



BESTMINDSET

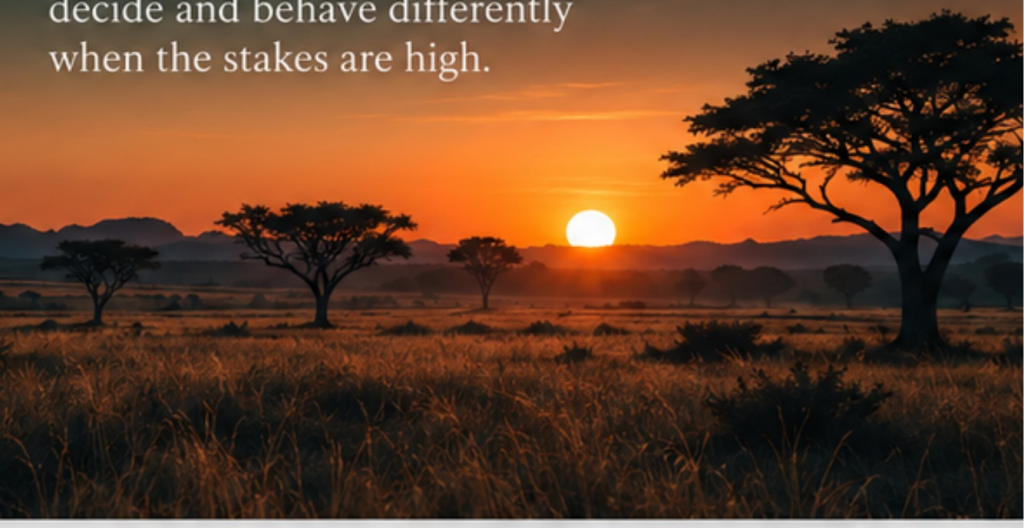
Veronica van Nierop B.Sc; M.NLP; N.E.T

Leadership Performance
Under Pressure

The Oldest Response in the Room

The Leadership Performance
Under Pressure Briefing

Why good leaders can think,
decide and behave differently
when the stakes are high.



1. The grassland

Forty thousand years ago, at the edge of a grassland, a hunter stops mid-stride.

The grass ahead has moved against the wind.

Before he can form a thought, his body has already decided. His breathing stills. His eyes fix on the movement. Every muscle holds.

This is freeze: the first defence, buying a fraction of a second to assess the threat.

If the shape in the grass is a lion, he has two remaining options. He can run for the trees, flee the threat or, if cornered, or protecting his child, he can raise his spear and stand his ground, fight the threat.

Either way it is survival reactions calling the shots. Rational thinking and emotional intelligence are not a luxury he can afford right now.

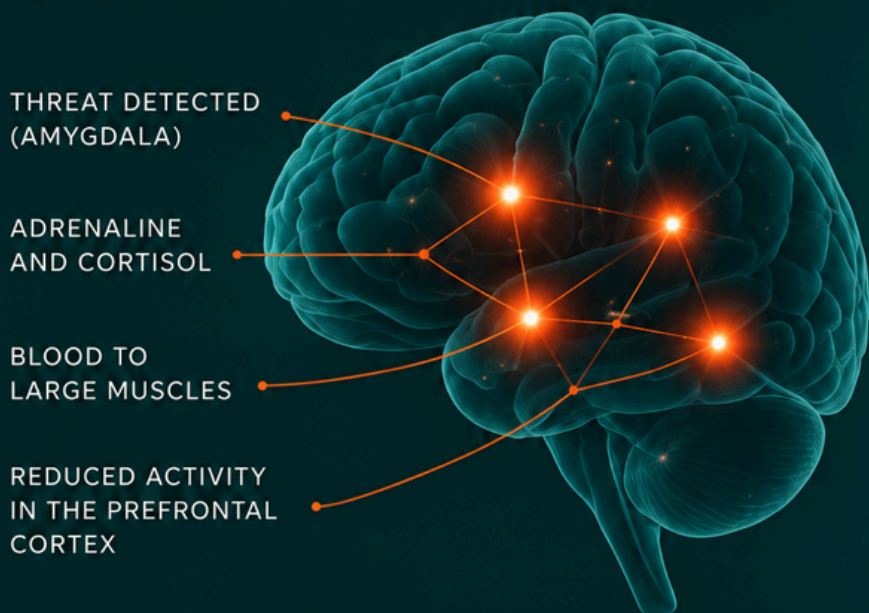
None of this involves deliberation. Adrenaline floods his system in seconds and cortisol follows. Blood moves to the large muscles, and his attention narrows to the threat. The slower, reflective parts of his brain step back, because in that moment reflection is a liability.

