

Leadership Development Consultant

Kurtis Mercer

THE INNER GAME OF LEADERSHIP

How Self-Awareness Drives Performance, Decision-Making, and Team Culture

THE FIVE PILLARS OF THE INNER GAME OF LEADERSHIP

1. Awareness
2. Regulation
3. Communication
4. Collaboration
5. Performance

PILLAR 2 — AWARENESS

UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONS AND INTERNAL DRIVERS





WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE SELF-AWARE?

**Most people describe self-awareness
by talking about the story they tell about themselves.**

WHAT PEOPLE THINK SELF AWARENESS IS

A black silhouette of a person's head and shoulders is centered against a dark blue background with a fine, grid-like texture. The silhouette is facing forward, and its head is slightly tilted. Inside the head area, four lines of white text are stacked vertically. At the bottom of the silhouette, a line of red text is visible.

“I’m a good listener”.

“I’m hardworking”.

“I’m honest”.

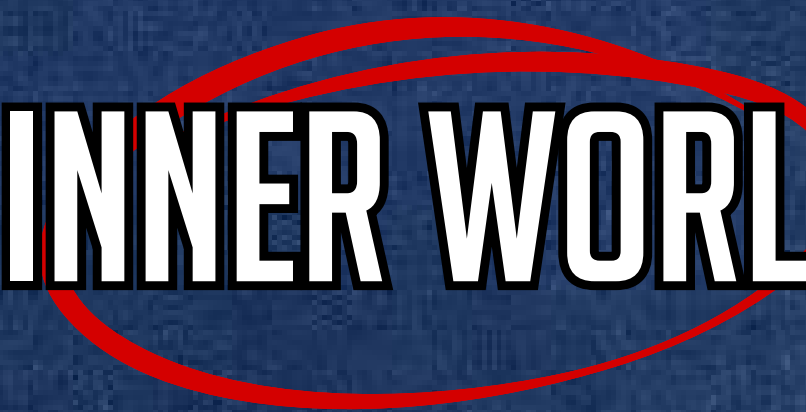
“I’m driven”.

“I’M A GOOD PERSON”.

REAL SELF-AWARENESS

HONESTY

ABOUT YOUR INNER WORLD



REAL SELF-AWARENESS

Fear of failure

Need for approval

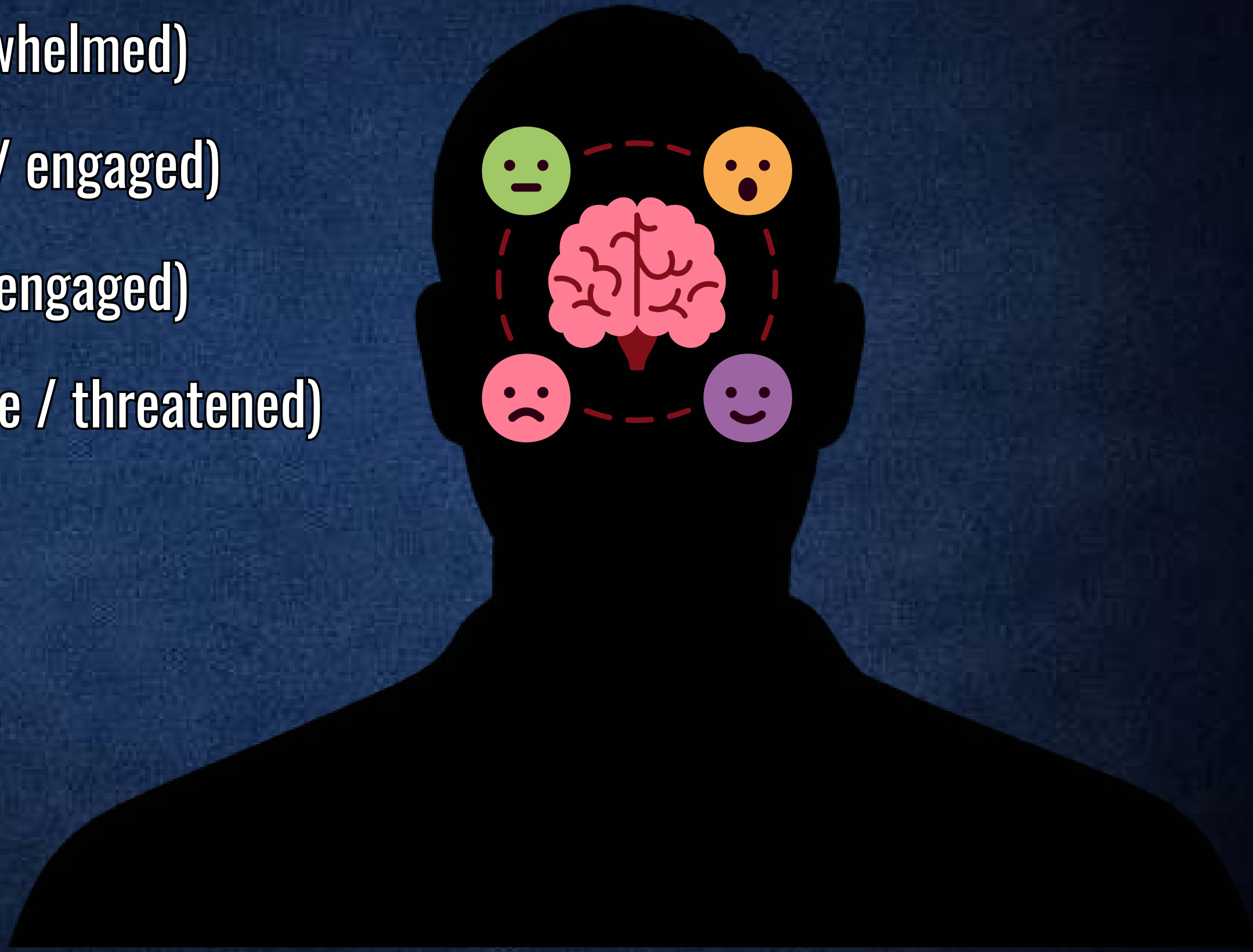
Discomfort with conflict

Need for control

“I’M IN PAIN”.

EMOTIONS CAN HIJACK YOU

- “My brain feels foggy.” (shutdown / overwhelmed)
- “I’m excited about this idea.” (energized / engaged)
- “I don’t care anymore.” (indifferent / disengaged)
- “Why is everyone against me?” (defensive / threatened)



WHO IS AT THE CONTROLS RIGHT NOW?



