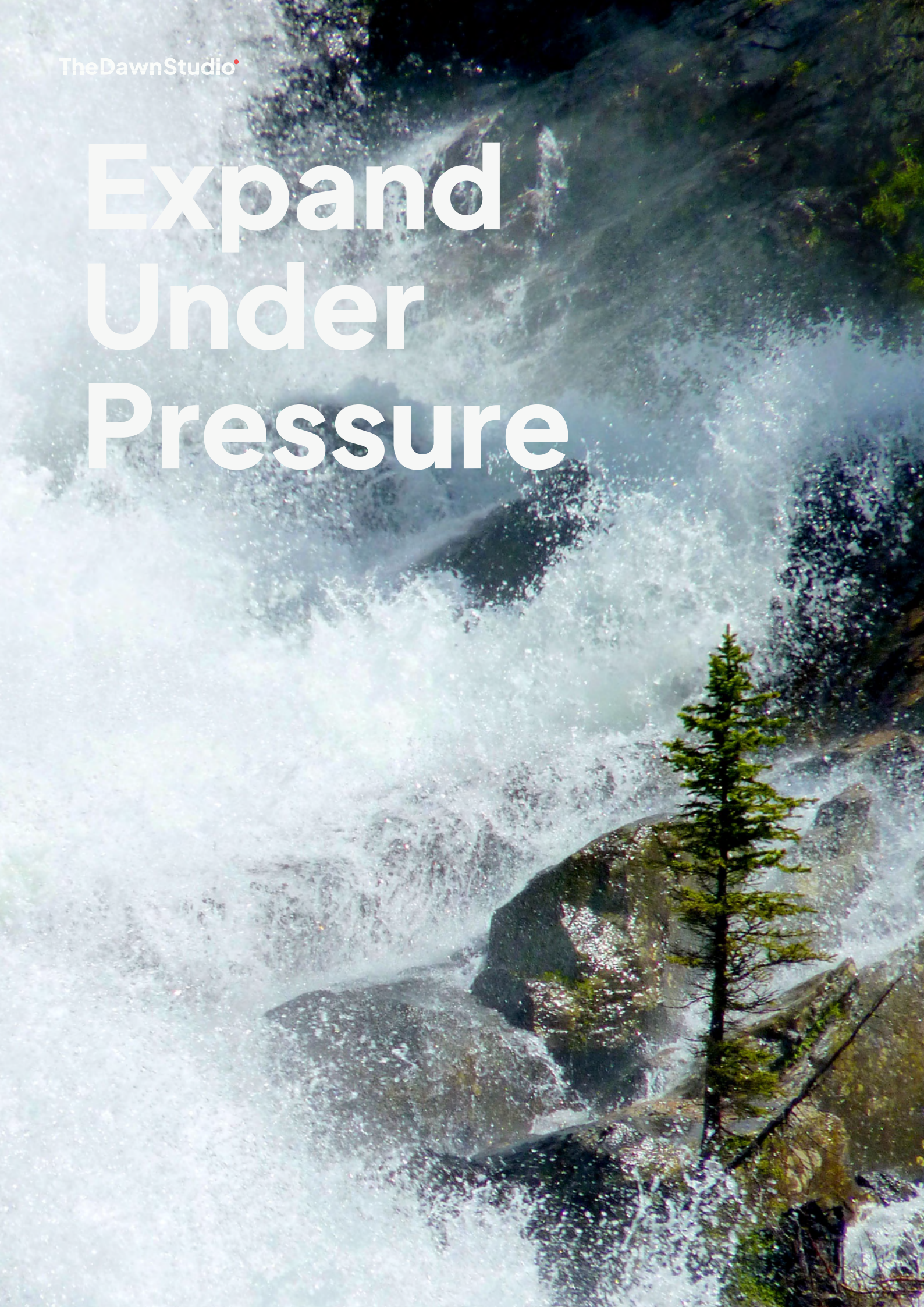


TheDawnStudio

Expand Under Pressure



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The Dawn Studio is promoting the concept in its leadership training of 'Expand Under Pressure.' **They explain it here** – but is there a way we can wrap our collective minds around an example that is meaningful at a very base level?