Those who hesitated to think did not become our ancestors.



2. The predators have changed. The response has not.

These survival reflexes are hard wired into our brains. The body's threat systems evolved for physical danger. Research shows they are also strongly activated by social and psychological threats, especially being judged by others in situations we cannot control.



Under acute stress, the brain temporarily reduces the function of the prefrontal cortex, the area behind our forehead. This is the region senior roles depend on most, for judgement, perspective and considered decisions.

The reflex that once saved a life can now derail a strategy, a meeting or a team.

3. Modern leadership, ancient wiring

The environment has changed, but the biology has not. Today's leaders are not facing lions, but the brain still responds as if they are.

A critical email. A challenging conversation. A board presentation. A high-stakes decision.

The modern workplace can trigger the same ancient threat response.

COMMON TRIGGERS INCLUDE:



Being scrutinised or judged



Conflict or confrontation



Uncertainty and risk



High expectations



Time pressure



Visibility and influence



4. What happens in the brain

When we perceive a threat, real or imagined, the brain activates a rapid, automatic response. This happens in milliseconds, before we have a chance to think.

01 THREAT DETECTED

The amygdala scans for danger, picking up on cues such as tone of voice, body language or a challenging email.

02 STRESS RESPONSE ACTIVATED

Adrenaline and cortisol are released, preparing the body for action.

03 BLOOD REDIRECTED

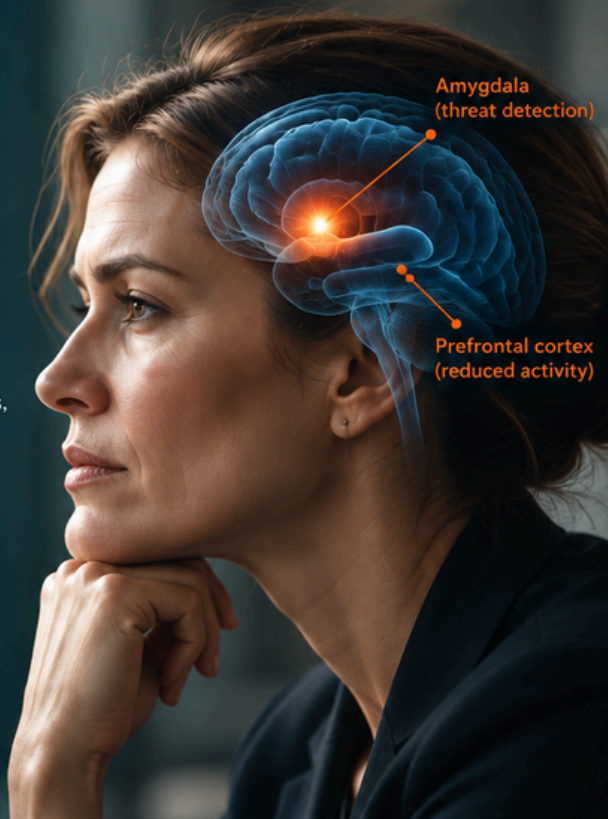
Blood flows to the large muscles, increasing heart rate and heightening alertness.

04 PREFRONTAL CORTEX GOES OFFLINE

The logical, reflective part of the brain reduces activity.

05 SURVIVAL MODE

We are primed to fight, flee or freeze, not to collaborate, problem solve or think clearly.



This response was essential for our survival. It helped our ancestors evade predators and keep themselves and their tribe safe.