WHEN EMOTIONS HIJACK YOU AT WORK



MISREADING COWORKERS' INTENTIONS



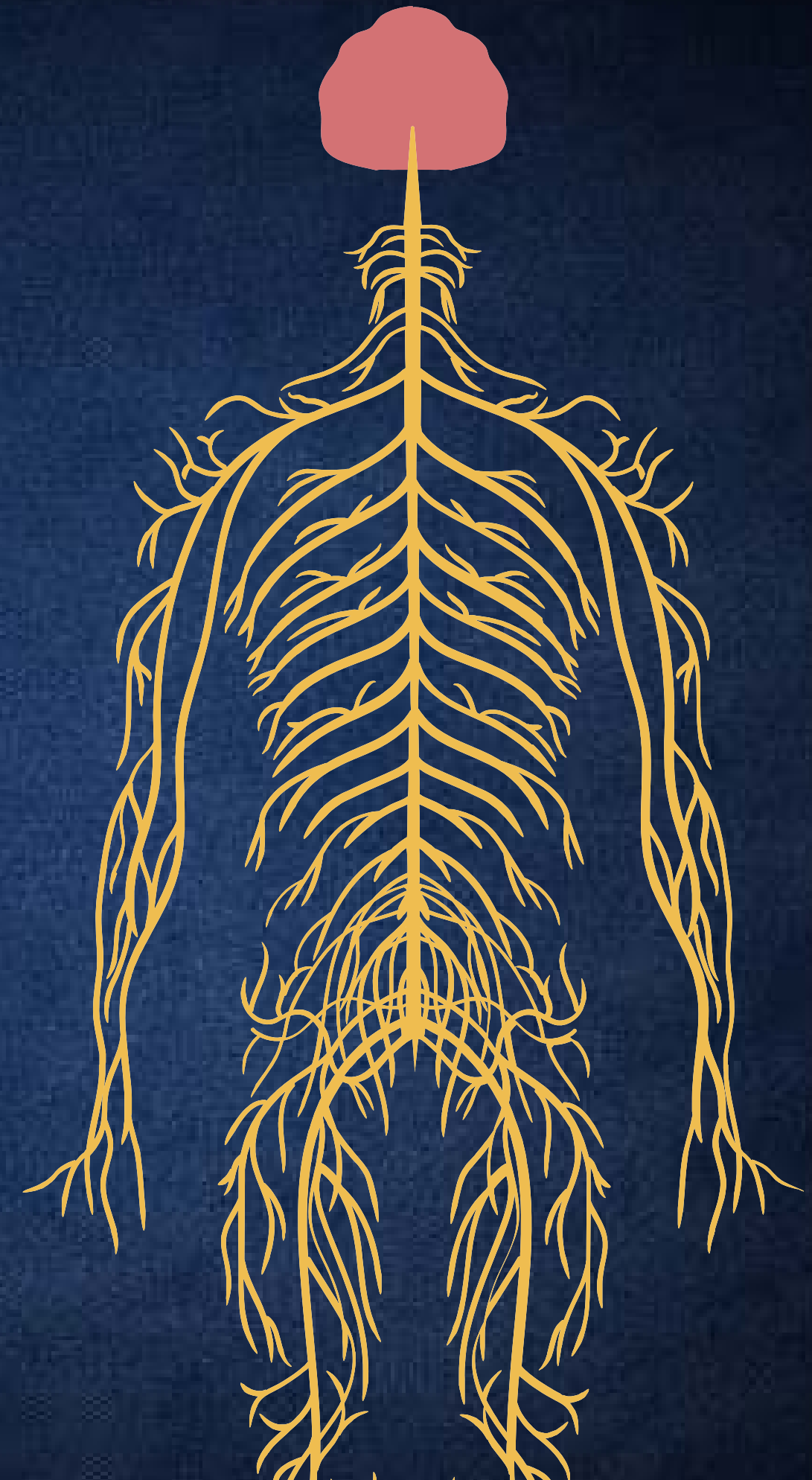
AVOIDING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

YOUR EMOTIONS ARE NOT JUST THOUGHTS

EMOTIONS CAN HIJACK YOU

Physiological

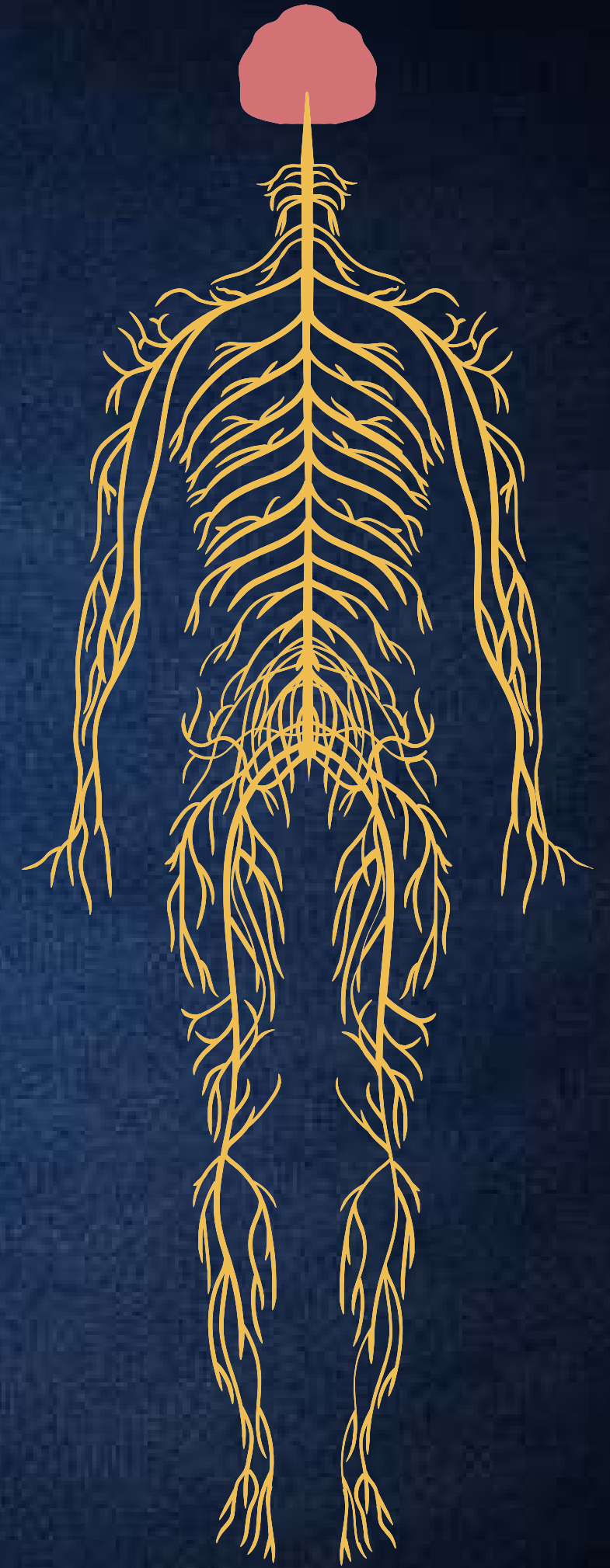
- “My chest feels tight.” (shutdown / overwhelmed)
- “My heart is racing.” (energized / engaged)
- “My body feels heavy.” (indifferent / disengaged)
- “My jaw is clenched.” (defensive / threatened)



WHAT IS THE NERVOUS SYSTEM?