Scroll back to high school chemistry, and one of the first mathematical, physical laws we all learned – Boyle's, or the Ideal Gas Law. $PV=nRT$, which basically says pressure is inversely related to volume. It's simple – for an ideal gas, pressure applied shrinks the volume it is applied to. And the paradigm in a leadership situation might directly apply. Under pressure, hunker down, do the same thing only perhaps a little better, consider no real new strategies, and wait for the storm to pass.

In an Ideal situation.

But we do not live in, any more, anything resembling an ideal situation. If we follow a paradigmatic mapping of the Ideal Gas Law – collapse under pressure – we risk collapsing our organizations, as well our society.

Can we reverse the paradigm? What does this really mean to Expand Under Pressure?

The short version is this – when leadership in our organizations encounter new, disruptive forces, instead of doubling down on whatever our old strategies were, and perhaps are, we use that energy from that pressure to expand our range of possibilities. We use our prior preparation to open our thoughts to new

directions, based on the changing circumstances we encounter. We train ourselves intrinsically to look downstream, to a changing landscape that perhaps was only partially visible to us months, days, or minutes before. And then encourage our people to do the same, and feed back that new information into new directions, and new organizational structures that can handle the new and unexpected challenges.

It has to start from the bottom of our neural stack, with training the part of our minds that runs our bodies – our somatic center – so that the effects of the development of what is called ‘neural plasticity’ is intrinsic in our being.

An example. I have been a whitewater kayaker for over 41 years. Very few people my age still run whitewater in a kayak. And for good reason – whitewater is a brutal master. Unlike other adventure sports, like skiing, running whitewater in a kayak requires one to deal constantly with uncertainty. Water in its unfrozen state is constantly changing. The surface ripples unpredictably under one’s boat. If you fail, you swim – and swimming in whitewater is one of the more brutal things a human can do and survive.

And rapids in rivers also change over time. Though there’s no question some rivers are more stable than others, weather and geology change features, and require constant realignment in real time with your environment. If you are going to run whitewater, especially as one ages, you must have done the work. And you must be able to expand under pressure.

A little background. When I was 18 years old and started paddling, it was almost my whole world. Wild country, along with beautiful rivers I couldn’t imagine from growing up in the Ohio Valley were suddenly open to me. I progressed rapidly, and started running Class V whitewater (on a scale of I-VI) in only about the course of 2 years.

For the next 30 years, I chased whitewater around the globe. But a divorce, and the inevitability of the loss of reflexes from aging, caught up with me. I wiped out on one of my local Class V runs, lost my boat, and was forced to hike out of a 2500' deep gorge. I called my friends in California. "Chuck," they said. "Everyone stops paddling Class V sooner or later. Some stop before they drown."

I had kids. So I dialed it back. But the intense somatic training stayed with me. If you want to run Class V, you must practice slow, rhythmic breathing. You must control your heart rate, and your fear. You must retain precision focus, as well as body movement. Thousands of times, and situations, the river trained me.

I still paddle. Last summer, I was standing with my son, 22, also paddling a kayak, looking at Troublemaker Rapids on the S. Fork of the American River outside of Auburn, CA. The reality of the S. Fork of the American is that it is run literally by thousands of people in rafts every summer. It is far from cutting edge. But that said, Troublemaker is still a real, bona-fide Class IV rapids. It was my first run down that section, and worthy of a scout.

My son and I discussed the line from the embankment over the river. And then I walked back to my boat, and prepared myself for my run. I went first. My son, who is in far better shape than me, and far more gifted physically, but also with far less experience, followed behind.

