

WHITE PAPER

# Turn Up the Heat, Turn Up the Learning

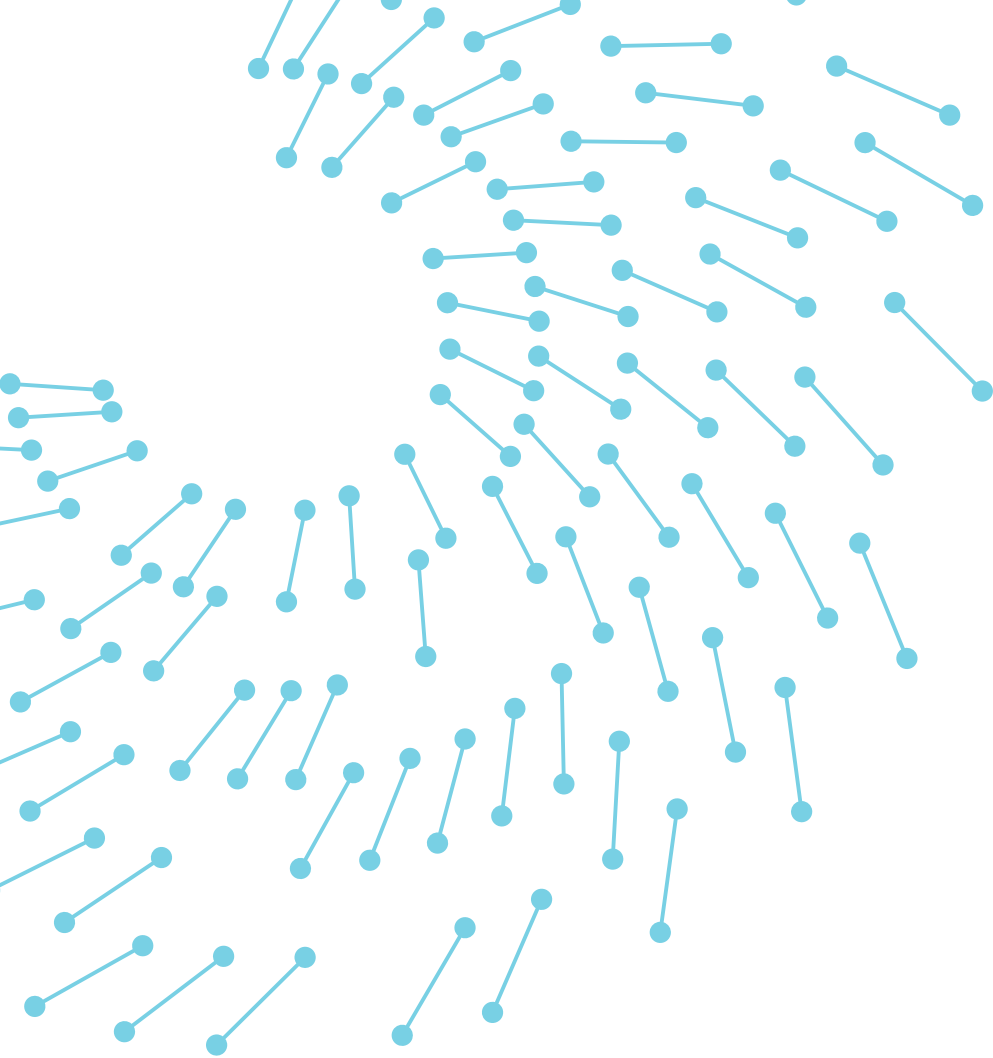
How to Fire Up Your People  
Without Burning Them Out



Center for  
Creative  
Leadership®

By: Chris Watz





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## INTRODUCTION

# Why Heat Matters

Reflecting on your career, you may recall a time you faced a difficult assignment that left you feeling overwhelmed, afraid to make the next move, or stressed to your breaking point. We call this “heat.”

Looking back, what did you learn? Was it worth it? If you feel the experience ultimately helped you stretch and grow, it’s likely you had some support to help you survive the heat.

**For an individual or team, heat is a stressful assignment that pushes you to your limits** in a way that can be career-defining. It can be mentally taxing, emotionally confusing, or physically demanding—and sometimes all three at once. Whether it’s “worth it” in the end all depends on how much learning you gained from the experience.

**For organizations, heat experiences offer both benefits and risks.** While uncontrolled heat can push workers toward burnout, controlled heat creates an opportunity for big leaps in how leaders respond to uncertainty and complexity, which translates directly into making your organization more agile. To attain these benefits, though, organizations must provide leaders with well-timed support in the midst of the stress and chaos. Savvy companies are now experimenting with intentional use of heat for development that harnesses more of its benefits, and manages more of its risks.

