

Leadership Under Pressure

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Abstract

Leaders are facing unprecedented levels of pressure due to high-performance expectations despite facing extraordinary internal and external uncertainty. When the pressure gets too much, it needs to disperse. When a leader is reactive, this can lead to explosion or implosion to relieve the pressure. In an explosion, the energy moves from the centre outward until a sudden burst occurs, which in the context of leadership can lead to an aggressive fight response. In an implosion, energy moves from the outside into itself, resulting in a crushing collapse, which in the context of leadership can lead to a withdrawing flight or freeze response. Diffusion is an adaptive alternative to pressure dispersion without the destructive consequences of an explosion or implosion. In the context of leadership, utilizing emotional intelligence as the foundation for diffusive pressure dispersion creates pro-active and effective leadership pressure management, resulting in adaptive outcomes for both the leader and their organization.

1. Introduction

Modern-day leadership is complex. Leaders feel the pressure, and often carry it silently, often alone (Rook et al., 2016; Thompson, 2010). This struggle stays invisible, until the moment when the pressure gets too much and what's going on beneath the surface becomes visible through a pressure release, often in an explosive or collapsing manner.

Leading means 'to go' and 'to guide' (Etymonline, n.d.). In the words of leadership expert John C. Maxwell, 'a leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way' (Maxwell, 2015). Meta studies and literature reviews exploring multifaceted definitions of leadership (Bugaj and Sulyma, 2022; Winston and Patterson, 2006) suggest that defining leadership is highly complex, which further supports the premise of the challenges and pressure that leaders face.

We cannot forget that every leader is a person, with core beliefs, emotions and thoughts that shape their decisions and behaviours (Beck and Beck, 2020). When the pressure gets too much, and the stakes are high, leadership explosion or implosion can have irreversible consequences, therefore safely diffusing the pressure is paramount.

2. Leadership Pressure

Volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity are key contributors to leadership pressure (Syamsir et al., 2025). Adaptive performance is expected and required (Junça-Silva and Caetano, 2024), all while only 18% of leaders score high in stress tolerance (SuccessFinder, 2025).

2.1. Types of Pressure

Leaders face various types of pressure. Examples of pressure on leaders are displayed in the grid below (Table 1). It is not meant to be an all-inclusive list of all pressures on leaders, as that would far exceed the scope of this paper.

Table 1: Examples of Leadership Pressure (Akindele, 2024; Dannheim et al., 2023; Razinskas and Hoegl, 2019)

Internal Pressure	Out of Leader's Control Pressure
External Pressure	In Leader's Control Pressure
Capability Pressure	Relational Pressure
Capacity Pressure	Organizational Pressure
Professional Pressure	Pressure from things going in a leader's life outside of the work and professional environment

The practical reality is that these categories overlap, can occur concurrently and vary in intensity and what is at stake. For example, a leader may face external, out-of-their control supply chain pressure while simultaneously also struggling with internal anxiety about their next high-stakes meeting.

A certain amount of pressure can be positive, motivating and spur on greater performance. Stress response to stimuli operate on a continuum, which ranges from adaptive, where it can aid and build stress coping capabilities to maladaptive, where it leads to both diminishing leadership performance, as well as 'consequences at the structural, cellular and physiological level' of the leader (Suri and Vaidya, 2015).

3. When Pressure Gets Too Much

While a single type of stress stimulus may be easily absorbed by a high-performing leader, ongoing and/or recurring stress stimuli can heighten stress beyond the levels of leadership pressure that can be tolerated

without necessary pressure release, which often manifests in undesirable and destructive leadership action unless counter-action is taken to address potential leadership derailment (Akindele, 2024).