- The nervous system constantly scans the environment to determine whether situations feel safe or threatening.
- When it senses pressure or threat, it can activate a stress response that prepares the body to react quickly.
- In high-pressure situations, the nervous system can override clear thinking and push people into automatic reactions.
- This is why people sometimes say or do things under stress that they would not normally choose when they are calm.

Sources: National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) – Stress and Your Health
Harvard Health Publishing – Understanding the Stress Response
Nature Reviews Neuroscience – Stress Signalling Pathways that Impair Prefrontal Cortex Function



STRESS CHANGES HOW WE SEE SITUATIONS

When the nervous system shifts into a stress response, the first thing that changes is how we perceive situations.

We stop looking for understanding, and we start looking for potential threat & feel unsafe.”



PERCEPTION VS REALITY



THIS IS WHAT FEELING UNSAFE LOOKS LIKE

- Feeling criticized in a meeting
- Feeling judged by coworkers
- Thinking your boss is disappointed
- Feeling excluded from a conversation
- Believing you made a mistake everyone noticed

**CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES SHAPE HOW WE
THINK, FEEL, AND REACT AS ADULTS.**



YOU ARE NOT YOUR EMOTIONS

AWARENESS IS THE KEY TO CONTROLLING YOUR EMOTIONS



**Most leadership training focuses on skills.
But skills fail under stress without awareness.**

PILLAR 2 — REGULATION

MANAGING REACTIONS UNDER PRESSURE



REACTION VS RESPONSE

HOW EMPLOYEES RESPOND TO PRESSURE

When pressure increases in the workplace, employees often move into automatic stress reactions.



Sources: American Psychological Association (APA): Stress Effects on the Body, National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH): Stress and Your Health
World Health Organization (WHO): Mental Health in the Workplace, Harvard Health Publishing: Understanding the Stress Response

PRESSURE WORKPLACE SITUATION

A CUSTOMER ORDER
MUST BE COMPLETED
BY THE END OF THE DAY,
BUT THE TEAM IS ALREADY
BEHIND SCHEDULE.



STRESS RESPONSE

HER BODY AND MIND
SHIFT INTO SURVIVAL MODE.

OH MY GOD...
MY BOSS IS
GOING TO FIRE ME!
I'M GOING TO
GO HOMELESS!

I'M NOT GOING
TO GET THAT
PROMOTION.

I'M NOT
GOOD ENOUGH.

I'VE MADE TOO
MANY MISTAKES.

EVERYONE IS
DISAPPOINTED
IN ME.

WHAT WILL
MY FAMILY
THINK?

I CAN'T
KEEP UP.

THIS IS TOO
MUCH FOR ME.

I'M GOING TO
LOSE EVERYTHING.

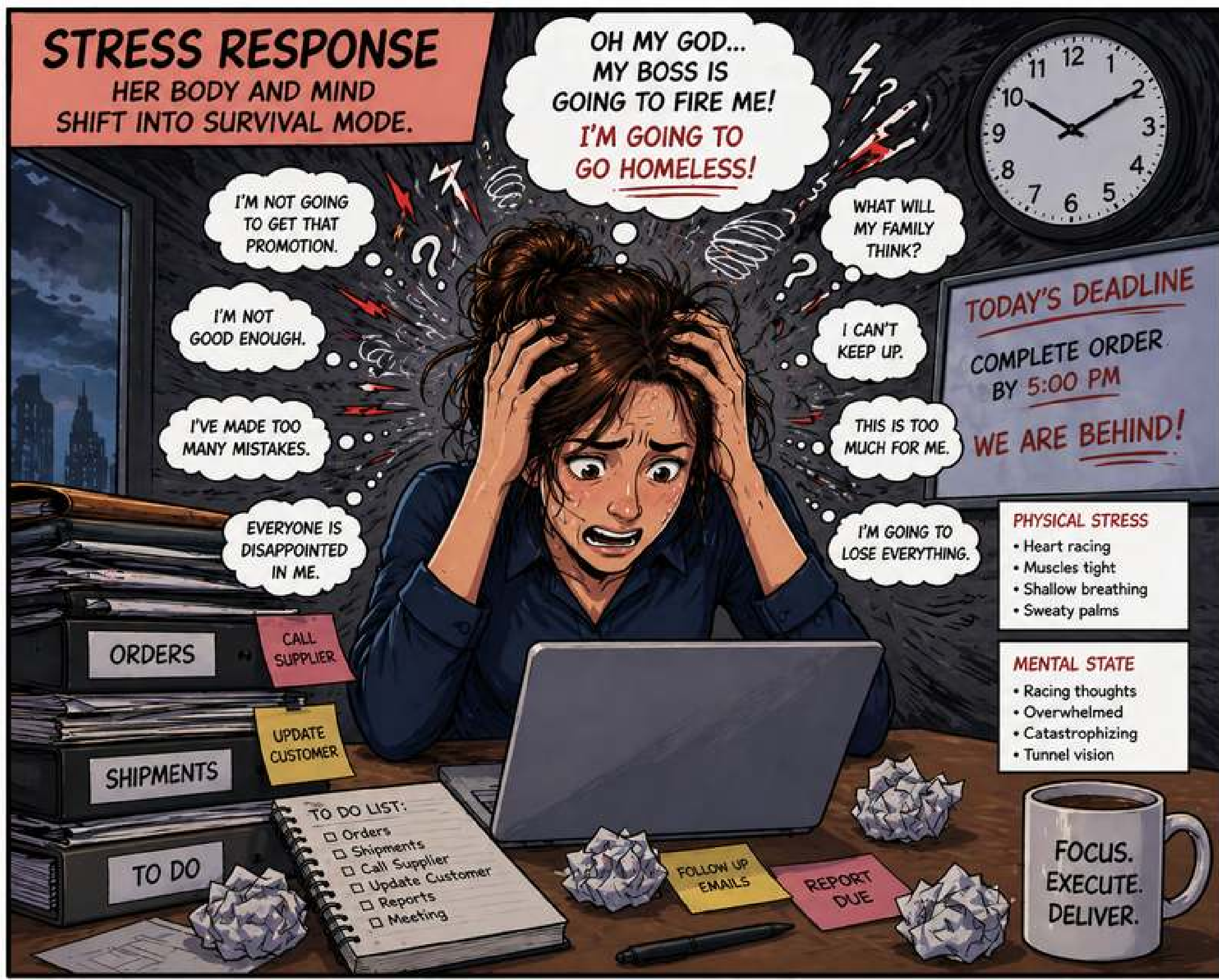
TODAY'S DEADLINE
COMPLETE ORDER
BY 5:00 PM
WE ARE BEHIND!