Organizations boldly using this tactic for development recognize that if you “turn up the heat,” you turn up the learning. But getting the temperature right and providing support are critical: otherwise, organizations risk losing their high-potential talent to burnout. When managed poorly, heat can have negative impacts on engagement and retention, but when harnessed well, heat helps talent grow and prepares leaders for future challenges.

At CCL, we’ve partnered with several organizations to replicate heat experiences. These development opportunities provide a “safe space” for individual leaders and teams to practice their leadership and collaboration skills in a heat scenario. This enables them to try new ways of thinking and collaborating, and can catalyze necessary innovations, skillsets, and cultural shifts when the team returns to work.

This paper offers best practices for getting the full benefits of heat, so that your leaders have more career-defining moments that are positive, and your business gets better results. It covers:

- How to increase success when heat and risk intensify;
- Which types of heat stimulate growth in more powerful ways; and
- Leveraging “safe-to-fail” heat scenarios to create more resilience in leaders and teams.



## What Defines a Heat Experience?

**What makes an experience “hot”?** There are three critical components that drive heat levels. Consider these variables when evaluating assignments for teams and individuals:

- **The challenge is unfamiliar.** Heat rises when a leader is placed in a new situation and doesn’t know what stressors to anticipate.
- **The challenge is complex.** Heat increases when there’s no simple answer and lots of information to sift through and analyze.
- **There is a fear of failure and vulnerability.** Heat intensifies even more when a high level of risk increases the likelihood of failure. High-visibility, high-stakes assignments can feel both exhilarating and scary, and can bring out the best or worst in people.

**Examples of heat assignments.** Organizations are growing bolder in how they create and leverage heat for talent development. At CCL, we’ve seen clients in fast-moving industries intentionally create heat by placing their leaders in stretch assignments to prepare them for larger roles. Examples include:

- **Asking managers to head change initiatives or product releases in areas where they have no prior expertise**, requiring them to take on the role of coach and collaborator, not expert.
- **Merging disparate product lines under a single talented leader** to help them develop the capacity to manage completely different things at once, while still growing the business.
- **Placing leaders in situations where they must navigate completely unfamiliar terrain with minimal training**, such as executing a cross-functional change with conflicting stakeholder expectations, to help them get comfortable experimenting with strategy and execution.

**Watch for signs of too much heat.** Assignments like these, which can feel like a “trial by fire,” force leaders to learn and adapt.<sup>1</sup> A common theme with heat is that leaders experiencing it feel vulnerable and overmatched for the challenge, and often must persevere through a number of painful missteps before getting back on track. The key to accelerating learning is how quickly they can extract insights from the experience. Yet while heat can be powerful for transformative learning, beware of “overheating.” To recognize it, watch for these symptoms in your leaders and teams:

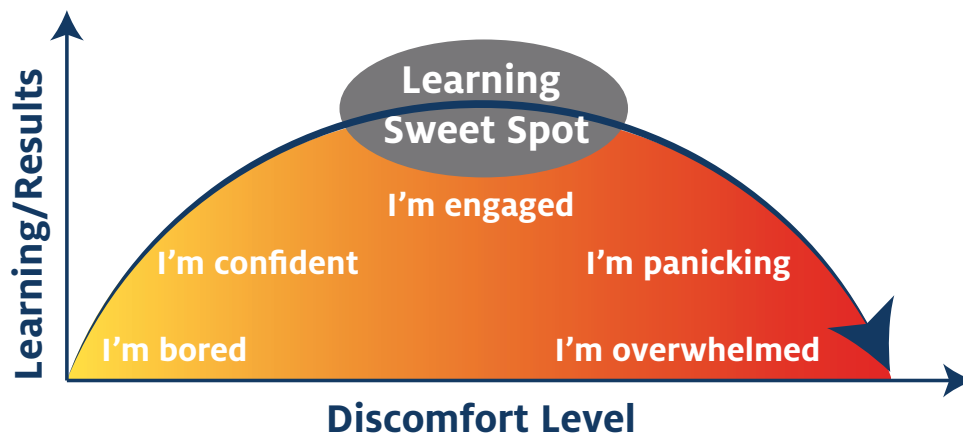
### Signs of Overheating

Warning Signs for Individual Leaders	Warning Signs for Teams
Inability to see all available options	Can’t agree on which way to go next
Won’t ask for help soon enough	Not using proven solutions that exist elsewhere
Lack of empathy for others’ emotions	Lots of effort with disappointing results
Poor listening	Power struggles or lack of helpful feedback



## Getting the Right Temperature Drives Learning

Getting the level of discomfort right is important. Too much heat can create a burnout problem,<sup>2</sup> with leaders doubting themselves and feeling overwhelmed; too little heat creates a boredom and retention problem. Both impact productivity for individuals and teams.



