

# LEADING UNDER PRESSURE

## IMPROVING VS PROVING

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# INTRODUCTION

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While facilitating a team working session, one of the team members sputtered out a question to me that everyone in the room was thinking but afraid to say. This team had been through the wringer, with major regulatory changes, stronger community oversight, increasing turnover and hugely difficult negotiation challenges. Several members of the team had just been promoted, and all were being asked to perform at a higher level than previously in their career. To top it off, our working session was designed to help them prepare for a comprehensive software project that would touch every part of the firm. Just as they were coming out of one set of challenges, they were facing even bigger unknowns than ever before. The pressure was palpable.

In many ways, these were the “chosen” ones who had worked hard to be here. They had proven their abilities and been given the nod to take the organization into its future. From the outside looking in, you would have expected this to be a confident, capable group of people, who were excited to be playing at this new level. And they were.

But this pressure might be too great for their skills and everyone knew it – they just weren’t saying it.

The question in the back of everyone’s mind had many facets:

## **What if I can’t do it?**

I’ve been in countless conversations with clients who wonder this – and almost never voice it, even to me in the context of a coaching engagement. This question has probably caused more sleepless nights than having a teenager miss curfew.

## **What if this is a bridge too far for my skills?**

Code speak for fear of failure. Another way people see this is something like “I should have quit while I was ahead!”

## **Am I up to this job?**

Yes, I can do the job from a skills perspective. I have what it takes – and it will take a lot out of me to do it. At this stage of my career, who needs this s\$3t?

## **Do I even want this job?**

We are supposed to want promotions and more status and more money. It’s hard to look at someone who has made you the new VP of Special Wonderful Things and tell them – nope – give it to someone else.

Here’s the interesting thing – at least to me. The person who spoke the big question carefully worded it in corporate speak: “Lynn, what is your guidance for me in showing that I am prepared to handle my new responsibilities?”

If he knew what everyone else was thinking, he might have spoken up sooner. He might have even voiced the real questions in the room. He was definitely not alone. Everyone in the room started nodding their heads and they were very interested to hear ideas on how to prove themselves up to the challenge of their roles. They were relieved to be in a conversation that dealt with what was really going on rather than keeping up the façade.

When we try to prove ourselves, we worry incessantly about what people think. Our monkey mind starts chattering at us about whether we are good enough, worrying that people will see us for the frauds we are and all that nonsense about how we will be homeless next week if we don’t hurry up and prove we are worthy and awesome!

The coaching I gave them that day surprised everybody. What I said was something like this “Stop trying to prove yourself and start learning. Assume you don’t know everything and get very good at asking questions, being curious and checking out your assumptions. Allow yourself to not know. It

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will require you to be much more present to what is happening, you will have to listen more and worry less about what people think about you. You will have to build a set of inner tools that help you be less reactive and more creative. Learn to really know your value and what only you can bring to the table. In the end, you will be much more uncomfortable and you will be much more effective.”

I was describing skills that this team had – when the pressure was moderated. They just weren’t sure how to operate when so much was at stake.

Things are moving more quickly in the business world than ever. We have to learn to learn at a pace that makes our schooling look like a walk in the park.

**Learning is THE skill for the times we are living in and learning under pressure, while performing in context of doing your job is an absolute necessity in order to stay relevant. Work IS school.**

I have worked with hundreds of leaders in Corporate America over my 20 year coaching career. Whether they are trying to move on, move up, or move out, they all come face to face with the adage of “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” As the world moves ever faster, we have to grow with it or get left behind. We can be better tomorrow than we were today if we face the forces that are keeping us stuck and the same. Those forces are both external and internal. You can control and change some and others are like the weather. You just have to deal with it.

What I’ve found is this: People who operate from a proving mindset (Carol Dweck calls it a Fixed Mindset) keep writing the same story for their life over and over again. People who operate from an improving mindset (Growth Mindset) break free of their past and are able to truly reinvent themselves. As one client put it “I am finally able to operate as a free person who trusts my own judgment. It’s like I set my true spirit free.”

In the rest of this article, I’m going to outline the important distinctions between a proving mindset and an improving mindset, how we get conditioned to prove ourselves, why it makes a difference, especially in the face of pressure and what you can do about it.



# UNDERSTANDING THE PROVING MENTAL MODEL

The proving mindset puts the power in the hands of everyone else. **The improving mindset keeps the power in your hands.** We all operate with some of both mindsets, depending on the circumstances and the pressure you are facing. The more pressure you feel, the more likely you are to operate from a proving mindset.

For the team in the story above, at the very time they needed to be able to learn at the highest level was the time they were most likely to default into a proving mode that made them play small.

Our ways of dealing with pressure start forming from the time we are born. We learn from watching our parents and other family members, teachers, peers, and other authority figures. We learn from our experiences and how we handle what happens to us. As we are growing up, we are like little scientists, studying the world and deciding who we are and how we fit in it. This becomes our “conditioning”.

