

SKIP LEVEL

strategic leadership for leaders ready to think two levels up

EPISODE 129 · WORKSHEET

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Steadiness, Not Dread

Emma Walmsley, who led GSK for nearly nine years and now takes over at HP, says there are few things more obnoxious in life than CEOs complaining about how hard their life is. Maya and Marcus take her line seriously: pressure has three places it can go, steadiness is not silence, and the work is processing pressure in the right room before you bring your team a decision, not your dread — with four steps for this week.

KEY STRATEGIES & IDEAS

1. Pressure Has Three Places to Go

Pressure has three places it can go. Down onto your team as worry they did not ask for. Out as a complaint, a story about how hard your life is. Or through you, coming out the other side as a decision. Leaders who perform their pressure make their team carry it twice — once as the work itself, and once as the anxiety about the work.

2. Steadiness Is Not Silence

Silence says, I am hiding something. Complaining says, feel sorry for me. Steadiness says something different: here is what is true, here is what we do not know yet, and here is what happens next. Your team does not need you to have no pressure. They need you to have processed it before you bring it to them.

3. Stress Intelligence

Jon Miller and Drew Keller, writing in Harvard Business Review, report that more than half of four hundred senior leaders surveyed were very stressed, at levels higher than the pandemic peak. Their point: leaders under stress fall into default patterns, and the skill is what they call stress intelligence — noticing your own pattern and deliberately shifting it. Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman found that people in a high-stakes situation quickly judge it as a threat or an opportunity; James Gross showed the difference between reappraising what you feel and just holding it in.

4. Absorb It Does Not Mean Swallow It Alone

Michael Watkins, author of The First 90 Days, says leaders too often try to absorb all the anxiety themselves, and that is becoming less tenable as the pace and size of decisions grow. His answer is not to complain louder. It is to build processes that let the organization respond, and to talk about uncertainty and fear as a team, so nobody carries it alone. Complain in private to a peer who can help you think. Decide in public with a clear next step. The sequence matters.

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5. Your Remarks Land as Direction

A complaint from the top does not stay a complaint. It becomes permission for everyone below you to complain, and evidence that the situation is hopeless. Your team will copy your posture toward pressure long before they copy your strategy for it.

The picture: a leader walking into a division review after a bad quarter. If the leader opens with how brutal the quarter has been, the room hears two messages: the numbers are bad, and the leader needs comforting. If the leader opens with what happens next, the room hears one message: here is the problem, and here is the plan. Same quarter, same numbers, completely different room.

ACTION & REFLECTION STEPS

- [ ] **Step one — name the pressure privately first.** Before you walk into the hard situation, write down three things on your own. Get the swirl out of your head and down on paper, where you can look at it instead of performing it.

What is actually true?

What is still unknown?

What is yours to decide?

- [ ] **Step two — separate the complaint from the constraint.** Read back what you just wrote, and cross out every sentence that is asking for sympathy. Keep every sentence that is asking for a decision, or for help with something specific. Keep the first kind for a private conversation with a peer. The second kind is what your team actually needs to hear.

The complaint I am keeping private:

The constraint my team needs to hear:

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- [ ] **Step three — bring the room a decision, not your dread.** Make your first sentence about what happens next. Make your second sentence about what you need from the people in the room. People can follow a next step through a hard situation. A feeling gives them nothing to follow.

My first sentence (what happens next):

My second sentence (what I need from the room):

- [ ] **Step four — build one pressure valve outside the room.** One peer you can be honest with, one process that catches problems early, one habit that keeps you steady when the week gets long. Steadiness cannot run on willpower alone. If your only valve is your team, your team becomes your valve, and that is just complaining with better manners.

One peer I can be honest with:

One process that catches problems early:

One habit that keeps me steady:

Think two levels up. — Maya & Marcus

Joe Dutkiewicz

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