy-creating impact. The story you tell about your purpose as a leader, why it matters, and what's important about it, turns the pressure and challenge into a source of motivation. It gives you a deeper, more passionate commitment to make the kind of difference that purpose-driven leaders always make.

Interestingly, you can use the gift of Purpose to re-define your story about pressure, the possibilities in it, and what opportunity it offers you – just as this insightful leader did.

You can find Purpose and redefine your negative story about pressure by answering two questions:

1. How do I want others to be different because they are going through pressure with me?
2. What is the gift, the opportunity available in the present situation and challenges?

Your answers to these questions will help you begin to find Purpose, including helping you define why you are doing what you do, and the deeper reason it matters for you to navigate your situation with grace. Purpose guides your way of being as you work toward the accomplishment of your objectives, and it connects you to your own passion.

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Pillars directly hold the weight – or the pressure – of a building and uphold its entire framework. Without pillars, the building would collapse. In a business, team, or individual life, the Pillars that support pressure and distribute its weight are the goals that direct and shape action.

Research suggests that there is an optimal number of Pillars or goals to have at any given time. Having too few will result in the absence of positive pressure that inspires you and others to action. Too many will overwhelm the system. The ideal number is somewhere between three and five – and for each major initiative beyond that, your effectiveness diminishes because you dilute your effort to the point that you can't accomplish any of them with excellence.

Olympian Noelle Pikus-Pace had a strategy for creating strong Pillars that worked so well it led her to five world medals, a world record, world-championship title, and a silver Olympic medal in one of the most daunting and dangerous sports - the skeleton. Her Pillar strategy includes four defining elements that helped her establish an effective *pace* in achieving her goals.

Build your goal Pillars in a way that will help you set and maintain your *pace*:

1. **Purpose.** Identify your bigger why and the motivation for your goal.
2. **Aim.** Set a specific objective, with its clear success measure(s), and timeline for accomplishment – and be sure your objective is aligned to your team's goal (to thus multiply energy, resources, and time).
3. **Construct.** Break the goal down to prioritized steps, complete with deadlines for each step.
4. **Everyday Action and Accountability.** Establish a daily routine and accountability practices with yourself and an accountability partner or team members.

As you build strong Pillars, particularly as you create clearly aligned personal goals in support of team goals, you will better distribute the heavy pressure you face and waste less time, energy, and resources. You will also have the quiet satisfaction of knowing that your goals are upholding the team Pillars and helping others have success along with you.

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You have likely proven by your own experience the old adage, “if you fail to plan, you plan to fail.” However, when you are under a barrage of incoming and constantly changing demands, it can feel like any Plan you put in motion is destroyed the second you try to execute on it. That is when you need to remember this valuable true story that happened nearly a half a century ago.

A worn out, stressed out CEO, who was sick and tired of failing to hit his goals, decided to approach a well-respected business consultant for help. He was desperately looking for a strategy to help him and the business get things done faster and more efficiently – and manage the overwhelming workload and exhaustion that seemed to weigh on everyone.

After listening for a long time to the weary CEO, the consultant finally offered one simple strategy to help the CEO with his day-to-day Plan. He said: *“For the next two weeks, start each day by writing down only the five most important things you need to do. Write them in order. Then, start at the top of the list and keep working until you have accomplished each of those five things. At the end of two weeks, you can decide what this idea is worth, and choose what you’ll pay me.”*

The CEO felt so beat up at the time that he was open to trying anything – and for the next two weeks he was diligent about carefully following the prescription he had been given. He kept a stack of index cards on his desk. Every morning, he took out a fresh 3 x 5 card and wrote his five most important priorities – and then started with number one and worked his way down the list. When interruptions came, as they often did, it was easy for him to remember where he left off and come quickly back to his highest priorities.

He was surprised at the impact of this tiny adjustment to his daily Plan and how significantly it shifted his energy and his outcomes. By the time he met with the consultant the next time, he felt almost human again! His face was not quite so heavy with worry. There was a feeling of lightness about him, and it was obvious that something was different.

After reciting his surprising success to the consultant, he then handed him a check for \$10,000 and told him that this was the single-most valuable leadership change of his entire career. In the coming days and weeks, he rallied everyone in the business to also honor this simple practice.

Today, that \$10,000 value would be equivalent to about \$60,000 – a fairly significant remuneration for such a seemingly simple idea that took so little time and effort to activate. You might even find it worthwhile if you were to give it a try. A tiny change to your daily Plan can make an enormous change in the way you respond to pressure and help you to stay focused on the most important priorities!