We document those discoveries in our bodies and our ways of being in the world. That conditioning becomes our patterns for dealing with the pressures of life. Feeling betrayed? You’ve got a pattern for that. Not getting what you want? You’ve got a pattern for that.

Some of our patterns are super useful. That instinct to hit the brakes when something rolls in front of your car? Useful. That instinct to hit someone that just took something you wanted away? Not so great, especially in corporate life.

Your early years as a little scientist established a huge repertoire of patterns that operate like automatic programs. They run in the background without any conscious thought or help from you – and they take energy, much like an app running in the background on your smartphone.

Think of your patterns like the buttons you push to start an app on your phone. Rather than having to open the screen and find the icon, your buttons get pushed by the situation. Here are examples of the types of things that happen that will “push your buttons” and cause you to operate from your conditioning (instead of from the actual situation in front of you):

- Not getting what you want
- Feeling betrayed
- Making a mistake
- Watching someone else be praised for something you did
- Getting embarrassed
- Feeling treated unfairly
- Getting “screwed” by a situation
- Wanting to please others
- Looking for approval
- Wanting to be right
- Fearing failure
- Feeling responsible for the fate of others
- Being told your work is not good

Your unconscious patterns run you, just as surely as if you were a robot running on the programming code of its inventor. Learning to operate creatively and consciously requires MUCH MORE than a simple decision to change.

# A MENTAL MODEL FOR GROWTH

If you operate with a mental model of “proving” yourself as worthy of your leadership role, it sets up a cascade of actions that can lead decreased effectiveness. If you operate with an “improving” mental model, it sets off a cascade of actions more likely to create effectiveness. Some examples of the differences includes:

Proving	Improving
Internal dialogue negative – beats self up	Internal dialogue positive – encourages self
Looks for approval	Seeks the inner feeling of accomplishment
Internally says “look at me”	Internally says “let me learn”
Wants attention	Wants effectiveness
Wonders “am I enough?”	Wonders “how can this be better?”
Creates stagnation	Leads to growth

“Picture your brain forming new connections as you meet the challenge and learn. Keep on going.”

- Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*

We all have some of both mental models operating at the same time. Depending on the situation, you can be in a learning mode or you may go into the proving mode. What I’ve found is that the higher the pressure, the more like you are to fall back on old strategies from the past and operate from a proving mode.



# THE PRESSURE GAP

The “pressure gap” is the difference between your ability to handle a situation and the pressure created by that situation. It’s not based on your visible skills, but points to something less tangible. I call it your **Invisible Tools**\* When pressure increases, we are more likely to need our Invisible Tools to bring forth our peak skills.

## \*Invisible Tools:

Invisible Tools refer to the mind/body/emotion tools that either help you bring forward your best performance under pressure. Not having these tools can hinder your ability to operate at your peak skills. They include a set of practices, self-awareness skills and trainings we use in our Pivot Point to Freedom Coaching that help you calm your mind, stay grounded, transform negative thoughts in to useful energy, discern the signal from the noise, feel your emotions without them running you, deal with surprises, stay in the moment and more. The higher level you develop your Invisible Tools, the more pressure you can handle.

Here’s an illustration you can test right now. Find a 20 foot span where you can walk comfortably on flat ground. Go ahead. Walk for 20 feet in a straight line. Now, reverse direction and walk the same span as if this were a 12 inch wide beam. You might have to put one foot in front of the other. Did you fall? Did you even feel wobbly? Probably not. The pressure created by the first task was really low – you handle that level of pressure all day long. The pressure created by the second task was also low, although slightly higher. Keeping your balance along a 12 inch beam is slightly more difficult than regular walking.

Now for the next task, you need to use your imagination. Imagine that you are going to walk across a balance beam, like the one gymnasts do flips on. Just imagine being able to walk across that. Chances are, the pressure created by the height of the beam will test your **Invisible Tools** if you really do it.

Personally, just imagining it can create the sensation of falling in my body. For me, my pressure gap begins as soon as the beam is far enough off the floor that falling might hurt.



For the final task, again, use your imagination. In this case, imagine that you are going to walk across a 12 inch beam (3 times wider than a balance beam) that is several hundred feet off the ground. We have already established that you have the skills to walk a 12 inch beam without falling over – so this is well within your skills. So envision yourself walking across that beam several hundred feet above the Earth. Everything on the ground is really tiny – you wouldn’t be able to recognize your own mother from this distance. You would be tempted to stare at your feet, even though that’s not how you normally walk. But remember, the beam is 12 inches wide! You have the skills to do this all day long. I’m going to take a wild guess here and say that you would love to have something to hang on to while up there. Or better yet, that you would like to be roped in. Or if you are like me, you might say to hell with it – never going there.



