BRIDGEPOINT COACHING & STRATEGY GROUP

Advising Leaders at the Point of Pressure

A Three-Phase Approach to Executive Coaching

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Executive Summary

> **Pressure does not create new problems in leadership. It exposes the ones already there.**

Most senior leaders are good at their jobs on a normal day. The test comes when the stakes go up, the situation gets complex, and the next move is not obvious. A new seat. A CEO transition. A restructuring. A board that wants an answer by next quarter. In those moments, the habits that got a leader here start working against them.

I have worked with leaders in exactly these moments for 30 years, in energy, manufacturing, financial services, healthcare, aviation, technology, sport, and family enterprise. The organizations they lead represent more than $300 billion in combined revenue and assets under management. The industries differ. The pattern does not.

I did not build this method in a classroom. I built it on drilling rigs in 2008, coaching supervisors whose bad calls showed up in the injury report before they showed up anywhere else. That work cut the recordable incident rate by a third and returned four dollars for every one spent. It also settled something for me. Leadership under pressure is not an abstraction. It is a man on a rig floor deciding whether to stop the job. Everything since has been that same moment at a different altitude.

This paper lays out the approach I use. It has three phases:

- **Discovery.** Understand the leader, the stakes, the system, and what is actually going on.
- **Design.** Build the plan together: the priorities, the decisions that matter, who belongs in the room, and the conditions to protect.
- **Development.** Practice under real pressure, with feedback from the people around the leader, measurable shifts, and a plan to make them hold.

Three ideas sit underneath the method. First, complexity is fine. Complicated is fatal. Second, who a leader lets into the room under pressure shapes the outcome. Third, continuity plans protect operations. Only a leadership team protects direction.

If you lead under pressure, this paper is for you. It ends with a self-assessment you can take today and a straight answer on when coaching is the right move and when it is not.

The Problem: What Pressure Does to Leaders and Teams

Pressure is not the enemy. Leaders at this level chose roles with pressure built in. The problem is what pressure does to judgment, to relationships, and to the system around the leader when nobody is watching.

Here is what I see, over and over:

- **The circle gets smaller.** Under stress, leaders pull decisions closer. Fewer voices. Faster calls. It feels like control. Most of the time it is isolation.
- **The volume goes up.** More meetings, more updates, more initiatives. Activity starts standing in for progress.
- **The team goes quiet.** People read the leader's stress and stop bringing bad news. The leader gets less information at exactly the moment they need more.
- **Strengths overplay.** The decisive leader turns rigid. The collaborative leader turns slow. The detail person disappears into the weeds.
- **Energy erodes.** Sleep goes. Patience goes. Burnout shows up long before anyone says the word.

None of this is a character flaw. It is what happens to capable people in demanding conditions. But it has a cost. Decisions get made on partial information. Good people leave. Strategy drifts while everyone stays busy.

The research matches what leaders feel. Amy Edmondson's work on psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) found that teams learn better when members believe it is safe to speak up, ask questions, and admit mistakes. Pressure, left alone, eats exactly that belief. It usually starts at the top.

The missing piece in most continuity plans

Organizations invest heavily in business continuity. Backup systems, recovery sites, crisis protocols, succession charts. That work matters. But it answers one question: will operations keep running?

Most plans skip the second question: will the organization keep heading in the right direction?

> **Systems give you continuity of operations. Leadership teams give you continuity of direction.**

When a CEO leaves suddenly, when a restructuring lands, when a crisis hits, the systems usually hold. What breaks is alignment. Who decides. What matters now. What we stop doing. If the leadership team has not built the trust and the habits to answer those questions under pressure, the best continuity plan in the world will keep the lights on while the organization drifts.

I have watched a version of this more than once. The details here are changed, but the shape is faithful. A long-tenured president retired on schedule. The succession chart was clean. The systems never blinked and the quarterly numbers held. Nine months later the team was still running every significant decision past the person who had left, by phone, after hours. Nobody owned the three calls that would shape the next two years, so nobody made them. Operations never missed a beat. Direction stood still for the better part of a year, and the business paid for it in year two.

Your continuity plan is missing one thing: the leadership team. Whether anyone wrote them into the plan or not, the leader and the people around them are the plan. That is why my work sits where executive coaching and business continuity meet.