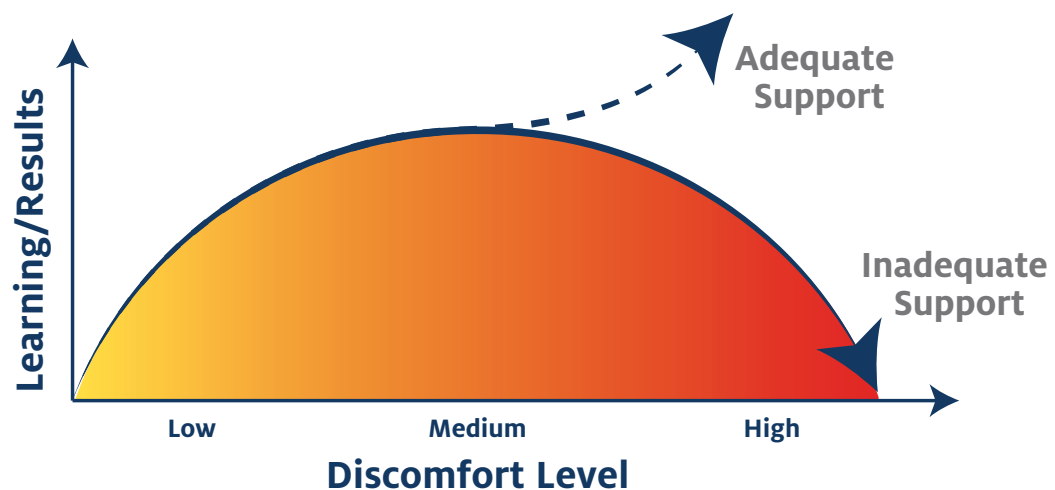
**The neuroscience of heat.** When leaders feel pushed beyond their limits, it can trigger a fight-or-flight response in the brain. Intense emotions like fear and panic can create “tunnel vision” around a narrow range of solutions focused on individual survival, rather than group collaboration. Overheated leaders may lose their composure, become overly reactive, and may make serious errors in judgment. When the ability to listen and pay attention is compromised, a leader can’t learn or discern clearly what to do next.

**Overheating causes powerful emotions.** “I just need to survive this and feel safe again” is a phrase our executive coaches report commonly hearing from leaders nearing the boiling point. These powerful emotions can create a ripple effect of panic across the team. That’s why heat can end up being transformational—or debilitating.



## Giving the Right Support Drives Results

**Heat and help go hand in hand.** CCL research shows leaders need a healthy balance of both challenge and support—both heat and help—to turn a confusing experience into a growth opportunity.<sup>3</sup> And as heat levels intensify, providing the right type of support is crucial to ensure that learning and results happen concurrently.



The type of support needed depends on the heat level and how teams are reacting emotionally to it. With adequate support, a team can become more resilient and agile in the moment.

**The more intense the heat, the more support a team may need.** One executive at a client organization, the vice president of operations at a global marketing research and consulting firm, said it well: “When dealing with heat on the job, lower the risk by drip-feeding support at key moments. When developing leaders in safe-to-fail places, crank up the heat as much as possible and push teams to their limits to create preparedness.”



## Levels of Heat and Associated Support Best Practices

Heat Level	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
<i>Familiarity</i>	<b>Known Problems</b>	<b>Known Problems</b>	<b>Unknown Problems</b>
<i>Complexity</i>	<b>Known Solutions</b>	<b>Unknown Solutions</b>	<b>Unknown Solutions</b>
<i>Amount of Discomfort</i>	Low	Medium	High
<i>On the Job Examples</i>	Familiar change: e.g., improve performance, process, or product	Unfamiliar change: e.g., scale fast, revise operating model	Disruptive change: e.g., revise business model, reinvent your brand, pivot
<i>What Helps Overcome the Heat</i>	<b>Tools</b> that are practical and easy to apply	<b>Skills</b> that benefit both individuals and teams	<b>Collective breakthroughs</b> that change how we approach leading
<i>Suggested Resources to Help</i>	<b>Peer Support</b> and Online Learning	<b>Expert Support</b>	<b>Team Coach</b>
<i>Ways to Simulate the Heat</i>	Role plays	Games, Simulations	Off-Site Expeditions
<i>Debrief Frequency</i>	As needed	At critical times	Consistently



## **Level 1 Heat: Known Problems, Known Solutions**

**How to Recognize Level 1 Heat:** Many know and agree on the challenges that need to be faced, but there may be misalignment on what to do about it. Ambiguity or lack of prior experience may create hesitation about which solution will make things better, not worse.

