

The
Seven
Mistakes
People
Make Under
Pressure

By Kevin Sweeney

Leadership Expert, Pilot, Professional Speaker

Introduction

We all face pressure in our daily lives both personally and professionally. How do we do a better job of handling our pressures? The key is putting ourselves into a better position for handling the pressure whenever the pressure comes into our life.

Mistake #1

Putting yourself into a known position of pressure.

Look ahead, when you have that important presentation, get to the presentation room early. Survey the room; check out the audio visuals, if something is amiss you have time to fix it. You have plenty of time to call the audio visual person to help you.

How many times have we seen someone rush into the room at the last minute only to have something in the physical set up of the room go wrong, there is no time to fix it?

Now, the person feels they are under extreme pressure. This pressure is self induced, if they would have gotten there earlier, the problem they had could possibly be 'no sweat'.

Leave early for an important client or customer meeting so that you can get stuck in traffic and still be on time. Traffic jams happen; we all know which route is most susceptible to a traffic problem, when you are going to take that route leave early.

Don't schedule meetings too close together. Yes, we are busy, but how many times have you sat in a meeting that is running over looking at your watch feeling your blood pressure rise because you know you are going to be late to your next meeting. So what happens? You quit listening to the meeting you are in and then you are late to your next meeting. This causes you to be at less than your best in both meetings. Remember, YOU put yourself in this position, don't do that.

Think ahead; avoid putting yourself into a known position of pressure. You can control the situation; put yourself into a position for success.

Mistake #2

Failing to prepare to handle pressure.

Spend some time thinking about what you would do if something goes wrong. What will you do if the light on the projector burns out during your Power Point presentation? If you have thought about that you will have a spare light and you will have practiced putting the spare light into the projector. The situation will be no problem. If a spare light isn't available you will have a handout that you can go right to.

We want to think positive, but experience has shown us from time to time the unexpected happens. Unexpected, I say if you have thought about it, it is not unexpected. This thought process alone relieves some of the pressure. In the pilot, flight crew world we consistently practice for the day when something goes wrong, the day you lose an engine, the day you lose hydraulic pressure so that when that day happens you are prepared. This makes it a lot less stressful and allows you to be able to concentrate more fully on the task at hand.

In business we tend to allow ourselves to think we are way too busy to stop and think about alternatives, but if you look at the people who are the most successful, they are the ones prepared for the unexpected - - Join that Group!!

Mistake #3

Being afraid to make a decision under pressure.

When we get under pressure it is very easy to be afraid to make a decision because you are afraid to make the wrong decision. Trust yourself, if you have prepared you will make a good decision. You don't have to make a 'perfect' decision; you just have to make a good decision.

The first day of United States Air Force pilot training we were taught an important aspect of decision making under pressure that I have never forgot and I use constantly in business and my personal life. If you are rolling down the runway in a multi-engine airplane and you lose an engine unless you do something incredibly stupid you can either take off or abort. Thinking about it is going to kill you.

The moral of that story is under pressure you typically have alternatives, pick one, and don't worry about it. Sure some alternatives are better than others, but more than one of the alternatives is more often than not acceptable. What will increase the pressure is not making a decision.

Mistake #4**Failing to address pressure when it happens.**

When we are under pressure it is very easy to let your mind wonder onto something else that doesn't have anything to do with the situation at hand, don't let that happen. Focus on the task at hand, clear out all the extraneous thoughts from your mind. Ignore the immaterial, focus on what you need to do to address the pressure you are under.

Have you ever been in a meeting where you are going over some tough decisions; decisions that will have important repercussions for your organization? The conversation in the meeting turns to something that has nothing to do with the task at hand. This will just increase the pressure of the meeting. Be the one to take the meeting back to the tough questions. Putting off pressure does not alleviate it; it tends to increase the pressure.

When you are the one in the organization that is recognized as the person who effectively deals with pressure by taking it head on and doing the right thing under pressure, you will receive the respect of your peers, subordinates will want to be on your team, and superiors will realize you are the one to go to when the pressure is on. Properly addressing pressure head on will advance your career.

Mistake #5**Failing your teammates when under pressure.**

When you see that look of pressure on the face of one of your teammates help them. Don't be the one that runs the other way. From time to time we all are going to be under pressure, when we are under pressure we need the support of our teammates. When you help your teammate under pressure that will set the precedent for them to help you when you get that look of pressure on your face.

The old saying goes, you are only as good as your weakest link, when a teammate cannot function properly your team has a broken link, your team will not be effective. The broken link will increase the pressure on the rest of your team for normal operations substantially. People on the team will be called upon to do multiple jobs. If you address the pressure quickly you will alleviate the pressure on your team, you will become known as a great teammate. The teammate everybody wants to have.