PHYSICAL STRESS

- Heart racing
- Muscles tight
- Shallow breathing
- Sweaty palms

MENTAL STATE

- Racing thoughts
- Overwhelmed
- Catastrophizing
- Tunnel vision



ORDERS

CALL
SUPPLIER

UPDATE
CUSTOMER

SHIPMENTS

TO DO

TO DO LIST:

- ☐ Orders
- ☐ Shipments
- ☐ Call Supplier
- ☐ Update Customer
- ☐ Reports
- ☐ Meeting

FOLLOW UP
EMAILS

REPORT
DUE

FOCUS.
EXECUTE.
DELIVER.

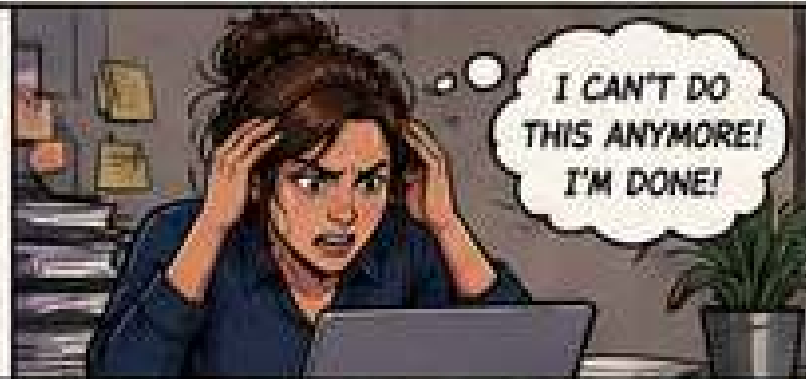
IMPULSIVE REACTIONS

Automatic. Emotional. Often Regrettable.

When stress takes over,
we react without thinking.

1. QUITTING OR WALKING OUT

Leaves the problem
behind—temporarily.

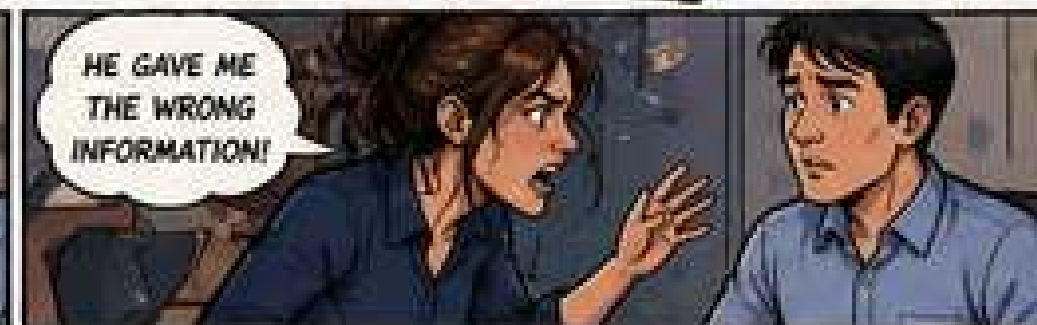


RESULT:

Burned bridges.
Financial stress.
Problem not solved.

2. BLAMING SOMEONE ELSE

Avoids responsibility
and creates conflict.

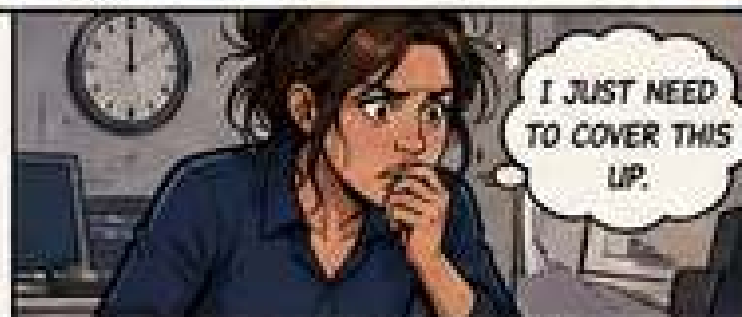


RESULT:

Damaged relationships.
Loss of trust.
Team tension increases.

3. LYING OR HIDING THE TRUTH

Feels like a quick fix
but causes bigger
problems later.

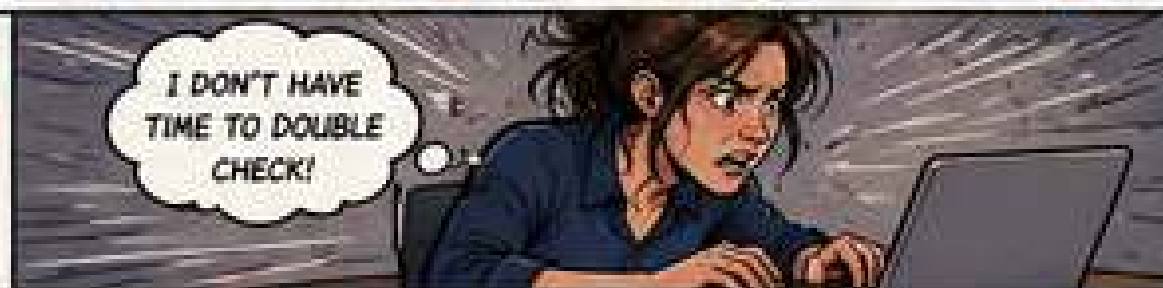


RESULT:

Erodes credibility.
Harder conversations
in the future.

4. RUSHING DECISIONS OR TAKING SHORTCUTS

Leads to mistakes
and more work.



RESULT:

Costly mistakes.
Rework. Delays.
More stress.

5. EMOTIONAL OUTBURSTS

Lets emotions take
control of behavior
and communication.



RESULT:

Hurts relationships.
Creates fear or distance.
Harder to resolve issues.

IMPULSIVE REACTIONS MAY FEEL GOOD IN THE MOMENT, BUT THEY CREATE MORE STRESS, MORE PROBLEMS, AND MORE REGRET.



ALTERNATIVE SCENARIO

PRESSURE WORKPLACE SITUATION

A CUSTOMER ORDER
MUST BE COMPLETED
BY THE END OF THE DAY,
BUT THE TEAM IS ALREADY
BEHIND SCHEDULE.



AWARENESS CHANGES THE OUTCOME

Same Pressure. Different Path.

1. PRESSURE

A customer order must be completed by the end of the day, but the team is already behind schedule.



2. AWARENESS

ONE THING AT A TIME

BREATHE

FOCUS

AWARENESS creates space between pressure and response.



3. INTENTIONAL ACTION

She tackles one thing at a time and communicates clearly with her boss.

Plan:

1. Finish priority order
2. Update customer
3. Reassess timeline

Clear plan.
One step at a time.



4. OPEN COMMUNICATION

I want to be transparent.
I don't think we can meet the deadline for the full order.
I'm having some anxiety today and my mind is telling me I'll get fired.
I just wanted to be honest.



5. COLLABORATIVE SOLUTION

Let's prioritize the most important part of the order today. I'll communicate the new timeline to the customer.

Teamwork.
Trust.
Better solution.