Complexity Is Fine. Complicated Is Fatal.

Complexity is the world you lead in. Markets shift. Regulators rewrite the rules. Talent moves. Technology rewrites the business model every few years. You cannot coach your way out of complexity, and you should not try. Handling it is the job.

Complicated is different. Complicated is what leaders add on top. The extra layer of approval. The fourth priority that quietly became the eleventh. The reorganization launched to fix a problem that was really about two executives who do not trust each other. The 40-page plan nobody reads.

Under pressure, most leaders add. It feels responsible. More process, more reporting, more people in more meetings. Each addition makes sense on its own. Together they slow everything down and bury what matters.

> **The good ones subtract.**

They ask different questions:

- What can we stop doing?
- Which decision actually matters this quarter?
- Who needs to be in this conversation, and who does not?
- What is the simplest version of this plan that still works?

Subtraction takes more courage than addition. It means saying no to good ideas, disappointing some stakeholders, and trusting a short list. This is where an outside advisor earns the seat: helping a leader see what they have added, and giving them the clarity and the backing to take it away.

Every phase of the approach that follows is built on this. Discovery separates what is complex from what has been made complicated. Design strips the plan down to what matters. Development builds the habit of subtracting when the pressure is real.

Who's in the Room Under Pressure

One more idea before the method. Who a leader lets into their decisions shapes the outcome.

Under pressure, the room gets smaller. Sometimes that is right. Not every decision needs a committee. But too often the room shrinks to the people who agree, the people who happen to be nearby, or the people who are loudest. The leader stops hearing from the person closest to the customer, the skeptic who has been right before, or the peer who will tell them the truth.

The useful question is not how many people belong in the room. It is this: who does this decision need? Sometimes the answer is to add a dissenting voice. Sometimes it is to remove a voice that has become noise. Either way it is a choice. Make it on purpose.

The Three-Phase Approach

I advise leaders when the stakes are high, the situation is complex, and the next move is not obvious. The work moves through three phases: Discovery, Design, and Development. They run in order, but they are not rigid. Something we learn in Development can send us back to Discovery. That is a feature, not a failure.

Most engagements run six to twelve months, with a session every other week and the phone available in between. A fair number continue well past that. Several of my longest client relationships are past a decade now, and the coaching has followed those leaders through two or three seats. That is not the goal when we start. It is also not an accident.

Phase 1: Discovery

Understand the leader, the stakes, the system, and what is actually going on.

WHAT HAPPENS

Discovery starts with listening. Not only to the presenting problem, but to everything around it. Leaders usually arrive with a clear statement of what they want to fix. It is rarely the whole story. In Discovery, we:

- **Listen deeply.** Extended conversations with the leader about the role, the goals, the pressures, and what is keeping them up at night.

- **Gather stakeholder input.** I talk with the people above, beside, and below the leader. Usually six to ten of them: the board chair or the boss, a few peers, a few direct reports, sometimes a customer or a board member who sees the leader from a different angle. The conversations are confidential. The leader hears the themes, never the sources.
- **Assess where it adds signal.** Assessment is a tool, not a ritual. When a leader needs a shared language for strengths and gaps, I use the Purposeful Leadership Compass, a five-dimension framework I developed over years of this work: Inspire, Engage, Innovate, Achieve, and Become. When the stakeholder conversations already tell the story, I skip it. Nobody needs another report.
- **Map the system.** The board, the leadership team, the key relationships, the competing agendas, and the decisions coming over the horizon.
- **Separate complex from complicated.** What is genuinely hard about this situation, and what has been added on top?

WHAT THE LEADER GETS

A clear, honest picture. Where you stand, how you are experienced, what is really at stake, and what is driving the pressure. For most senior leaders, this is rare: an unfiltered view from someone with no stake in the outcome except your success.

QUESTIONS DISCOVERY ANSWERS

- What is really going on beneath the presenting problem?
- What is at stake, for me, my team, and the organization?
- How am I actually experienced by the people I lead and work with?
- Where is the complexity real, and where have we made it complicated?

Phase 2: Design

Build the plan together.

