The Energy Project®

CASE STUDY · LEADING UNDER PRESSURE

Building Self-Awareness to Fuel Steadier Leadership

How senior leaders find stability when the demands of the role keep expanding.

THE SNAPSHOT

INDUSTRIES	Various
WHO	Chief executives and board chairs
THE BLOCK	Demands outgrowing experience
THE FOCUS	Self-awareness, composure, and trust

THE CONTEXT

When experience stops being enough

With the rise of ever-present technology, artificial intelligence, and globalization, the demands on senior leaders are widening exponentially. There are more constituencies expecting an answer, more scrutiny on every decision, and more calls leaders need to make with incomplete information and no obvious precedent. Those who rose through the ranks on execution and technical judgment find that those strengths, while still necessary, now simply aren't enough to address the complex and multi-disciplinary questions that are being asked of them. What we tend to find at that point is that while they can keep learning new skills and bringing in different technology, the real gain comes from finding more groundedness in themselves, and understanding more clearly what they're carrying into their boardrooms and team meetings.

THE BLOCK

What leaders never stop to examine

Everything about a senior role rewards looking outward. Leaders are asked to direct their attention toward the subsequent quarter's results, toward the next fire that starts, toward the multitude of people and problems waiting in the queue. Over time, they can start to react to pressure in ways they cannot account for afterward, and lose clarity about the direction in which they're heading.

For one leader, that last one surfaced during the hardest stretch of his tenure:

> *"I was stuck. I was stuck in the pandemic. I was stuck in crisis, and I needed to step back to realize how to move forward. Is this the right place for me? Is this the right time for me? Do I have the skills to be the leader necessary to come out of this crisis?"*
>
> — Jamie Bruning-Miles, Chief Executive Officer, YMCA of Greater San Francisco

Many leaders struggle to pose questions like this, because they fear the repercussions of asking them. The instinct, instead, is to hunker down more, work harder for longer, but over time, that offers diminishing returns.

It can show up as disengagement, as exhaustion, or as a sharp tone in an email or a quick dismissal of a new idea. Most leaders can point to moments they didn't handle the way they'd like, without being able to clearly explain what happened.

It turns out, though, that giving space to whatever questions are present is what gives us the solidity and clarity to weather whatever storms we face.

THE UNLOCK

Turning inward to steady the room

The work asked the leaders to look at what they had the power to influence. What energy were they bringing into the board rooms and their team meetings? What choices were they making unconsciously, without taking account of the consequences? How were they speaking to themselves in the hardest moments? They found that by bringing more awareness to their experience and their interactions, they were able to be more intentional about how they were showing up.

One chief executive described what changed:

> *"What I've found throughout all of this is more evenness. I'm much more thoughtful about how I enter a room, the conversation I have with myself about a presenting issue beforehand... Now when I know I'm going to have a hard conversation, I take a little bit of a moment to say, okay, where am I? Who am I bringing into the room? What am I anxious about? How is that going to show up?"*
>
> — Phoebe Boyer, President and CEO, Children's Aid

Sometimes the honest answer was to say it out loud. One leader described walking in and telling the team plainly how stressed they were about a presenting issue, and watching that change the dynamic. While we tend to think that business means keeping personal feelings and experiences out of the office, the truth is that when leaders share themselves honestly and vulnerably, they build trust and connection, which ultimately leads to diminished friction and higher team effectiveness.

That same awareness allows for more grace and composure in the face of emotional triggers. Leaders began to catch their inclinations earlier and use the moment after the stimulus to make a conscious choice about how to respond.

> *"There were times before I was involved in the program where I wondered, where did that come from? Now I have the skill to actually recognize it, identify it, and deal with it in a responsible way. I don't live in the land of reaction. I live in the land of response."*
>
> — Gaurdie Banister, Chair, Russell Reynolds Associates

Bringing more awareness and intentionality to his interactions allowed him to recognize that interval where it was possible to pause, and to make a conscious choice about how he wanted to show up.

For the chief executive who had questioned whether he was the right person for the moment, the same work produced the answer:

> *"It was the best investment I could've made in myself and for the organization. I'm a better leader now."*
>
> — Jamie Bruning-Miles, Chief Executive Officer, YMCA of Greater San Francisco

THE RESULTS

What changed

Increased Stability

Leaders described more solid footing across the range the role puts in front of them, including the moments that arrived without warning.

More Intentionality

Leaders checked their energy before difficult conversations and made conscious choices about how to approach them.

Honest Vulnerability

Naming their own state openly changed the dynamic in the room, and built the trust that made the harder conversations possible.

Clarity on Direction

Leaders got clearer about their "why," which gave them stronger roots in the face of adversity.

THE KEY INSIGHT

A leader's stability begins with their self-awareness, because without it, their internal experience is always at the mercy of whatever situation they encounter. A leader who cannot name what drives them is governed by it, spends energy concealing what they haven't examined, and reopens the same fundamental questions with every new crisis. A leader who has done that work has a fixed point underneath them. The reactions still come and the pressure still lands, and now there is a choice in between. As one of them described it, the tree with the deepest roots is the one that survives all the wind.

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