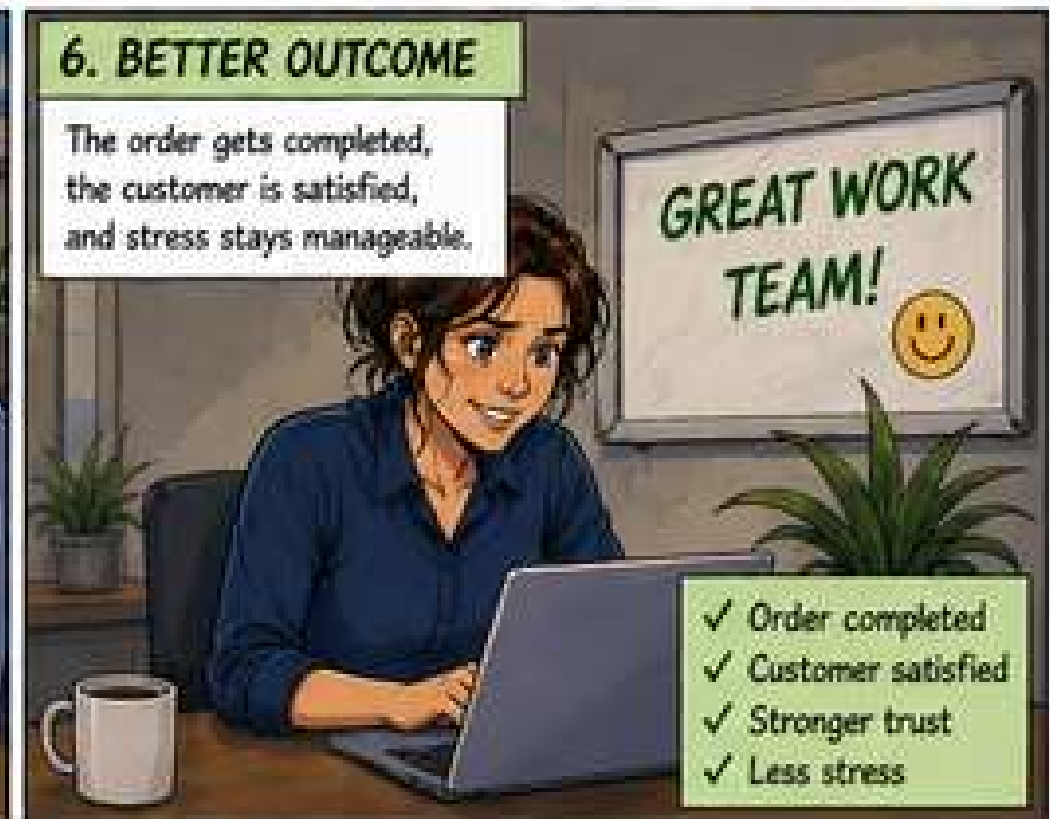


6. BETTER OUTCOME

The order gets completed, the customer is satisfied, and stress stays manageable.

GREAT WORK TEAM!

- ✓ Order completed
- ✓ Customer satisfied
- ✓ Stronger trust
- ✓ Less stress



AWARENESS LEADS TO CHOICE.
Choice leads to better actions.
Better actions lead to better results.



CALM MIND



CLEAR COMMUNICATION



STRONGER RESULTS

PILLAR 3 — COMMUNICATION

INTERACTING CLEARLY WITH OTHERS



HONESTY WITH OTHERS

Build Trust & Safety

- Share when something is affecting your focus
- Give context without oversharing details
- Honest communication reduces misunderstanding
- Trust grows when people feel safe to speak



⁺ GOSSIP THRIVES IN INFORMATION GAPS



GOSSIP THRIVES IN INFO GAPS

- When people don't understand a situation, they fill in the blanks
- Assumptions often turn into rumors
- Secondhand information is rarely reliable
- Professional leaders stay curious, not judgmental



