Surviving the Pressure
With a Ready Plan
Or, Literally, a Script

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Working one evening years ago, I suddenly felt horribly nauseated. I was preparing a major front-page feature within several hours, rather than the usual several weeks. As deadlines loomed, I pulled a tall trash can alongside my computer. I alternated between writing and throwing up.

We all find ourselves in hot spots at times. We must perform superbly under tremendous pressures. A golden opportunity to shine on the job can become a career-defining moment. But no one knows when this nerve-racking situation will happen next.

How do you avoid losing your cool -- and your lunch -- when you're thrust into the spotlight without warning?

The most important first step: Always expect the unexpected.

"That act alone increases a person's adaptability and resilience," says Dory Hollander, president of WiseWorkplaces, an executive-coaching firm in Arlington, Va. The worst thing, she adds, is to react "like a deer in the headlights -- too stunned to respond or survive."

Prepare by practicing positive self-talk. "Monitor that internal voice that says you're really an idiot and you can't do this job," proposes Gail Golden, a Chicago consultant for RHR International, an executive-coaching firm in Wood Dale, Ill. "When the hot spot hits, you have much more confidence to step up to the plate."

Smaller-scale calamities got Kevin Brookins ready for a big blowout -- a real one. He oversees Chicago's power needs as a regional director for Commonwealth Edison, owned by Exelon. He assumed his broad role in August after managing the city's southern suburbs, where he grappled with a storm-related outage. He says the prior stint taught him that he should assemble the right team in advance and that a crisis "is not the time to lose your head."
So, Mr. Brookins reacted calmly one Sunday morning this winter when a surprise power failure largely darkened a Chicago ward whose alderwoman already had squawked about her residents' poor service. His team restored service within about 70 minutes. He tried to restore the politician's shattered confidence by calling her at home the same day and revamping the ward's service-improvement plan later that week. He alerted Com Ed's top brass, too.

You also can handle a surprise spotlight well by crafting a game plan to conquer your panic-stricken mental chaos. Late one afternoon, a corporate client asked Personnel Decisions International to propose a multiyear project within two days. The Minneapolis talent-management consultancy typically spends a month drafting such complex proposals.

"Thirty things were swirling around in my head like a tornado," says Susan Gebelein, a PDI executive vice president. "I landed the tornado."

She jotted down her 30 ideas on Post-it Notes and placed similar ones together as she tacked them to a wall -- much as she had seen an IT team once do. The exercise enabled Ms. Gebelein to rapidly decide a sequence for tasks. PDI finished the proposal on time and won the project. "People need to know their process for getting comfortable when they hit a hot spot," she suggests.

Unanticipated hot spots often flare up during important meetings. Show patience, career experts say. Take deep breaths, compose your thoughts, restate the question -- and use humor to defuse tension. If you avoid blurting out the first thing that comes to mind, "people will see your demeanor as cool and professional," observes David F. D'Alessandro, head of John Hancock Financial Services in Boston and author of the book, "Career Warfare."

He learned this lesson the hard way years ago. At one former job, Mr. D'Alessandro was about to make his first -- but well-rehearsed -- presentation before his employer's board of directors when the tipsy chief executive made a pass at him. "Has anyone ever told you that you're a very attractive young man?" the leader asked.

Mr. D'Alessandro remembers thinking he should ignore the base remark. He also considered retorting, "Let's talk about my presentation, please." Instead, he replied, "Thank you very much, but not in this kind of environment."

Fellow executives privately praised the youthful marketing VP for deftly managing the awkward situation. The CEO's successor even cited the boardroom incident when he later gave Mr. D'Alessandro a more visible role.

"He said, 'That was the first time I saw you and I liked the way you handled it,' " Mr. D'Alessandro recalls.

Most people don't do well with the unexpected because they lack a script, notes Dr. Hollander. The workplace psychologist recommends acting classes for her clients.

A year of lessons helped one female client advance into the executive ranks at a big technology company. The woman used to perform poorly when colleagues tossed out unforeseen questions after presentations. "She looked like she was in pain," Dr. Hollander recalls.

Today, the former middle manager acts confident and appears to enjoy herself even when she lands on the hot seat. "It really is theater," her coach concludes.
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