



## Performance Pressure:

### *Pressuring your team can backfire*

By Lou Solomon

Instilling fear of failure can tear down your team. Rather, communicating in a positive way that values people's expertise can inspire trust and increase productivity.

Years ago, I attended a radio group awards gala for excellence in ratings and revenue. Everyone in that ballroom had already achieved a high bar of performance and made a huge sacrifice just to have been invited to this event. But the seating chart didn't say that. The very best performers were seated in front of the room and the lesser best were seated in a graduated order toward the back, according to actual numbers. My team sat at the back of the room, the last of best.

The lights dimmed and the CEO, we'll call him Jim, stepped out into the spotlight. "If those of you in the back of the room want to move to the front row," he said, "you're about to learn from the true champions." He went on to say "Tonight we celebrate, but tomorrow we will ask more of you for the new fiscal year. We are a fast growth organization, and we won't concede to anything but fast growth at each of our properties."

Someone on my team grumbled, "I thought we were all champions," and another, "Wow, we get to celebrate for one night and then it's another year of working harder!" and I thought, "Jim, you're committed to fast growth for the shareholders—what's the commitment to this team?"

Scores of scenes like that one play out every hour at company all-staff meetings, retreats, awards galas, video conferences, and everywhere employees are gathered across the globe. Ironically the blow back on heavy handed pressure can move an organization backward in work that requires industry expertise.

A **Harvard study** shows that performance pressure acts as a double-edged sword for expert teams. Findings by Heidi K. Gardner revealed that even though motivated to perform, pressured teams are more likely to begin leaning on general or common knowledge to drive toward a goal, while discounting industry expertise, leading to mediocre performance. In other words, the more pressure an employee feels to meet the goal, the more he or she will play to survive versus using expertise to excel.

Even when leaders have to make tough decisions against crushing deadlines, they can prioritize intelligent, positive communication that values the expertise of people. What's important is not that we run faster and do more to keep up with the shifting wind of business, but that we become intentional about communication.

What if Jim had talked about the giftedness in every individual in the room and demonstrated to us that he really got it?

He might have made us all feel included in the celebration. If he had expressed his deep gratitude, he might have instilled trust. Instead of making us feel a sense of dread, he might have given us a vote of confidence to lean into our greatness for not only the company, but ourselves and one another. Instead, he made some of those hard-working people fearful that while they might be good, but not quite good enough. We lost one of our best people a week later.

High-pressure work environments, rapidly approaching deadlines, and a fast-paced world translate into stress for most people. When an individual becomes overstressed, energy that would otherwise be used for achievement is shifted to manage stress. Perhaps the most effective strategy is shifting from a pessimistic to an optimistic point of view. **Research** has found that maintaining a positive outlook on life is one of the most effective ways to manage stress.

Before you apply performance pressure at the next company event, here are 5 points for reflection:

1. Give careful thought to what you can do to bring authentic, positive value to people.
2. Tell a relevant personal story and share what your life has taught you.
3. Let people know you understand and appreciate their contribution (and make sure you do).
4. Activate the best ideas and inspiration within people by giving voice to your own true passion for the future.

5. Articulate a bigger picture and more meaningful purpose than the work alone.

When it's time to inspire greatness in your organization, say something real. By replacing fearful, lackluster words with positive reinforcement, you can build trust and boost performance.



Lou Solomon is an author, TEDx speaker and founder of Interact, a communications company that helps Fortune 500 CEOs, business leaders, managers, entrepreneurs and their teams to make connections, earn trust and build influence.