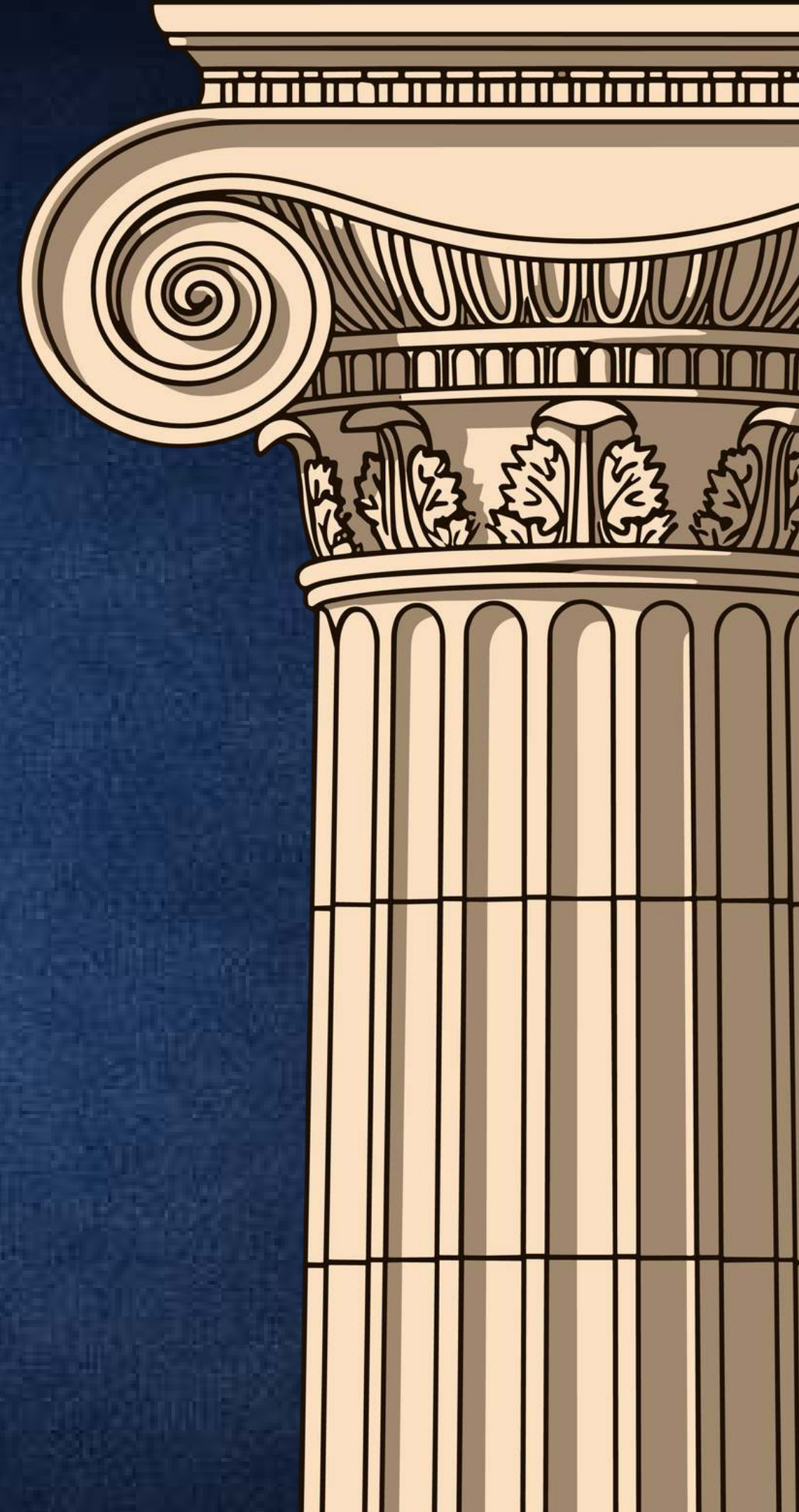
PILLAR 4 — COLLABORATION

COORDINATING EFFECTIVELY AS A TEAM



PILLAR 5 — PERFORMANCE

BECOMING THE LEADER YOUR TEAM NEEDS



THIS IS NOT YOUR IDENTITY

- “If I want something done right, I have to do it myself.”
- “People should just do their jobs properly.”
- “People rely on me.”
- “I’m the one everyone comes to when they need help.”
- “I just need to push a little harder.”
- “Results are what matter.”
- “I’m just wired differently.”
- “No one really gets where I’m coming from.”

THIS IS NOT YOUR IDENTITY

- “I’d rather just figure this out on my own.”
- “People drain my energy.”
- “Something could go wrong if we don’t think this through.”
- “Let’s just keep things positive.”
- “There’s always something better around the corner.”
- “You have to be strong in this world.”
- “If I don’t take charge, nobody will.”
- “It’s not worth making a big deal about.”
- “Let’s just keep things smooth.”

THIS IS YOUR TRUE-SELF



YOUR TRUE-SELF

FALSE SELF

- “I’d rather just figure this out on my own.” →
- “People drain my energy.” →
- “Something could go wrong if we don’t think this through.” →
- “There’s always something better around the corner.” →
- “Let’s just keep things positive.” →
- “You have to be strong in this world.” →
- “If I don’t take charge, nobody will.” →
- “It’s not worth making a big deal about.” →
- “Let’s just keep things smooth.” →

TRUE-SELF

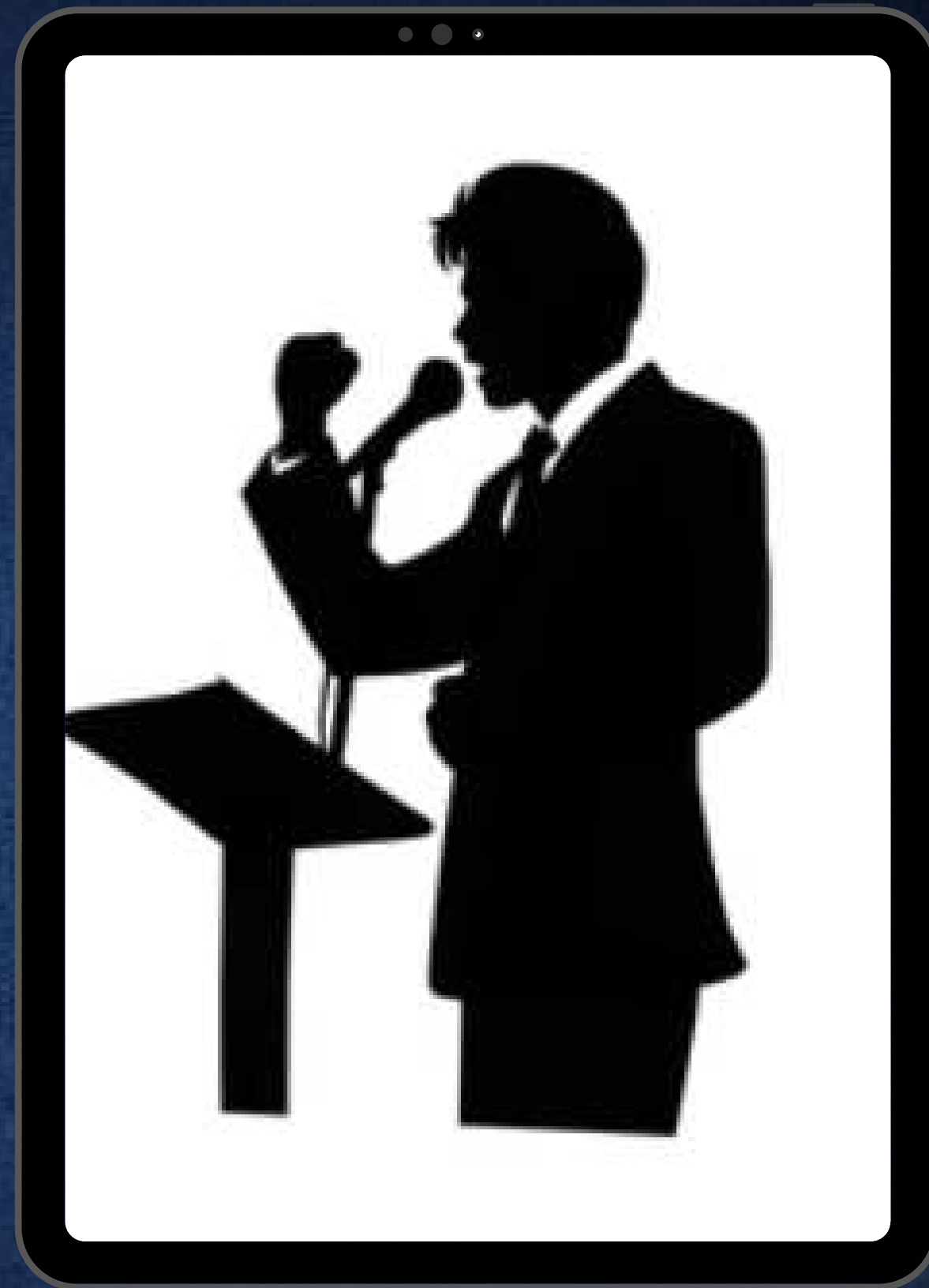
- “I’m capable, and I can also work with others when it helps.”
- “I can connect with people while still having time to myself to recharge.”
- “Even if something goes wrong, I know I can handle it.”
- “There may be something better ahead, but I can handle whatever comes.”
- “We don’t have to pretend everything is fine in order to work through it.”
- “The world can be harsh at times, but there is also goodness in it.”
- “I don’t have to take charge of everything. Others bring strengths I don’t.”
- “My ideas are worth sharing.”
- “Addressing issues helps us improve.”

CHANGING THOUGHTS ISN'T THE WHOLE STORY

TRANSFORMATION



MOTIVATION



TRANSFORMATION WINS EVERY TIME

MOTIVATION IS ONLY PART OF THE SOLUTION

Many leadership programs focus on motivation and inspiration.

They introduce powerful ideas and frameworks.

But when employees return to the pressures of daily work, those ideas can be difficult to apply in the moment.