When you get that reputation for being the best teammate, what will that do for you? A minimum of three things: 1) Everybody will want to be on your team, you will get the best talent. 2) Everybody will realize they have to give you the best value because everybody wants to be on your team. You will never hear those infamous words, “that’s not my job, get somebody else” because everyone will realize that they have to give you the best value or you will get somebody to replace them. 3) You have the best talent and the best value on your team, you will have the highest productivity, and you will have the pinnacle team all because you have the reputation of being a great teammate under pressure. Someone that is supportive, someone that will cover your teammates backside.

Mistake #6

Losing your confidence under pressure.

If you have done your homework, you have prepared, you have learned to focus on the right thing at the right time in the right order, and you have learned to ignore the immaterial you have set yourself up. Now just believe in your ability under pressure. The dictionary says self confidence is belief in one’s own ability, power, or judgment. I say self confidence is a state of mind where you think of a situation in terms of I can, I will, I expect, and I did it.

When our society looks at professional athletes we expect them to perform in the crucial situation in the game because “they get paid to do that.” When you talk to professional athletes, and I have, they expect to perform in the crucial situation in the game because they have prepared and they are confident in their abilities.

In pressure situations in our personal or professional lives we should think of pressure in the same vain as professional athletes if we have prepared then expect yourself to excel. Expect to be able to handle the pressure. Once you get to the level of expect, you will be surprised at how quick you will be able to say, “I DID IT!!”

Mistake #7**Believing that pressure won't happen to you.**

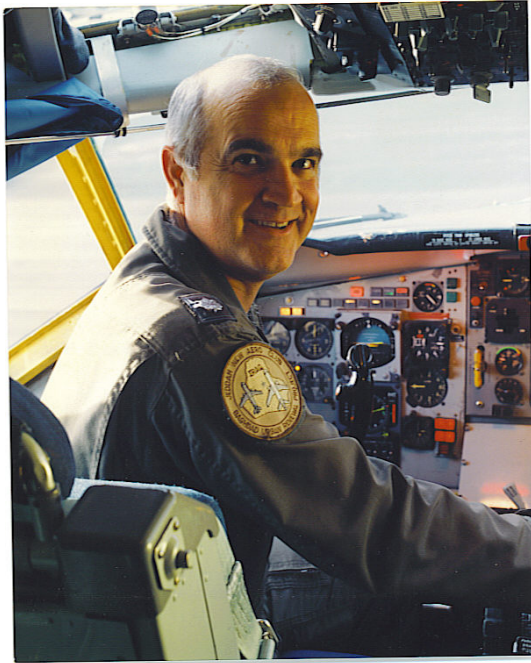
Expect to be put under pressure might sound trite at first, but stop and think about it. Is it a shock to our system whenever we are put under pressure? If we are a salesperson, do we expect to have that sales call that will make the difference between making our quota or not? If we are a project manager, do we expect to have a problem on the project at some point in time? If we work in Human Resources do we expect to have that pressure packed counseling session or tough interview at some point in time?

We often try to avoid pressure which is a normal human flight or fight response, but when it does happen don't let it crush you. Expect it, and then deal with it.

During my 23 year career as a United States Air Force pilot I had many emergencies from having an engine quit on me in flight to having engines fall off the airplane in flight to losing hydraulic systems, to losing electrical power, to losing cabin pressure. I was able to successfully handle all these emergencies; I don't say this to be braggadocious at all, I say this because Air Force training did a superior job in getting the flight crews mind set into realizing and therefore expecting to have an emergency at some point in your flying career. When it happened since you expected it, while the pressure wasn't totally alleviated, it never will be, it was certainly decreased because mentally we expected to have the emergency and therefore were better equipped to handle the pressure.

Expect pressure, it will happen no matter how hard we try to avoid. Just take a deep breath then handle it or as the emergency procedures manual in the flying business says – Stop, Think, Collect Your Wits.

About the Author



Kevin is a retired Lt. Colonel in the Air National Guard, and a renowned pilot having flown combat missions in both Viet Nam and Desert Storm. Kevin is the only person to have successfully landed a KC-135 (Boeing 707 Air Refueling Tanker) after two of the four engines were ripped off the airplane in mid-air. And he did it at night — on a combat mission — while loaded to maximum capacity.

His incredible flight has been featured in a *Reader's Digest* article titled "Bring Them Home" and a featured segment on the A&E channel titled *Frontline Pilots*.

A decorated pilot, he was awarded numerous medals, including the Air Achievement Medal, multiple Air Medals and the United States Air Force Distinguished Flying Cross.

He has been a successful business executive for a Fortune 50 company in both sales and operations. Kevin is also well educated with two Bachelors degrees and a Masters Degree in Business Administration. He attended undergraduate school on a basketball scholarship where he served as captain of the team and was honored as an all-conference and all-district athlete.

Kevin Sweeney is a leadership expert for employees, managers, and executives who want to improve their performance under pressure. Through his professional speaking, consulting and training, Kevin delivers a process for converting daily pressures and crises into calm and confident decision making.