WHAT HAPPENS

Design turns insight into a plan. We build it together. Not a template. A plan that fits this leader, this moment, and this system. Design focuses on four things:

- **Priorities.** The few things that matter most right now, and the things to stop doing.
- **The decisions that matter.** Leaders face dozens of decisions a week. A handful will shape the next year. We name them and plan how each will be made.
- **Who needs to be in the room.** For each critical decision: who should be involved, who should be informed, and whose voice is missing.
- **The conditions to protect.** The time, energy, relationships, and team norms the leader needs to perform. Pressure takes these first, so we protect them on purpose.

WHAT THE LEADER GETS

A short, practical plan. One you can explain in a few minutes, that your team can act on, and that holds up when the week goes sideways. Good design is subtraction made visible.

QUESTIONS DESIGN ANSWERS

- What matters most in the next 90 days, and what can wait or stop?
- Which decisions will shape the outcome, and how will I make them?
- Who needs to be in the room, and who is missing?
- What conditions do I need to protect to lead well under pressure?

Phase 3: Development

Practice under real pressure.

WHAT HAPPENS

Development is where change becomes real. Insight is cheap. Behavior under pressure is what counts. So we practice in live situations, not hypotheticals. In Development, we:

- **Prepare for high-stakes moments.** The board meeting, the restructuring announcement, the hard conversation with a peer. We work them before they happen.
- **Debrief after them.** What worked, what did not, what to adjust next time.
- **Build feedback loops.** Progress is seen and named by the people around the leader, not just self-reported.
- **Track measurable shifts.** In Design, the leader picks one or two behaviors that matter and that other people can see. At the midpoint and again at the close, the same stakeholders from Discovery answer a short survey: on this behavior, is the leader more effective, less effective, or about the same as when we started? That score, not my opinion and not the leader's, is the measure. If it has not moved, we change the plan, not the story.
- **Plan for sustainment.** So the new habits hold after the engagement ends.

WHAT THE LEADER GETS

New capacity that shows up when it matters, and a team and a system that support it. The goal is not dependence on a coach. The goal is a leader who can do this without one.

QUESTIONS DEVELOPMENT ANSWERS

- Am I leading differently when the pressure is on, and do others see it?
- What is working, and what needs to adjust?
- How will I know the change is real?
- How do I sustain this after the engagement ends?

Sidebar: Three Composite Scenarios

These scenarios are composites. Each blends patterns from several engagements, and all identifying details have been changed. None describes a real client, person, or organization.

Composite 1: The new CEO and the loyal team

A newly appointed CEO followed a long-tenured predecessor. The leadership team was capable, but loyal to the old way of doing things. Discovery showed the team was waiting to see whether the new CEO would listen or impose. Design narrowed the first 120 days to three decisions, with a deliberate choice about who would shape each one. In Development, the CEO practiced holding back his own view until the team had spoken. Over the next two quarters, problems started surfacing earlier, in the room instead of after it.

Composite 2: The restructuring that got complicated

A division president was leading a restructuring under board pressure. The plan had grown to dozens of workstreams. People were exhausted and unsure what mattered. Discovery separated the real complexity, a market shift and genuine cost pressure, from the complication: overlapping initiatives and unclear decision rights. Design cut the plan to four priorities, each with a single owner. Development focused on how the president delivered hard news: shorter, more direct, more often. The changes landed with fewer surprises, and the people the business most needed to keep stayed.

Composite 3: The high performer running on empty

A newly promoted executive was praised for results and quietly heading for burnout. She had kept every responsibility from the old role and added the new one. Discovery made the pattern visible. Design named what to hand off and which conditions to protect: time to think, a weekly reset with her chief of staff, and two evenings a week that belonged to her family. Development tested those boundaries in a crunch quarter. Not every one held. The ones that did made the difference, and the team grew into the work she let go.

What Changes

Coaching at this level should change things people can see. The shifts tend to show up in three places.

FOR THE LEADER

- Clearer thinking under pressure. Fewer reactive calls. More deliberate ones.
- A simpler agenda. Fewer priorities, held more firmly.
- Better information. People bring problems earlier because it feels safer to.
- Sustainable energy. The leader protects the conditions they need to perform.

FOR THE TEAM

- Faster, cleaner decisions with clear ownership.
- Healthier conflict. Disagreement surfaces in the room, not in the hallway.
- Shared direction, even when the plan changes.