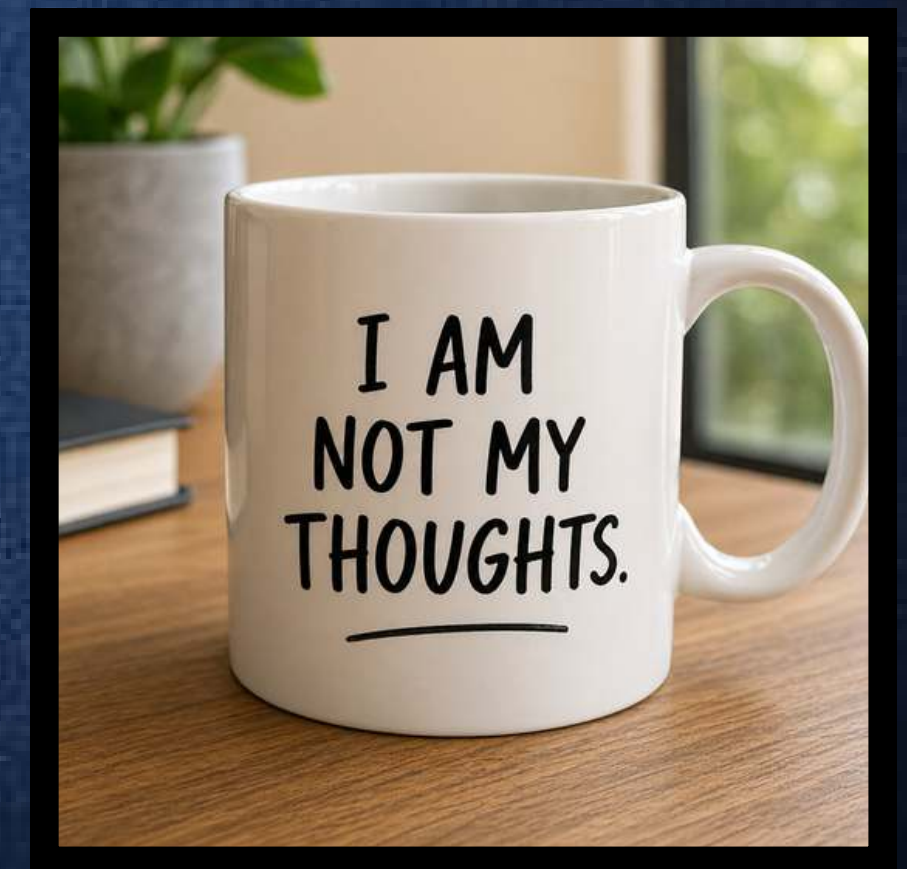
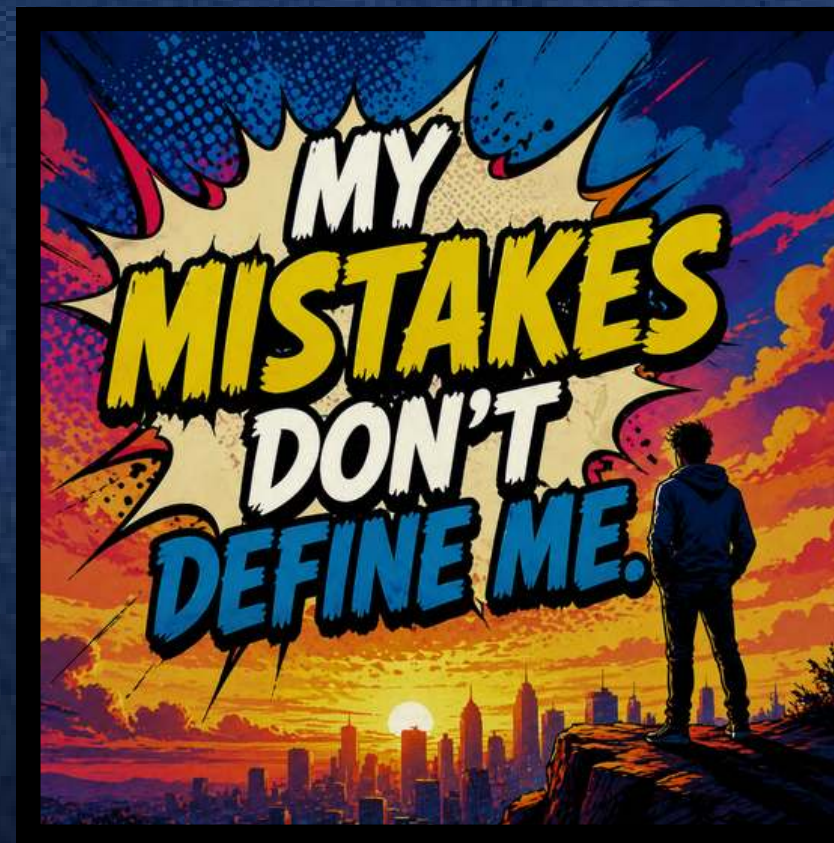
HOW TRANSFORMATION IS DIFFERENT

Instead of focusing on temporary motivation, this workshop focuses on practical change in everyday situations at work.

Employees begin to:

- recognize stress reactions in real time
- understand how those reactions influence behavior
- separate identity from temporary reactions
- develop awareness before acting

These skills are applied in real workplace situations as challenges and pressure naturally arise throughout the day.