How can a task that we do so easily on the ground become so difficult even a few feet off the ground? Clearly, the guys in the picture don't seem to be struggling with it. They are responding to the pressure created by the situation to lay down and have lunch. Just because we have the skills doesn't mean we have the Invisible Tools to exercise those skills in any circumstances. **This is the pressure gap. We rarely talk about it, much less notice it. The pressure gap is the difference between the pressure of the situation and our ability to exercise the best of our skills under pressure.**



# THE PRESSURE GAP IN ACTION

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Pressure is created by a number of things. In this case, the height of the beam creates pressure, because the consequences of screwing it up are so dire. Any time the consequences are high, the pressure will go up.

We are all aware of the pressure created by giving a big speech, like a TED talk or other big moments in our lives. Different situations create different pressures, depending on your personal threshold. For some, it's easier to give a big speech than to tell someone that they are losing their job. For others, the thought of giving a speech is completely paralyzing. But how about the regular pressures that seem to be increasing by the day? For example, your job title hasn't changed, but the speed and complexity of it might have grown dramatically. It's as if your job is growing out from under you.

Or what if you have lost your job and have to go into the job market? You have bills to pay and a lifestyle to support. Or how about telling your brand new boss, the one you are not sure likes you, that you made a mistake? Much higher pressure than telling your best friend how you handled a mistake at work. That board presentation where you are delivering bad news? That co-worker than you need to confront for talking over you in meetings? That big decision that will establish the direction of your company for the next five years? All of these require you to use skills that you do all day long (talking and making decisions – how hard can it be?)

What makes it difficult is the pressure created by the situation. If your **Invisible Tools** are not up for that type of pressure, you have a gap between what is needed from you and what you are able to do.

That's why it's critical to build your Invisible Tools. As we have said before, making the shift from proving to improving doesn't just happen with a simple decision to change. In my experience working with clients, it takes much more.

## Why?

Because emotions lock the original programming into place. Until we access those emotions and then “rewrite” the program, we cannot change the pattern.





# CREATING THE IMPROVING MENTAL MODEL

There are a variety of methods to rewrite the old programs. All start with self awareness and intention. Some take just a few minutes and others may take a lifetime. In all cases, you begin to develop your Invisible Tools, like listening, hearing, problem solving, patience, synthesis, insight, attention, and so forth. These are the tools that separate the good from the great and are so much more than just mental skills. They are fully embodied when you learn them.

## Three Levels of “Buttons”

In order to understand the different methods building your Invisible Tools, you first need to understand the three levels of buttons:

- 1. Survival Mode:** Everyone has ingrained wiring on how to handle threat. With that kind of pressure, our automatic systems kick in and put us into Fight, Flight or Freeze. We did not create this programming – but we can definitely moderate its impact on our actions.
- 2. System/Context (AKA “Kid”) Mode:** Everyone has conditioning that is more or less common to all of us socialized in our education system and families. While there may be variances due to culture, we understand the difference between a parent and a child, a teacher and a student, and other places where we get our power from positioning. The context often decides how we handle the pressure. We learned this programming from the system in which we were raised and we can significantly moderate its impact on our actions.
- 3. History Mode:** Significant life experiences deeply establish your patterns for how you handle pressure and threat. The size of the experience is more or less irrelevant. The story you tell yourself about that experience in your younger years determines the way your pattern operates today. We created this programming through our “little scientist” method and until it is brought into awareness and altered, it likely runs you today. You can significantly moderate the impact of your life events if you are willing to do the work.

## Pivot Point to Freedom

We change the patterns by going to the root of it and then pivoting from the old story to the new choice. **We call this the “Pivot Point to Freedom.”**

Below is a partial list of methods to shift you from operating reactively to creatively, in order of effectiveness and permanence.

- Breathing methods
- Pocket questions
- Habit redirect
- Thought exercises/journaling exercises
- Practice
- Meditation
- Core transformation
- “Live” feedback with pattern interrupt

The most effective methods for truly rewriting patterns and increasing your ability to operate at ever-higher levels of pressure involve having a second party, like a teacher, coach, or therapist who can ask tough questions, hold up a mirror and guide you through the method of choice. Many of the above methods require the second person, and those you try yourself are often limited by the echo chamber of your mind.

In our coaching work at Creative Spirits Unleashed, we work with the methods that create the greatest change given the time and resources that can be dedicated to it.

For more information on learning to unleash your true spirit, operate with discomfort and grow your Invisible Tools, sign up for The Coaching Digest.

If you don’t have the patience to read dozens of articles and want to know more about closing your pressure gap and building your invisible tools, contact Lynn Carnes at [lynn@lynncarnes.com](mailto:lynn@lynncarnes.com) to set up a consultation.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I'm Lynn Carnes. My official title is Executive Coach, focusing deeply on leadership. My unofficial title is professional "Unleasher." After 20+ years in Corporate America, I decided to wrap my work around my life and started my own leadership consulting firm. I have worked with thousands of senior leaders across all types of industries. The leaders who work with me reclaim their lives while becoming a force to be reckoned with. In working with these leaders over the years, I've learned something very, very important: You can have a successful career AND a great life!