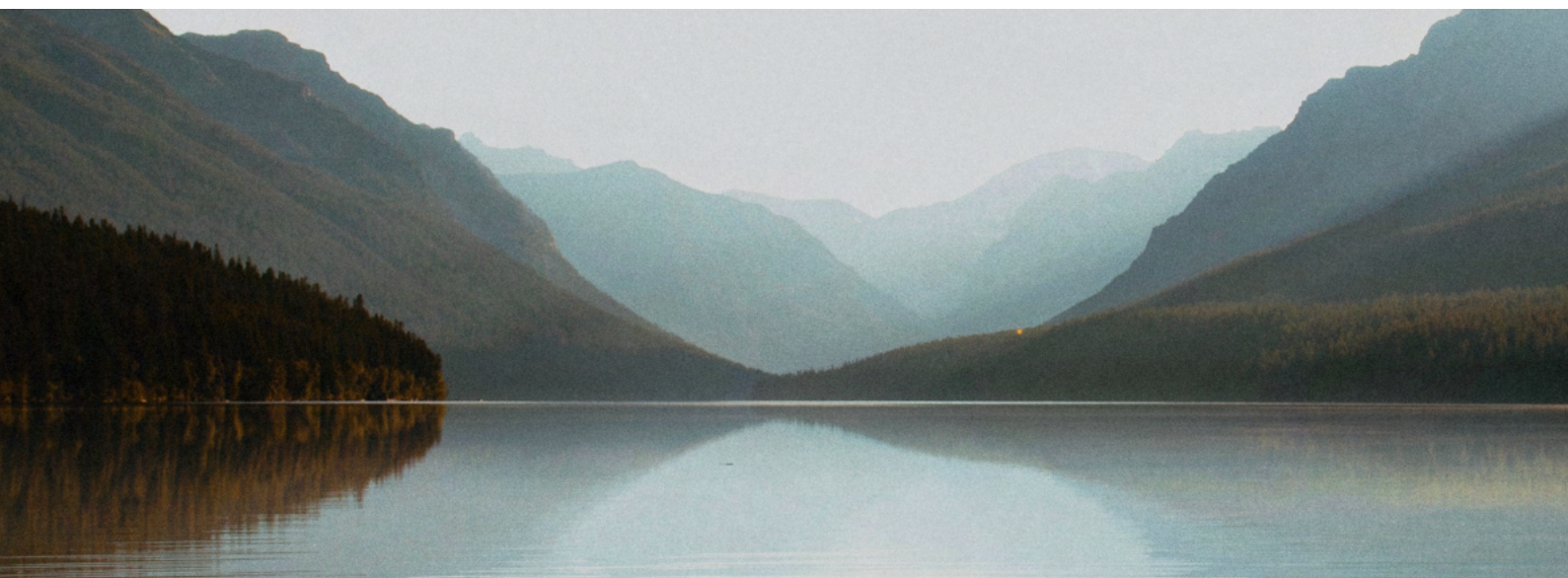
I shoved off from the bank. After about three paddle strokes toward the 4' ledge that dominates the top of the rapids, I realized that the line I had called from the shore was really not the way to go. I instantly realigned my boat, jetted off the ledge to the left, and landed flat in the lower eddy. Paddling with a slow, steady cadence, I skirted a critical rock in the river, and completed the run.

Expand under pressure.

My son came paddling up behind me. Unable to adapt, he flipped. But he was strong, and used that strength to overcompensate and roll his kayak up. It was to no avail. He immediately flipped again, and after a couple of failed roll attempts, swam from his boat. He had not done the work, and he knew it. But since he is my son, there were no excuses. “I know what I have to do next, Pops,” he said. Indeed.

In the parlance of complex systems theory, ‘expand under pressure’ means understanding the simple, linear models in your head will likely not suffice. You’ll need to seek a new course that will require acceptance of a multiplicity of solutions. And, unlike the simpler, linear thinking, which path you choose depends on both where you start, and data collected along the way. There is no way you can always, a priori, pick the correct path. You can, however, prepare both your body and mind, working to imbue both with the flexibility to receive that new decision that must be made.

And if you’ve done the work, instead of collapsing, you’ll expand under pressure.



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