

The
Pragmatic
Programmers

The Stress Equation

Reduce Burnout,
Increase Happiness and Productivity



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Increasing Security

A high sense of security can make us brave enough to take on very challenging tasks, even if there is high pressure and complexity. If we know we take the challenge on as a team, and that our manager has our back if things go south, we feel the security that keeps our stress level in balance.

It has been said, by people a lot smarter than me, that necessity is the mother of invention. I think that's true in a lot of contexts, but not necessarily in the large modern corporate environment. In this setting a more appropriate wording would be: "security is the mother of innovation."

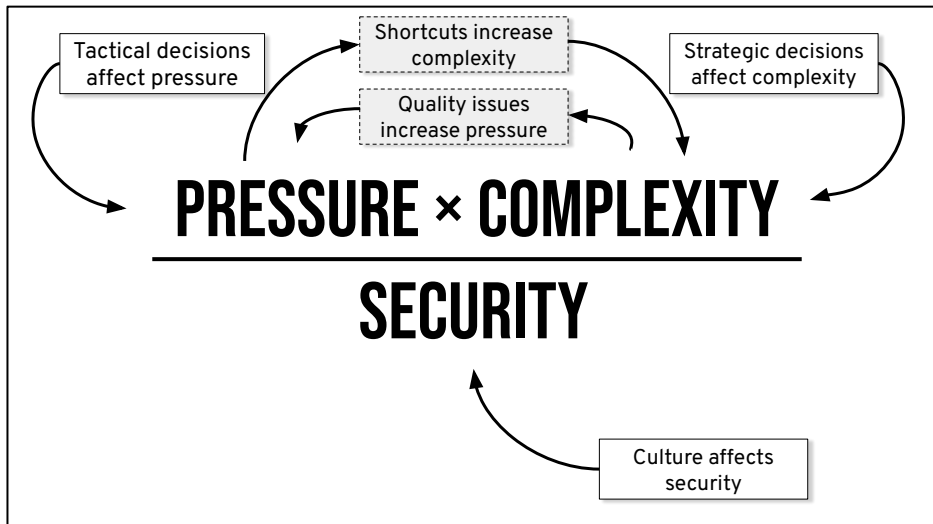
In this chapter we will learn about what decreases and increases the feeling of security. It's security that tells us it's safe to dare to try new things and to speak our mind, without risking losing prestige. If more people dare, more innovation and initiatives will come to fruition. If more people dare, more correct decisions will be made throughout the organization.

This sense of security largely comes down to the culture of a team, organization, or company.

Define "Culture"

Culture is a very complex thing, but the simplest way to describe it is how we speak to and about each other—the words we choose and tone we use. Who has a say, and who doesn't? Do we tolerate gossip and backbiting? This does of course not catch everything related to a company's culture, but it's an indicator that carries a lot of impact.

The following image illustrates how tactics, strategy, and culture relate to the Pressure, Complexity, and Security variables of the Stress Equation.



Culture also reflects the values and behaviors that we accept and award in promotions and paychecks, directly or indirectly. If you promote someone who is brilliantly competent but a nightmare to collaborate with, you are not only promoting the competence, you are also indirectly accepting and promoting the nightmarish collaboration skills. This sends the signal that our culture not only values competence over collaboration, but also rewards non-collaborative behavior.

I am not trying to downplay the importance of competence and mastery when trying to succeed in business. It's vital. We need driven experts to push boundaries and break new ground. However, it doesn't scale well unless there are a few drops of humility and empathy mixed in there. Big egos, who think work is a never ending game of King of the Hill, are rarely a good basis for a secure company culture.

Appreciate Cooperation

The research of Ron Westrum on company culture, shows that a high performance organizations are characterized by cooperation, active information sharing and shared risks and responsibilities.¹ While we need technical brilliance to excel, teamwork and collaboration is often the only way we can accelerate. It's okay to seek prestige and individual recognition, but unless the organization sees collaboration with the highest of prestige, the ability to scale smoothly will be severely reduced.

1. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1765804/pdf/v013p0ii22.pdf>

Let me rephrase that: no scale up is ever smooth, it's always challenging. But if the ability to collaborate is a pre-existing challenge, scaling up will be very, very challenging.

Company culture is also about how we define great leadership. What is it that signifies and nurtures great leadership in our organization?

More than once I have witnessed companies educate line and middle managers in psychological safety, coaching, and how to meet employees with empathy and understanding only to then tolerate high ranking managers bulldozing their way through meetings, openly shaming and yelling at people, and criticizing and disregarding recommendations from their own experts.

That kind of behavior can get very potent short term results, but there is a disconnect between what's being taught and what's being practiced. It sends ripples of fear throughout the organization that will harm a company's culture in the long run.