The challenge today is that the same ancient wiring is activated in modern workplaces, often in situations that are uncomfortable rather than life-threatening.

5. The impact at work

When the oldest response in the room is activated, it can significantly affect how we think, feel and behave at work, often without us even realising.



DECISION MAKING

We can default to quick, defensive decisions rather than considered, strategic thinking.



COMMUNICATION

We may become more guarded, reactive or avoidant in our conversations.



RELATIONSHIPS

We can misinterpret intent, assume risk and find it harder to build trust and collaboration.



PERFORMANCE

Our focus narrows, creativity reduces and we can struggle to see the bigger picture.



ENERGY AND WELLBEING

Living in a heightened state of alert is mentally and physically draining over time.

These are not character flaws or a lack of capability. They are predictable biological responses designed to keep us safe, but they can get in the way of the leadership we want to show up as.



6. How it shows up for leaders

The oldest response in the room can show up in subtle ways. It can look like diligence, perfectionism or caution, but underneath, it is often the brain trying to keep us safe.

Many high-performing professionals experience these patterns, especially in high-stakes, high-visibility environments.

The result can be capable, experienced leaders feeling less confident, more reactive or harder on themselves than they need to be.



COMMON SIGNS INCLUDE:



Overthinking and second-guessing



Over-preparing but still feeling not ready



Difficulty speaking up in meetings



Heightened sensitivity to feedback



Avoiding risk or new opportunities



Feeling mentally and physically drained



Being harder on ourselves than we would be on others

These responses are understandable. They have kept us safe. But they are not always helpful in a modern leadership context.

The good news is that once we can recognise the signs, we can learn how to work with the brain, rather than against it.

7. Choosing a different path

The oldest response in the room is powerful, but it is not a life sentence. Once we understand what is happening, we can choose a different path.

