

Presence Under Pressure: How to Stay Grounded in Hard Moments

By Bryce Thomason · September 10, 2025 · 3 min read



Pressure reveals something essential about who we are. Even the most seasoned leaders feel its effects — the quickened breath, the tightening in the chest, the narrowing of focus. Our bodies react before we have a chance to think. The nervous system moves to protect us, and our leadership shifts right along with it.

One of the most liberating truths I've learned is that presence isn't a personality trait. It's not charisma or confidence. Presence is a physiological state — a way of inhabiting ourselves — and under pressure it can slip away without us noticing.

When this happens, we sometimes assume our discipline or mindset is failing. But the truth is more human and far more forgiving: we're reacting from biology, not intention. The body moves into protection long before the mind is aware.

For many leaders, this shows up in familiar ways — talking more, taking on what others could carry, tightening our grip, avoiding a hard conversation, or smoothing conflict that actually needs space to be honest. These behaviors aren't character flaws. They are adaptive patterns shaped by years of responsibility and expectation. They make sense. But they also come with a cost: narrowed thinking, diminished presence, and a gradual loss of clarity.

If we want to lead differently, the shift doesn't begin by controlling our behavior. It begins by reconnecting with ourselves in the moment. That is the heart of presence — a return to ourselves when pressure tries to pull us away.

In coaching, I often talk about “real-time reps.” These are not dramatic practices. They're tiny, almost imperceptible pauses in which we choose connection over reactivity. The moment before we respond. The breath we allow ourselves in a tense meeting. The softening of a jaw we didn't realize was clenched. The willingness to let silence linger long enough to hear what we actually think.

Over time, these moments accumulate into capacity. They allow us to meet pressure with steadiness instead of urgency.

A simple practice I often share — one that is both discreet and surprisingly powerful — is something I call the 5% Release.

When you feel pressure rising, notice one place in your body that has tightened: your shoulders, your stomach, your hands. On your next exhale, release just five percent of that tension — no more. That small release is enough to interrupt the automatic pattern and signal to your body that it doesn't need to brace quite so hard. Often, that five percent creates more room than we expect — a deeper breath, a bit more clarity, a renewed sense of agency.

Leaders who practice this often tell me it changes the way they enter conversations. They feel less rushed, more grounded, and more themselves. And others can sense it.

This matters because leadership is revealed not on our easiest days, but in the moments when we are stretched, uncertain, or carrying more than we care to admit. When we stay connected to ourselves in those moments, everything shifts. Decisions become clearer. Conversations become more honest.

Boundaries become firmer and kinder. Teams experience us as steady rather than reactive.

Presence under pressure isn't perfection. It's practice — built breath by breath, moment by moment, as we learn to inhabit our leadership rather than perform our way through it.

If you find yourself tightening under the weight of expectations, consider this a gentle invitation to pause. Come back into your body. Release five percent. Remember that you don't have to push your way through leadership; you can root yourself in it.

And that grounding — that return — is where clarity, courage, and true purpose begin to emerge again.