



# LEADING WITH BUOYANCY

IN TIMES OF CRISIS  
AND DISRUPTION

PERFORMANCE FRONTIERS:  
Dr Martin Challis &  
Jocelyn Hannasmith



# LEADING WITH BUOYANCY

IN TIMES OF CRISIS  
AND DISRUPTION

Everyday, it seems we are confronted with new and unprecedented challenges.

Our country was still raw from the devastation of the Australian bushfires when COVID-19 hit. As this health crisis unfolds and threatens many of the people, systems and rituals we hold dear, it's hard not to feel at a loss, uncertain of where to turn or what to do, and perhaps even a growing sense of dread or panic.

It's these feelings of unsafety and instability, not a lack of supplies, that are driving crowds in droves to strip supermarket aisles bare.

As leaders, we set the bar for how our people and cultures respond in these times of crisis and disruption. We light the way, support and empower them to thrive. This can feel like a heavy load to bear, and it may seem like the pressure is mounting.

How do we help our people weather the storms of crises, and navigate this new landscape of unknowns? How do we lead while keeping our “heads above water” ourselves, and adapt, understanding that disruption is the new normal?

One answer lies in practising buoyancy.

## PRACTISING BUOYANCY

Buoyancy is our ability to stay afloat, resurface, and right ourselves in any situation; to have a sense of grounded optimism and move with the changing tides, instead of struggling against them or being dragged down by the swell.

Acting with buoyancy requires us to acknowledge what is happening in such a way that each situation is understood and being met for what it is: not catastrophised, and not underplayed. To be buoyant is to accept the present reality, see hope in the future, take responsibility for your part in bringing this to life, and adjust and navigate as needed.

“Seeing things for what they are” is arguably one of the most helpful ways to develop buoyancy. And yet, in time of crisis and disruption, our eyes are often clouded by heightened emotion. When we are stressed, we experience what we call a “threat” state, which activates our ‘flight, fight or freeze’ response, and shuts down deep levels of thinking — the kind of thinking we need in order to problem-solve and find ways forward.

To open ourselves to clearer thinking and to lead with greater levels of buoyancy, we can practise mindfulness. One way to do this is to apply Performance Frontiers’ **Catch Call Choose™** tool.



## CATCH

Our first challenge is to “**catch**” ourselves — to recognise the reactive response that we wish to change. In this case, we are catching our response to stress/disruption that may be preventing us from leading with buoyancy.

A reactive response can take many forms. Perhaps you feel a sense of panic and you start making rash decisions or avoid them altogether, maybe you snap at those around you, or you try to control every last detail to re-gain a sense of stability.

An emotional reaction often occurs outside a level of consciousness. It happens quickly and “hi-jacks” us, if we let it. To catch yourself, it’s important to understand common triggers, recognise what your default response to stress is, and to catch it before it catches you out.

### Ask yourself:

- What are some patterns of behaviour that do not serve me or my team in times of crisis?
- How can I recognise and catch these before they impact me or others?
- What are my triggers?

## CALL

Once we catch our response, we **call** it for what it is. So we can label or name it, it’s helpful to understand what’s driving this response.

Behaviours and emotional reactions are just what we see on the surface. What sits beneath are beliefs, patterns of thought or stories we tell ourselves. For example: You might be thinking “We’re going to lose everything”, “It’s all up to me”, “There’s not enough for everyone”, “I have no idea what to do.” In a threat state, we often think in these ways: limiting, pessimistic, closed, and problem-focused. Naming your response for what it is — threat-driven — opens the way for expansive, optimistic, solutions-focused thinking that support greater levels of buoyancy.

For example, you might say to yourself:

“I’m doing that thing where I avoid making decisions [response].”

This is my threat response when I am feeling uncertain of what to do next, which is being triggered by the COVID-19 disruption [labelling it].”

### Ask yourself:

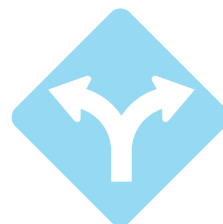
- What are the destructive stories I am telling myself about this situation?
- How will I call this response for what it is?



**Catch**  
yourself doing that  
thing you do...



**Call**  
it for what it is. Give it a  
name. Label it...



**Choose**  
a different  
response...



## CHOOSE

Once we have caught and called our reaction, we can **choose** a more buoyant response. There are a few strategies to choose from:

1) First, you might reframe your thought patterns and consider the situation from a more expansive perspective. For example, you might flip:

- From a *problem-focus*, “I just don’t know what to do,” to an *opportunity-focus*, “What possibilities might this open up?”
- From an *ego* perspective, “Everyone for themselves,” to an *eco* perspective, “How can I best support those around me?”
- From a mindset of *scarcity*, “There’s just not enough to go around,” to a mindset of *abundance*, “How can we ensure those who need help are able to gain access?”

2) Another strategy involves pausing and applying the “Vagal Brake”. The Vagus Nerve is the longest nerve in our bodies; a networked system connecting most of the major organs between the brain and colon. It has been described as a mediator between our brains and our bodies. Activating it can act as a type of brake that halts the “fight, flight or freeze” response. Breathing is key to activating the Vagal Brake, in particular, deep exhalation. Our Vagus Nerve essentially “listens” to our breathing, and sends signals to our brains and hearts to react according to our breath.

To train our Vagal Brake, [Dr Sven Hansen](#) from the Resilience Institute suggests the following:

- A. Lengthen your spine – sit light and long
- B. Inhale gently and bring your attention to your belly
- C. Breathe out long and slow with a slight pause (5 secs or more)
- D. Inhale low and slow (3 secs)
- E. Refocus on your intention.

3) Lastly, make a commitment to a constructive response. If you know your trigger, understand your common reaction and the cause for it, you can plan a few alternative strategies ahead of time. For example, if you know stress or uncertainty will trigger you to micro-manage others due a need for certainty, make a commitment to try a more collaborative or enabling approach to leadership.

You might commit to proactively invite others in your team to step up and lead for the day, make a more conscious effort to hear all the voices in the room, or commit to asking others what they need from you before offering support.

Buoyancy matters in our Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) world. In times of crisis and disruption, tools like **Catch Call Choose™** can help us respond with greater levels of buoyancy. With buoyancy practice, over time, we become more robust and resilient. No matter the situation, circumstance or setback, we’re able to bounce back and return to our natural state: one that is open to learn from experience, receptive to changing circumstances, course corrects with ease and navigates constructively through challenges.

Authors: Dr Martin Challis & Jocelyn Hannasmith





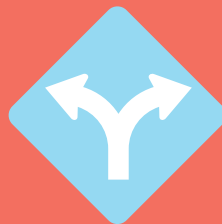
### **Catch**

yourself doing  
that thing you  
do...



### **Call**

it for what it is.  
Give it a name.  
Label it...



### **Choose**

a different  
response...



#### **BRISBANE**

STUDIO 1, 4 Lambert Road,  
Indooroopilly, QLD. Australia. 4068

[P] +61 7 3870 8433

[F] +61 7 3870 9822

info@performancefrontiers.com  
performancefrontiers.com



Please read on screen to save paper,  
but if you must print, please print  
only the pages you need.