WHAT TRANSFORMATION LOOKS LIKE AT WORK

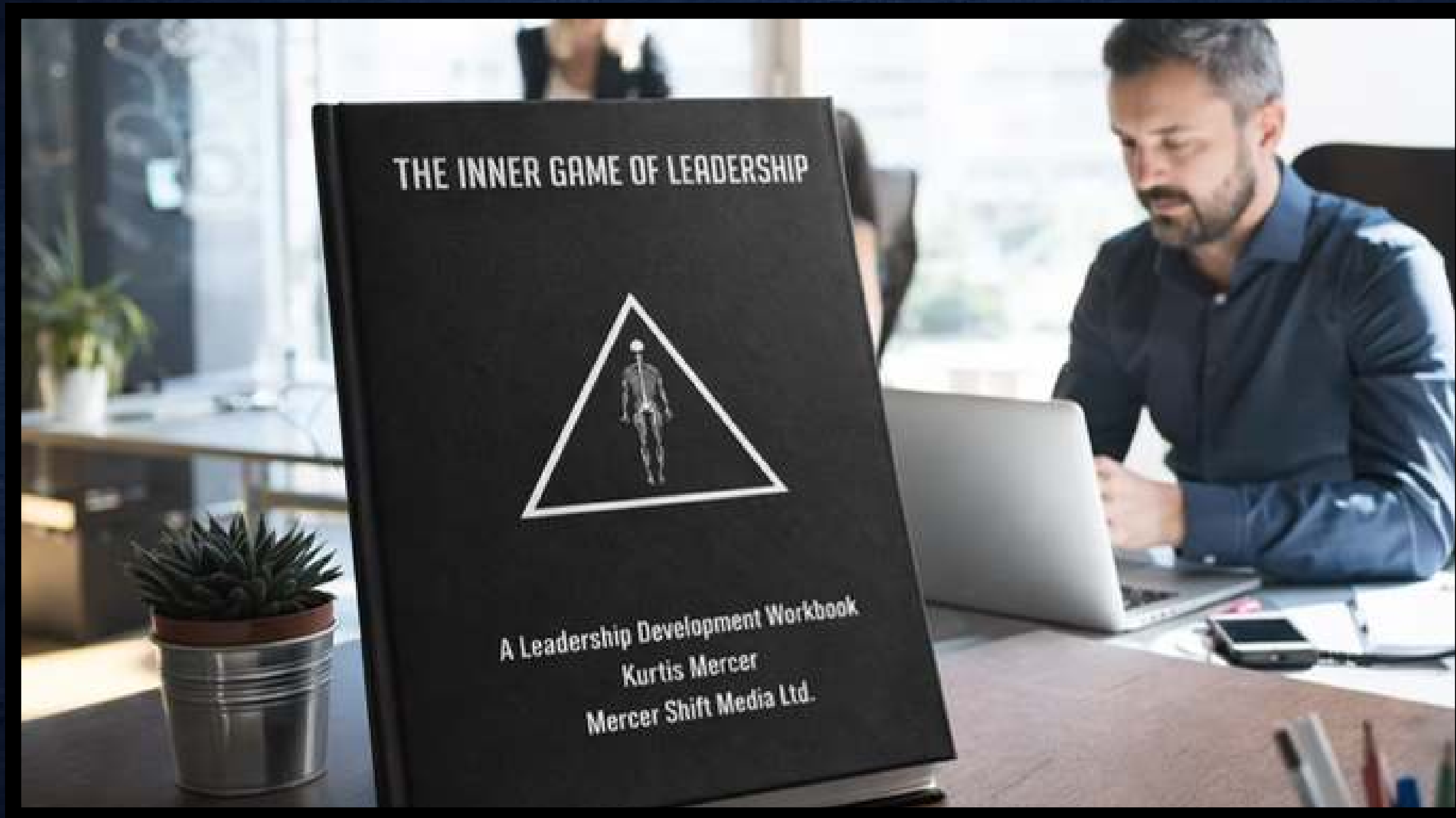
People begin to:

- pause before reacting under pressure
- communicate concerns clearly instead of emotionally
- interpret situations more accurately
- collaborate effectively even during stress
- make decisions with clarity instead of reaction



**When individuals change how they respond to pressure,
team performance naturally improves.**

THE INNER GAME OF LEADERSHIP WORK BOOK



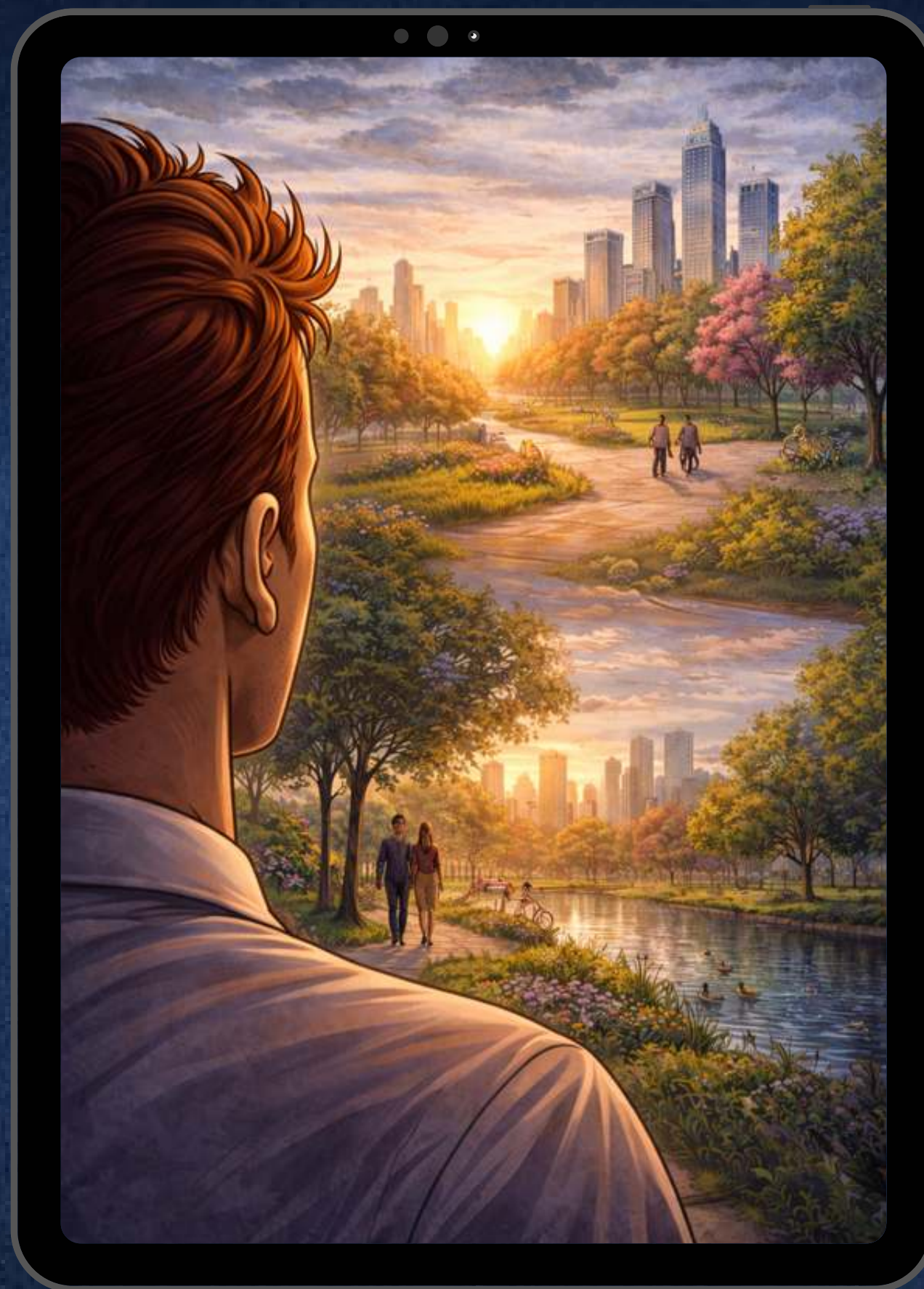
Where theory becomes practical

CLOSING STATEMENT

EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP BEGINS WITH SELF-AWARENESS.

When you understand what is happening inside you, your emotions stop controlling your reactions. You can pause, respond with clarity, and lead others with calm, confidence, and empathy. Because the more aware you become of your own inner world, the more understanding you have for everyone else's.

**Leadership isn't a position.
It's the ability to stay aware under pressure.**



ANY QUESTIONS ?