FOR THE ORGANIZATION

- Continuity of direction through transitions, not just continuity of operations.
- Stronger succession, because leaders are developing others, not just performing.
- Less complication. Fewer initiatives competing for the same people and the same attention.

The evidence I trust most is what stakeholders say when the leader is not in the room. Roles and sectors below are changed; the words are close to what I heard.

A year into one engagement, the direct reports of a manufacturing president told me they had stopped rehearsing bad news before they brought it to him. They just brought it. His staff meeting had gotten shorter and the decisions made in it had gotten bigger.

In another, a board member described a CFO who had been "the smartest person in the room and the last one to be heard" at the start. By the close, she said, he was the one asking the question nobody else had thought to ask, and the room was waiting for it.

> **Small to describe. Hard to fake. That is usually how real change looks.**

A Self-Assessment for Leaders Under Pressure

Use these to take an honest read on how you are leading right now. Answer fast. Your first answer is usually the true one.

1. When the pressure rises, does my circle of advisors get bigger or smaller?
2. Who have I stopped hearing from in the last 90 days, and why?
3. Can I name the three decisions that will matter most this year?
4. What have I added in the past six months that I could take away?
5. Would my team say it is safe to bring me bad news?
6. Does my leadership team share a clear direction, or just a shared calendar?
7. If I were out for a month starting tomorrow, would the organization keep its direction, or only its operations?
8. Which of my strengths am I overusing right now?
9. What conditions do I need to lead well, and am I protecting them?
10. Is there anyone I can think out loud with who has no stake in the outcome except my success?

If three or more of these were hard to answer, it may be time for a different kind of conversation.

When Coaching Is the Right Move (and When It Isn't)

Coaching is powerful in the right conditions and a poor fit in others. Being honest about fit protects the leader, the organization, and the work.

COACHING IS THE RIGHT MOVE WHEN

- The stakes are high, the situation is complex, and the next move is not obvious.
- You are stepping into a new role, a transition, or a period of real change.
- You are willing to look honestly at your own part in the situation.
- The organization supports the work and will give you room to change.
- You want a thinking partner, not a rescuer.

COACHING IS NOT THE RIGHT MOVE WHEN

- The need is a specific technical skill that training or a specialist can deliver faster.
- The decision about the leader has already been made, and coaching is being used to document it.
- The leader is not willing to engage, or is there only because someone said they had to be.
- The situation calls for clinical, medical, or legal support. Coaching is not therapy. A good coach says so and makes the referral.

About Dean Miles and Bridgepoint

Dean Miles is the Founder and President of Bridgepoint Coaching & Strategy Group, an executive coaching, training, and leadership development firm he founded in 2007. He is based in Celebration, Florida.

Dean began delivering training at a global pharmaceutical company in 1996 and has spent 30 years working with leaders and their teams. He began his coaching practice in 2008 on the drilling rigs of a global drilling contractor and has since logged more than 13,000 hours of one-on-one executive coaching with 245 leaders. The organizations they lead represent more than $300 billion in combined revenue and assets under management.

He is a Certified Professional Co-Active Coach (CPCC) through the Co-Active Training Institute (2009) and a certified coach in Marshall Goldsmith Stakeholder Centered Coaching. He holds an M.A. in Executive Leadership from Liberty University, completed with high distinction, and is a PhD candidate in Organization and Management at Liberty, with an executive coaching cognate and a dissertation on self-regulation and premature scaling in startup failure.

In 2021 he was selected to the Marshall Goldsmith 100 Coaches community from more than 18,000 applicants. Thinkers360 ranks him #1 in Business Continuity and a Top 10 Thought Leader in Coaching, and he holds its Elite Expert certifications in both. He was a Fellow of the Institute of Coaching, a McLean Hospital and Harvard Medical School affiliate, from 2016 to 2024, and is featured in the Wall Street Journal bestseller *Becoming Coachable*.

Let's Talk

If you are leading through a moment where the stakes are high, the situation is complex, and the next move is not obvious, let's talk.

A first conversation is confidential and carries no obligation. We will talk about what you are facing, what is at stake, and whether working together makes sense.

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Bridgepoint Coaching & Strategy Group. Direction. Not just motion.

Reference

Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2), 350-383.

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