3.1. Types of Pressure Release

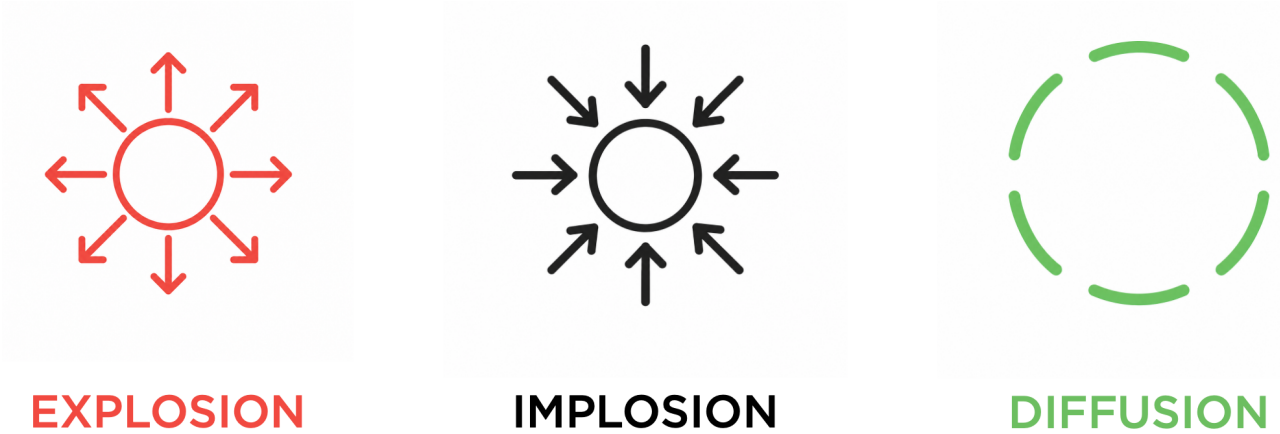


Figure 1: Leadership Pressure - When it Gets Too Much – Pressure Release Model (Krieger, 2026a)

3.1.1. Explosion

An explosion is marked by the direction of energy moving from the inside towards the outside. The pressure builds up inside until the capacity is exceeded, resulting in a sudden burst. The process is typically loud, and can be startling to everyone experiencing it as the pressure build-up may not have been visible outwardly prior to the explosion (Keller et al., 2014).

In the context of leadership, the explosion is reactive, triggering an acute ‘fight’ stress response in the leader.

A leader dispersing pressure this way will appear aggressive. This can lead to broken relationships, impulsive decisions, ultimately leading to toxic culture and employee disengagement in the organization.

Table 2: Pressure Dispersion: Explosion - Internal State & External Behaviours (Ekman, 2007; Krieger, 2026; Lige, n.d.)

Internal State (Feelings/Thoughts)	Fear/Trust	External “Explosive” Behaviours
Anxiety Anger Blame	Fear > Trust	Control Impulsivity Aggression Dramatizing

Because there may not have been warning signs that a leadership explosion would occur, or acknowledgement of the warning signs may have been avoided, those in the path of the explosion may not only feel hurt but also surprised. As a result, their feelings, thoughts and behaviours may be altered going forward, and may present similar to a ‘fawning’ stress response, where a person alters their behaviour towards people-pleasing, hypervigilance, and self-abandonment to fear-based pleasing because of a perceived threat, in this case the leader (Owca, 2020). A leader prone to explosive pressure dispersion patterns may misunderstand that fawning behaviour as successful outcomes of their leadership as it may make them feel validated in their actions (Bailey et al., 2023), while in reality it destroys trust and initiative.

3.1.2. Implosion

Just as an explosion is a dispersion of pressure, so is an implosion. An implosion is marked by the direction of energy moving from the outside into itself. The external pressure builds up until the capacity is exceeded, resulting in an inward directed destruction in form of a crushing collapse. An implosion typically causes less surrounding damage than an explosion (Farhat et al., 2013).

As damaging as leadership explosion can be, leadership implosion can be just as destructive as it is also reactive, triggering an acute ‘flight and/or freeze’ stress response in the leader.

A leader dispersing pressure this way will appear withdrawn. This can lead to burnout, lack of direction, and loss of critical decision making in the organization.

Table 3: Pressure Dispersion: Implosion - Internal State & External Behaviours (Ekman, 2007; Krieger, 2026; Lige, n.d.)

Internal State (Feelings/Thoughts)	Fear/Trust	External “Implosive” Behaviours
Anxiety Guilt Shame Hopelessness	Fear > Trust	Avoidance Hypervigilance Irritability Resentment

When pressure is dispersed through implosion, it can seem unexpected to those around the leader. A leader prone to implosion often keeps it all together for those around them until that is just not possible anymore. Hopelessness, like hope, is contagious and can affect those around the leader through loss of motivation, direction and drive to execute (Tang et al., 2021). This can further contribute to the leader’s feelings of shame and guilt.

3.1.3. Diffusion

Leaders who ‘blow up’ or ‘collapse’ under pressure are not bad leaders, nor do they have not enough capacity for pressure. There is simply too much pressure, and something must give. Leadership explosions and implosions can vary in intensity, the challenge is if everything goes back to how it was before, the pressure will build again, and the cycle will repeat.

Therefore, a more effective pressure release is required for leaders to sustainably perform in ways conducive to both the leader’s and the organization’s health (Brown et al., 2005).

Diffusion is a healthier, and more effective, alternative. When pressure is diffused, it can disperse without the destructive consequences of an explosion or implosion. Furthermore, when a diffusion process is set up, it can be designed to allow for continuous release of pressure as needed.

Pressure diffusion in the context of leadership creates not only an adaptive shift in the leader, but also a ripple effect in the organizational culture.

Grounded in the principles of emotional intelligence, its four capacities of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management are the foundation for pressure dispersion and can raise hope for a better future, both for the organization and the leader (Goleman, 2020; Lopez, 2014). This pro-active approach focuses on responding vs. reacting, which allows a leader to engage in personal responsibility and built stress resilience (Lige, 2025).