Create your daily Plan with this one simple idea:

1. Each day write down your top five most important things to accomplish in order of priority.
2. Work at them one by one in order.
3. When you get distracted – as soon as you’re able – come back and keep moving through your list.

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POWER SOURCE

Effective leaders are masters at tapping into an inner Power Source that is regenerative and creative. They know their own strengths and wisely use them to solve their problems, meet their own needs, and recover from moments of feeling drooping or negative. This also means understanding what fuels their energy and holding time with themselves as sacred so that they can recharge their own batteries. This is as important to them as their most urgent priority, knowing that when their energy becomes drained, their ability to keep producing is gone.

For some leaders, their sacred time is thinking time, a chance to be creative and think out-of-the-box about the challenges they are facing. For others, it is a physical workout, quiet meditative spiritual practices, or time with loved ones. Leaders pay attention to their own needs, and create their own conditions for success, rather than leaving that to chance, or wishing someone else would meet their needs for them.

The skill of being able to use your strengths effectively to ignite your performance and energy this way, especially under pressure, is one of the biggest indicators of strong self-leadership and is a predecessor to positively influencing others during times of high stress. After all, *"You can't lift others if you're not on higher ground!"* (Harold B. Lee). When you know how to do this, any pressure that you face can become flipped into positive pressure!

When pressure is high and you feel disconnected from your inner Power-Source, remember to STOP and come back to refueling your own energy, create your own conditions, and commit to do so on a regular basis.

To help yourself, ask yourself this question, *if there was just one thing that I could do regularly and consistently to boost my energy and performance, what would it be?* Hint: finding this answer is your first step to igniting performance and energy in yourself and others!

[Click here](#) to learn more about igniting performance and energy in yourself and others.

Notes: _____

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CONCLUSIONS

When a leader effectively aligns with Purpose, prioritizes work around key Pillars, follows a simple and focused Plan, and activates and maintains his/her inner Power Source, this has exponential positive results! It boosts morale for self and others. It creates confidence. It helps others to see new ways of responding to old pressures, without caving into old negative habits. It starts a positive ripple effect, even when pressure is high, and things appear to be overwhelming.

You can be this leader! You only need to answer a few questions for yourself – like:

- What is the difference I want to make in others' lives with each encounter?
- What are my most important Pillars (goals) – and how do they support our team Pillars?

Once you are clear and committed to these answers, you then simply make a small commitment to creating a daily Plan that focuses on your top five most important priorities (things that will move your key Pillars forward). Don't forget to include an energy recharge on your daily list!

The more you honor these self-leadership principles, the more power you will have to turn pressure into a positive, and to inspire effective execution – no matter what the circumstances! The more you apply these practices, the more likely you are to be among the great leaders who are creating a legacy-making impact every day.

Here's hoping you are one of them!

This leadership report has been written by **DeAnna Murphy** – the Chief Organizational Development Officer of **People Acuity** and principal author of *Shift Up! Strengths Strategies for Optimal Living and Choose to See You* – in collaboration with **Dr. Steve Jeffs**. DeAnna oversees all organizational development work for People Acuity its partners and clients and is a Top 100 Global Coaching Leader who has provided keynotes and leadership development experiences in 32 countries.

To learn more about online or virtual programs that might help your people ignite performance and energy, or build Self-Leadership, [click here](#).



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About People Acuity

People Acuity is a consulting firm specializing in cutting-edge research-based leadership development. We lift business performance by empowering leaders with crucial skills for this new economy.

Our programs are customizable, and we provide measurable behavior changes and a multi-modality learning approach; including virtual, live, and online learning supported by seasoned professional coaches.

As a global leadership development consulting firm, we empower leaders with critical game-changing skills needed today, like:

- Self-Leadership
- Proactive Accountability
- Coach-like Engagement
- Interdependent Collaboration
- Transformative Innovation

Through twenty years of research and organizational development experience, People Acuity has developed a **systematic set of offerings** and **tools** that deliver sustainable benefits with results that can be measured. The old one-and-done workshop methodology has been replaced with a multi-modality approach that can be customized according to your needs.

We offer services via:

- Self-directed **online learning** with application guides
- Live or virtual workshops
- Peer mastermind groups to ignite application and increase accountability
- Coaching for individuals, executives, and teams
- In-house facilitator and coach certifications.

You will quickly discover that People Acuity is committed to working closely with you to carefully align your learning experience with strategic business outcomes so as to optimize your return on investment.

Please visit our website www.peopleacuity.com
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