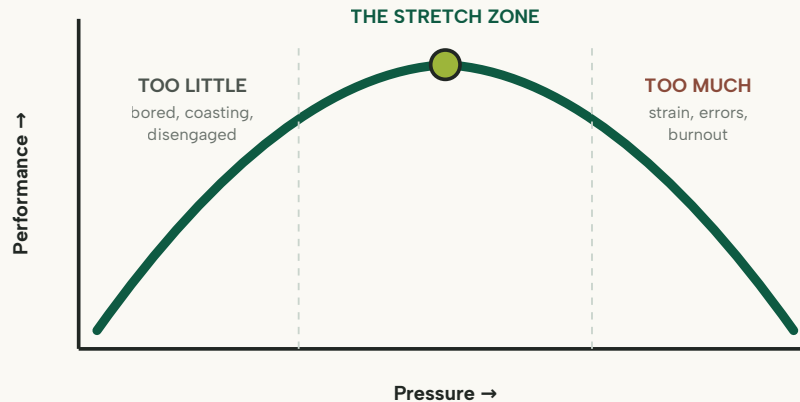




The Pressure-Performance Curve

Pressure isn't the enemy — the wrong amount of it is. How to read where your team actually sits.

Some pressure is necessary. Too little and people coast; performance sags from boredom, not exhaustion. But the curve doesn't climb forever — past a peak, more pressure buys you *worse* performance, then errors, then burnout. Leadership under strain isn't about removing pressure or adding it. It's about knowing which side of the curve each person is on — because the fix for each side is the opposite of the other.



Reading the zones

Zone	What you'll see	What actually helps
Too little	Coasting, minimum effort, "quiet quitting" energy, boredom disguised as contentment	More challenge, not more comfort: stretch assignments, real ownership, visible stakes
The stretch zone	Focused, energized, absorbed in the work, growing — challenged but resourced	Protect it. Don't "reward" people here by piling on until they tip over the peak
Too much	Rising errors, shortened tempers, cut corners, cynicism, working harder for worse results	Remove load, not add pep talks: reprioritize, extend deadlines, take something off the plate — visibly

The three mistakes leaders make with this curve

- **Rewarding your best people with more pressure.** Your strongest performer sits near the peak — so every new crisis lands on them, which is exactly how high performers become your next resignation. High contribution is not evidence of spare capacity.
- **Reading "fine" as fine.** The right side of the curve often looks like heroic effort right up until it doesn't. Rising error rates and shortening tempers are earlier, more honest signals than anything people will say out loud.
- **Prescribing the same fix for both sides.** Wellness resources for someone who's bored and stretch goals for someone who's drowning are both the correct medicine — for the other patient. Diagnose the side first.

Stretch is a place to visit, not live

Peak performance is not a permanent address. People need to return to comfort between pushes, and that recovery is what keeps stretch from tipping into burnout. Building this rhythm is workplace resilience, and leaders carry most of it:

- **Recognize the signs early:** shorter tempers, rising errors, cut corners
- **Enforce small daily breaks** — and enforce means modeling them yourself, out loud
- **Ask.** The question below works any time someone looks like they're living at the peak

One question to locate someone on the curve

"Right now, does your work feel more like too much, too little, or the right kind of hard?"

People almost always know exactly where they are. What they lack is a leader who asks — and adjusts something real based on the answer.

Based on the Yerkes–Dodson law (Robert Yerkes and John Dodson, 1908) — over a century of research on the relationship between arousal and performance, applied here to the pressure leaders and teams actually face.

Want this as a session for your team or conference? This guide pairs with "Building Your WRAW: Workplace Resilience & Wellbeing" — practical resilience for people under real pressure, delivered by a certified WRAW Master Facilitator. Not a pep talk. heatherlambert.speaker@gmail.com · 615.434.5180