

# Leading Under Pressure to Avoid Threat Rigidity

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Image by MidJourney

*“Every leader is at a different level for their window of tolerance for things like change, pressure, stress, complexity and uncertainty... When they get thrown outside their window of tolerance, that’s when their executive functioning goes out the window. And they are now driven by their emotions, which are largely dictating how they think and process at an unconscious level.”* Professor Ryan Gottfredson

Deadlines are looming, there are quotas to fill, customers to please, and KPI’s to meet. In short, there’s stress. You know you’re a good leader because you make time for your team,

you listen well, and you allow yourself some vulnerability.

But when the pressure is on, you tend to develop tunnel vision and find it hard to connect to the bigger picture. You go from an expansive mindset, to prioritising short-term or tangible goals, and avoiding risks. In extreme cases, you (and/or your organisation) might develop what is known as **“threat rigidity”** and become more conservative and focused on a narrow set of existing practices.

So, what happens to us when this switch occurs and how can we be alert to it, to avoid having our other leadership attributes hijacked?

## Decision-making Environments

Decision-making in the best of times allows space for us to be innovative and adaptive, but once we are submitted to pressure and change, our response can be rather more maladaptive. Leadership professor Dr Ryan Gottfredson, describes it this way:

“So many executives are faced with circumstances where the complexity of their world exceeds their ability to navigate that complexity. And that is a really tricky situation and when that occurs, the threat rigidity kicks in. Because now I need to figure out a way to control this environment that feels out of control for me.”

In 2023, when the Lyft CEO revoked the work from home policy and ordered his employees back to work, the decision to do this was reported as being related to rebuilding a stronger work culture. But additional context revealed that a recent major restructuring had meant laying off over a thousand people. Organisational psychology experts believed the Lyft CEO was trying to feel more in control and had gone into threat rigidity.

Similar stories have surfaced about the CEO of technology firm

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who, having had a work from home policy, recently ordered his staff back into the office, stating “You have misinterpreted my kindness for weakness.” These leaders are seen to be clinging to control in a known area, to compensate for uncertainty in others.

## Factors Inducing Threat Rigidity

Threat rigidity can come from both internal and external factors, including:

### Our Cognitive Biases:

- **Fear of loss** – Fear of losing what we already have, such as our market share, makes leaders avoid expansive or innovative thinking.
- **Hyper-focus on Metrics** – A tendency to over-index on measurable outcomes (e.g., financial KPIs) during uncertainty.

### Stress and Pressure:

- High-stress levels reduce our cognitive bandwidth and can result in leaders focusing on immediate tasks at the expense of long-term opportunities.
- Time constraints can create a sense of urgency that changes priorities.

### Market or Economic Volatility:

- When leaders face uncertainty or ambiguity, they can feel compelled to “play it safe,” which discourages any risk taking or innovation

### Organisational Culture:

- Cultures that overly prioritise financial outcomes or penalise mistakes often heighten this tendency.

## Leadership Behaviour:

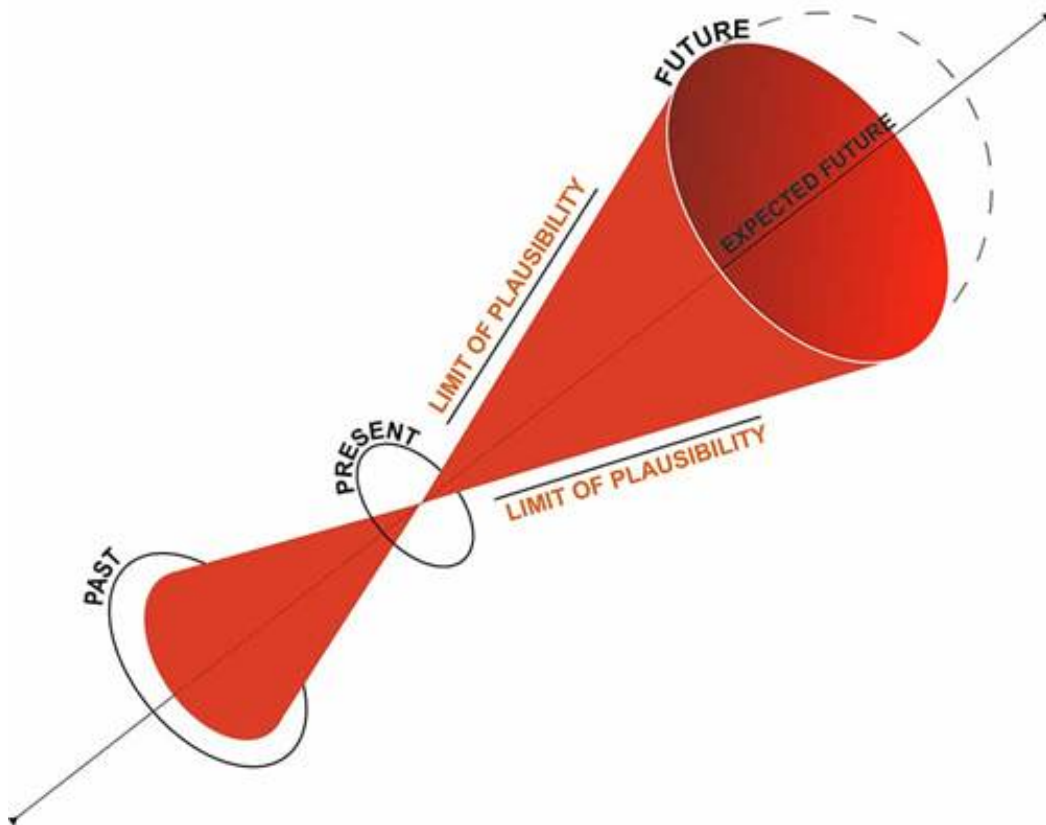
- Command-and-control or risk-averse leadership can stifle creativity and encourage a narrow focus.

But not all the news is bad. This kind of rigid hyperfocus can have positive consequences when we're after quick wins and risk mitigation. However, being aware of our responses and checking in on ourselves and our actions can circumvent our threat response kicking in automatically and will ensure we're making a choice.

## Sidestepping Threat Rigidity

Proactive ways we can prevent threat rigidity taking over, though, relate to our leadership mindset and practice. For instance,

- **Encouraging Psychological Safety** – Ensuring teams feel safe to propose ideas and feelings, even while under pressure. For example, when employees are pulled back into the office after having had flexible work conditions, have you had a conversation with them about the change, or have you simply issued a directive? Have they felt confident to give feedback or push back?
- **Leadership Self-Awareness** – What kind of self-awareness work are your leaders doing on an ongoing basis? What leadership development opportunities are you providing for them to learn and grow regarding their hidden biases and blind spots, and their ability to hold conflicting truths?
- **Futures Thinking** – Scenario planning for the future once you are already in threat and scarcity is too late. So, how are you building *futures thinking* into your organisational DNA, so you are not blindsided?



*Credit: Policy Horizons Canada*

- **Investing in Resilience** – This can mean a spectrum of actions: from increasing collaboration for mutual support, to building your teams' capacity to think expansively. All these factors will relieve pressure when you're rushed.
- **Dealing in Transparency** – as leaders your messaging needs to match the reality. Respect your teams, share how you are thinking and feeling to build trust, and be transparent around context and transpiring events.

It can be challenging to balance immediate operational pragmatism and strategic leadership, especially during volatile times. This dual focus is a learned skill that can be sharpened by intentionally seeking balance. We now know that when recognising and actively addressing the tendency to fall into a pattern of threat rigidity, self-awareness is key to keeping that

balance and thriving under pressure.

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