



Thinking under **PRESSURE**

Dr Norman Chorn

THE CHALLENGE OF THINKING UNDER PRESSURE

Over the past years I've been working with several organisations to improve their resilience and ability to adapt to the unending change and challenge in their environment¹. Many have commented that this has led to high levels of activity and a resultant decrease in the time they have for thinking and reflecting. Action is, indeed, the enemy of thought!²

This has led me to reflect on the challenge of thinking and decision making under conditions of sustained pressure. How can we improve these skills in this fast-moving world of ours?

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN PRESSURE TURNS TO STRESS?

While *pressure* is caused by excessive demands being placed on you or your team to perform and deliver certain outcomes, *stress* is caused by an overwhelming concern that you are unable to deliver these outcomes due to a shortage of resources or skills. The anguish over this potential failure (real or imaginary) often results in excessive rumination and stress - a sensation that leaves you feeling as if you have already failed.

And the effects of stress are well known. They include a narrowing of focus, a slowdown in cognitive functioning, increased defensiveness and lower motivation. So, we want to reduce the overwhelm and prevent the pressure turning into stress. And we want to improve the quality of our thinking and decision-making in the process. How do we do this?

¹ See "Five signposts on the road to Corporate Resilience", <https://www.slideshare.net/normanhorn/signposts-on-the-road-to-corporate-resilience-2018>

² See "Action is the Enemy of Thought", <https://www.brainlinkgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Action-is-the-Enemy-of-Thought.pdf>

FIVE STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE THINKING UNDER PRESSURE

I have outlined five strategies to improve thinking under pressure. They are designed to:

- Improve the conditions under which you think
- Enhance your cognitive functioning
- Harness the range of thinking “processes” you have at your disposal
- Adopt a systems perspective of the problem
- Define the challenge correctly.

Slow down and avoid a concentration of power at the top	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unusual or ‘first time’ challenges needed to be treated differently to ‘BAU’ problems. Because these problems cannot be solved by using the old tried and tested habitual solutions, we need to create both time and space to reflect on the challenge - even when things are urgent! This allows many of the brain’s non-conscious processes to assist in deriving more creative and insightful approaches • In a team situation, avoid a concentration of power at the top. If necessary, remain quiet to allow the natural social learning processes to operate - people will ‘bounce’ off each other and create better solutions
Calm the brain by reframing the challenge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our brains can be calmed by reducing the sense of overwhelm in a situation. Much of this is achieved by the way we frame the challenge. There are several strategies to achieve this: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▸ Focus on the immediate task instead of the potential outcome ▸ Attend to the controllable factors - ignore the uncontrollable ▸ Chunk the problem down into bite-size pieces ▸ Name and label the problems - this reduces the sense of overwhelm ▸ Recognise that not everything is a ‘life-or-death’ situation - view the problem as a challenge to be overcome ▸ Think and remind yourselves of the previous successes you have had
Use both analysis and intuition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good thinking and decision-making relies both on analysis and intuition. Intuition is simply the non-conscious recognition of a pattern previously associated with success. You can rely on your intuition when: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▸ The ‘system’ in which you are operating is subject to regular patterns ▸ You have received good feedback in the past about your performance in that space ▸ You are not feeling depressed or stressed - you tend to ‘knee-jerk’ in those situations
Adopt a ‘mentalist’ position	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentalists approach the problem from a systems perspective. They view the players in the situation as characters in a movie or novel - and figure out their motives and desired outcomes. In this way, they work out the leverage points in the system - and these become the key to the solution
Develop both a strategy and a plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning is the final step in a strategy - a sequence of actions to solve the problem. A strategy involves two earlier stages, namely: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▸ A diagnosis of the situation from a systems perspective ▸ Agreement on the overall philosophy to be used in addressing the situation. Only then can the action plan be developed. • Developing the whole strategy ensures that you define the problem correctly.

BETTER THINKING UNDER PRESSURE

By purposefully shaping the conditions and understanding how to optimise your cognitive abilities, you can improve your overall thinking under pressure. Even when there is little time to do the thinking, these strategies will assist in lifting your performance.

And remember the 'golden rules' of ***eat, sleep and move*** for giving yourself the best chance of succeeding in pressurised situations:

- Eat a nutritious, balanced diet
- Sleep at least 7 hours per night (with a few hours before midnight)
- Move and take moderate exercise on a regular basis.



Dr Norman Chorn is a strategist and organisation development practitioner with the BrainLink Group. He uses principles of neuroscience to address the challenges of developing strategy in a complex and uncertain environment. His particular areas of focus are strategy in conditions of uncertainty; organisational and cultural alignment; and strategic leadership.

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