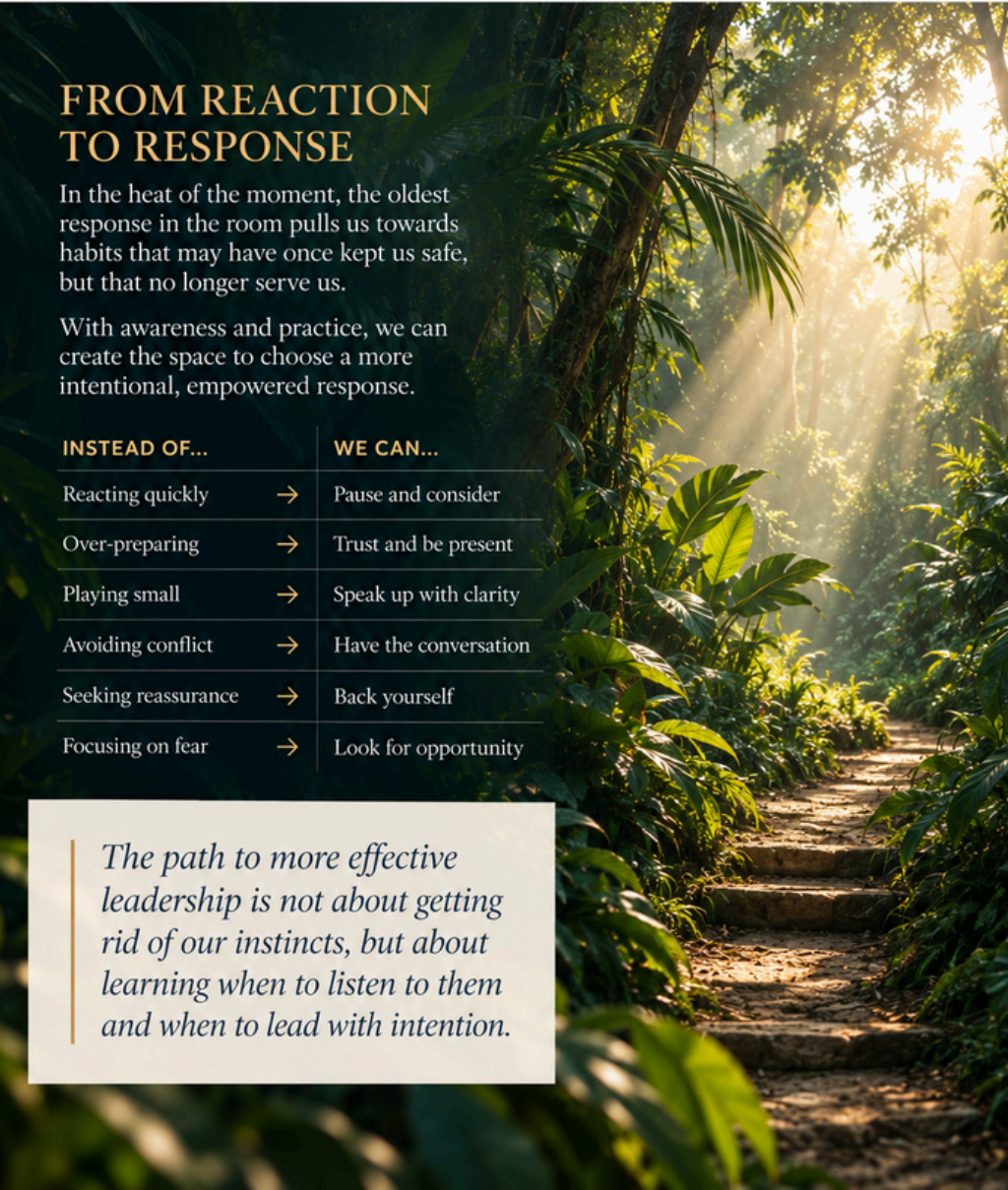
FROM REACTION TO RESPONSE

In the heat of the moment, the oldest response in the room pulls us towards habits that may have once kept us safe, but that no longer serve us.

With awareness and practice, we can create the space to choose a more intentional, empowered response.

INSTEAD OF...		WE CAN...
Reacting quickly	→	Pause and consider
Over-preparing	→	Trust and be present
Playing small	→	Speak up with clarity
Avoiding conflict	→	Have the conversation
Seeking reassurance	→	Back yourself
Focusing on fear	→	Look for opportunity

The path to more effective leadership is not about getting rid of our instincts, but about learning when to listen to them and when to lead with intention.



8. Key takeaways

The oldest response in the room is a natural, protective mechanism that has helped us survive. But it does not always serve us in a modern leadership context.

01

RECOGNISE

Notice the signs in yourself and in the room. Awareness gives you choice.

02

UNDERSTAND

It is a biological response, not a character flaw. It has kept us safe, but it can now limit our potential.

03

PAUSE

Use what you learn in the programme to calm your nervous system and re-engage your thinking brain.

04

CHOOSE

Respond with intention. Draw on the part of your brain that is calm, curious and solution focused.

05

PRACTISE

The more you work with this, the easier it becomes to stay present, even in high pressure situations.

06

LEAD

Lead from power, not pressure. When you are in a calmer, more intentional state, you create greater clarity, confidence and impact, for yourself and those around you.

*A calmer mind. A stronger leader.
A bigger impact.*

When we understand the oldest response in the room, we can lead with greater clarity, confidence and influence, for ourselves, our teams and the change we want to create.



VERONICA
VAN NIEROP B.Sc; M.NLP; N.E.T
LEADERSHIP PERFORMANCE
UNDER PRESSURE

Working with me

A MORE EFFECTIVE APPROACH
TO LEADERSHIP PERFORMANCE

With nearly three decades of cross-industry experience, my work combines organisational neuroscience and emotional intelligence, grounded in scientific rigour and a practical understanding of the realities of senior leadership.

My expertise enables me to work with what is happening beneath the visible behaviour, to understand the thinking, patterns and responses driving it.

Development is not about imposing a generic leadership model or asking someone to become a different kind of leader.

It is about enabling leaders to access and strengthen the qualities, judgement and capabilities they already possess, particularly when pressure would otherwise get in the way.

If you are seeing these patterns
in one of your senior leaders,
let's talk.



| v@veronicavannierop.com