Table 4: : Pressure Dispersion: Diffusion - Internal State & External Behaviours (Ekman, 2007; Krieger, 2026; Lige, n.d.)

Internal State (Feelings/Thoughts)	Fear/Trust	External “Diffusing” Behaviours
Hope Courage Empathy Curiosity	Trust > Fear	Pause between Stimulus & Response Realistic Goal Setting, Acknowledgement of Obstacles, Adjustments Honest Communication Vulnerability

Pressure dispersion through diffusion does not imply that pressure does not build as it is an expected part of a leader’s reality. Responsibly, uncertainty, decision making, and human interaction are high stakes in a leadership position, and pressure diffusion allows a leader to navigate all of it with sustainably adaptive outcomes.

4. The Principles of Emotional Intelligence

When a leader has a reactive background, growing emotional intelligence capabilities can seem as a 'threat' to a leader's way of being, therefore it is imperative to understand that growing and practicing emotional intelligence capabilities requires openness and willingness (Koerner et al., 2015).

4.1. Self-Awareness

Humans have the meta-cognitive ability to observe their own emotions and thoughts (Lai, 2011). Self-awareness, like all domains of emotional intelligence, is something that a leader can get better at with guidance and practice. Self-awareness is the foundational skill for personal change (Lige, 2025), and in itself already has the capacity to lower reactivity (Herwig et al., 2010).

4.2. Self-Management

Within self-management is a leader's choice to be reactive or pro-active in response to the pressure they experience (Lige, 2025). The ability to pause between stimulus and response is the basis for learning how not to be emotionally hijacked (ibid), which can lead to flight, fight or freeze responses that are indicative of the explosion and implosion pressure dispersion.

4.3. Social Awareness

While internal stimuli contribute to leadership pressure, a significant part of leadership involves external stimuli and interactions. Therefore, being able to recognize and understand others' emotions is just as important as self-awareness. Meeting others with empathy and curiosity instead of judgement allows a leader to both intellectually and emotionally understand others around them (Salovey et al., 2003).

4.4. Relationship Management

Human interaction is not controlled by one person, and in leadership this human interaction can often include a power imbalance, which must also be taken into consideration (Luft, 1969).

While in an explosive dispersion of leadership pressure relationship management can include expressions of aggressive dominance and in an implosive dispersion can include expressions of self-sacrificing resentment, in a diffusive dispersion the interaction offers an opportunity for openness, vulnerability, and honesty, and can lead to mutual understanding and increased resilience in everyone involved in the interaction.

5. Raising Hope

Leadership is marked by uncertainty, both internal and external. Hope doesn't pretend the pressure does not exist, but offers an invitation to believe that the future can be better than the past, and a path to making it so (Lopez, 2014). Hope isn't just a dream or a wish, instead it is rooted in a practical, scientific framework contributing to the ongoing diffusion of pressure.

5.1. The Science of Hope

Hope offers a way to lead differently, acknowledging the pressure while utilizing the hope framework of goals, pathways and agency (Snyder, 2000).

Table 5: Hope Theory in Practice. (Gallagher and Lopez, 2018; Gwinn and Hellman, 2018; Lige, 2025; Snyder, 2000).

Goals	Pathways	Agency
The Direction	The Way	The Belief
Goals create clarity of desired outcomes.	Pathways thinking supports the pursuit of the set goals.	Agency is the trust in the ability to walk the right paths to reach the desired destination.
A goal exists on a continuum of both uncertainty and attainability. Realistic goals allow for management of both.	The path to a goal is not always a straight line, adding to leadership pressure. Hope-based leadership utilizes pathways thinking to be flexible when there are obstacles in the way of reaching goals, and explore alternate pathways as needed.	Agency is the motivational aspect of hope, allowing for forward movement. Agency focuses a leader's internal strengths on believing in themselves and those they lead.
"I have clear direction"	"I am determined"	"I can do this"

Hope can help leaders to embrace 'dignity in moving ahead, whatever the challenge' (Lopez, 2014:128).

6. Closing Thoughts

We need leaders to go the way and show the way, to stay the course when the pressure rises and the stakes are high. But we need to give them the tools to succeed.

High performance under pressure relies on learned strategies and practice when the stakes are low. When dispersion of pressure is necessary, diffusion becomes a conscious choice instead of an explosive or implosive reaction.

The cost of getting this wrong goes beyond dollars and cents on the balance sheet. Organizational viability, individual leadership performance and team outcomes are on the line. Because an organization is only as strong as the sum of the people contributing to it.

Leadership requires both head and heart, and when we equip our leaders to not only execute cognitively at high levels but also give them the tools to adaptively manage their emotions, the outcomes are resilient and high-performing leaders and organizations.

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