



CAPACITY UNDER PRESSURE

The 9 Skills Your Team Runs On

A field guide for managers who want their people sharp when the pressure is high.

We ran a simple test with **40 professionals** at a top-50 global university. **Not 1** could name all 9 of these skills. They're the executive functioning skills, the brain's management system, and they're what holds or buckles when the load climbs.



Why these 9, and why under pressure

Most performance advice tells people to work harder or care more. Under real pressure, neither is the lever. The lever is executive functioning, the set of mental skills your brain uses to plan, hold information, manage emotion, and adapt. We call building them cognitive fitness training, because they behave like fitness. They're trainable, they fatigue under load, and they get stronger with the right reps.

When a team is under pressure, cognitive load climbs and these skills are the first thing to slip. The deadline itself doesn't change behaviour. The drop in available capacity does.

Research across the executive functioning literature finds these skills predict long-term success more reliably than IQ or test scores, which is exactly why naming them matters.

You can't train what you can't see.

Here's what each of the 9 looks like when it's working, the early signs it's running low on your team, and one practical way to start building it.

01 Self-Awareness & Self-Monitoring

Noticing what you're doing while you're doing it.

UNDER PRESSURE People feel their tone sharpening in a hard conversation and adjust before it lands wrong. They know when they've hit their limit and say so.

WATCH FOR Blind spots a person genuinely can't see in themselves, or a flat "I'm fine" from someone who clearly isn't.

BUILD IT A 60-second end-of-day check. What worked, and where did I lose myself.

02 Impulse Control

The pause between the trigger and the reaction.

UNDER PRESSURE The reply-all that would have made things worse never gets sent. People sit with a hard prompt before answering it.

WATCH FOR Reactive messages fired in the heat of the moment, or interrupting that gets worse as stress climbs.

BUILD IT A pause rule. Draft the response, wait 10 minutes, then decide if it still sends.



03 Emotional Regulation

Managing strong feelings without letting them run the room.

UNDER PRESSURE Frustration gets felt and named without spilling onto the team.

People recover from a setback in minutes instead of days.

WATCH FOR One person's mood setting the temperature for everyone, or long withdrawals after something goes wrong.

BUILD IT Name the feeling before the meeting, not after the blowup.

04 Working Memory

Holding what you need in mind while you use it.

UNDER PRESSURE Someone tracks a fast-moving meeting and still remembers the decisions that came out of it.

WATCH FOR The same question asked again an hour later, or this morning's details gone by the afternoon.

BUILD IT Externalize it. Capture decisions in writing the moment they land, so the brain isn't the storage.

05 Planning & Prioritization

Deciding what matters most when everything feels urgent.

UNDER PRESSURE A flooded week gets sorted into what moves the needle and what can wait. The team knows the one thing that matters today.

WATCH FOR Everything treated as equally on fire, or plenty of motion with little real progress.

BUILD IT Force a single top priority each day before anything else gets touched.

06 Organization

Building systems your brain can rely on.

UNDER PRESSURE The right file or note is found in seconds, because there's a place for it. Handoffs don't drop.

WATCH FOR Time lost hunting for things, or work that lives only inside one person's head.

BUILD IT One shared home for the things the team reaches for most.



07 Task Initiation

Starting, especially when the task feels heavy.

UNDER PRESSURE The hard email gets started before it becomes a crisis. People begin the daunting thing instead of circling it.

WATCH FOR A pile of important but unpleasant work that never quite begins, or busywork standing in for the real task.

BUILD IT Shrink the first step until it's almost too small to avoid.

08 Goal-Directed Persistence

Staying with hard things long enough to finish them.

UNDER PRESSURE A long project keeps moving through the messy middle when motivation dips.

WATCH FOR Strong starts that fade, or projects quietly abandoned once they stop being new.

BUILD IT Make progress visible, so the brain gets the signal that the effort is working.

09 Cognitive Flexibility

Adapting when the plan changes, which under pressure it always does.

UNDER PRESSURE A blown assumption gets met with a new approach instead of a stall. People hold two valid options and choose.

WATCH FOR Rigidity dressed up as high standards, or visible distress the moment a plan shifts.

BUILD IT Practice "what's another way" out loud, before the plan actually breaks.

Why we focus here most: cognitive flexibility is the skill that decides whether pressure breaks a team or sharpens it. Build this one and the others get easier to reach.



Run this with your team (5 minutes)

Read these out in your next meeting. Have everyone rate the team from 1 to 5 on each, then talk about the 2 lowest. Those are your capacity leaks, and they're where cognitive fitness training pays back fastest.

1. When pressure spikes, we name what matters most and let the rest wait. **1 2 3 4 5**
2. Decisions made in the room still get remembered and acted on a week later. **1 2 3 4 5**
3. People start the hard things before they turn into emergencies. **1 2 3 4 5**
4. When someone is frustrated, it gets named, not spread around. **1 2 3 4 5**
5. When a plan breaks, we find another way quickly. **1 2 3 4 5**
6. We catch ourselves before a reaction makes a situation worse. **1 2 3 4 5**

Where this goes next

You've seen the 9 skills and where your team leaks capacity. Here are three ways to go further, whenever you're ready. Start wherever fits.

Watch a full sample talk on demand →

See a live 90-minute Capacity Under Pressure session and feel why it lands.
The easiest first step, for you or your team.

Join a live workshop or webinar →

Interactive sessions where your team builds these skills together, with real practice and real play.

Explore coaching & custom services →

One-on-one and team coaching built around where your capacity is leaking most.

Pressure doesn't ease up.

The skills that hold under it can be built, and that's the work we do.