**Example Level 1 Heat Experience:** Improving the struggling performance of a product, process, or team.

**Recommended Support or Resource for Level 1 Heat: Peers & Online Learning.** Give leaders access to tools and role plays, then provide them with feedback on how to improve. Introverted learners may prefer accessing online learning materials, while more extroverted learners may prefer opportunities to connect with peers to hear what's been tried before and how it turned out. By expanding peer learning networks, organizations broaden advice and feedback avenues on how to use learning tools for greater impact.

## **Level 2 Heat: Known Problems, Unknown Solutions**

**How to Recognize Level 2 Heat:** As heat increases, so do unexpected setbacks (like increased errors, unhappy customers, and resistance to change), which can trigger increased tensions and volatile emotions. These may cloud judgment and lead team members to go “down rabbit holes,” rather than take productive steps together to move forward (like analyzing patterns, trends, or options). Solutions are out there, but the team isn't accessing or agreeing on them.

**Example Level 2 Heat Experience:** Expanding existing products or services into unfamiliar regions; refining parts of the organization's operating model to be more scalable and efficient; or leading a localized or smaller-scale transformation like a cross-functional change.

**Recommended Support or Resource for Level 2 Heat: Expert Support.** At higher levels of heat, leadership battles are won and lost on the emotional level. When tensions are escalated, we recommend a qualified expert coach or mentor to help see above the fray. Expert coaching or mentoring can lift leaders and teams from fear into learning, equipping them to make tough, confident, timely, and well-informed decisions. Select 1-2 of these options to provide support in Level 2 heat:

- **Individual Coach**—A highly trained professional who knows how to help calm the “fight-or-flight” response, widen options, and help the leader surface their own insights on what to do next.
- **Individual Mentor**—A more experienced leader who is regularly available as a safe sounding board, and can offer practical advice based on prior success in similar situations.
- **Team Coach**—A professional who can ensure everyone is heard, help the team learn how to safely engage with a leader who is feeling the heat, and create positive momentum and commitment.
- **Team Learning Event**—An opportunity for the team to practice adapting on the fly and learning how to collaborate positively together when things don't go as planned. Allowing the team to try simulations or play complex games improves listening skills and feedback delivery, both essential for better team performance.



## Level 3 Heat: Unknown Problems, Unknown Solutions

**How to Recognize Level 3 Heat:** The highest levels of heat are marked by feelings of chaos and confusion. As conditions continually shift, predictions grow more inaccurate, and people can feel panicked. The team may struggle to create shared direction or maintain alignment amidst setbacks, because they don't know what to anticipate. Teams may want to overanalyze the situation, when speedy action and a quick debrief would be more appropriate. Some leaders may become so stressed they suffer from lack of sleep, creating a negative effect on their discernment and resilience, just when both are needed most.<sup>4</sup>

**Example Level 3 Heat Experiences:** Leading disruptive change, such as being forced to quickly revise the business model due to competitor shifts; reinventing the brand or pivoting in the marketplace; leading a global transformation; or navigating repeated mergers or acquisitions.

**Recommended Support or Resource for Level 3 Heat: Team Coach, Consistent Debriefs.** To navigate chaos, teams need breakthrough learning to happen collectively. This comes from ongoing debriefing of situations with extreme honesty and candor, and the patience to listen to colliding perspectives across silos. Research from CCL<sup>5</sup> and also by Google shows that psychological safety is essential for team effectiveness. In fact, it's likely the main predictor of a team's ability to adapt amidst higher heat levels. If a team doesn't feel safe to raise the most important issues, critical needs may be missed and the team won't be able to shift gears fast enough to keep pace.

*Levels of psychological safety matter. What feels like medium heat to some can feel overwhelming to others if it doesn't feel safe to be candid or to take risks.*

We recommend deploying a team coach to promote deeper learning at critical meetings, such as ones focused on business strategy or team dynamics. The presence of a trained professional can interrupt unhealthy communication patterns, ensure everyone's voice is heard, and empower the team to take risks together and work across boundaries. They can also help build (or rebuild) trust.



### CASE STUDY: How One Client's Team Coach Accelerated Transformation

#### The Challenge

A Fortune 100 consumer goods company was undergoing a digital transformation to support shifting customer needs. During the transition, the Chief Marketing Officer was asked to assume the role of Chief Technology Officer (CTO), though the leader had no prior tech experience. The CTO understood the customers but not the technical details, so creating alignment between the two teams was difficult. Under stress and coming from different backgrounds, team members weren't really listening to one another. As the company migrated to a new shared services operating model, mistakes were made and tensions were high.

#### The Impact of a Team Coach

The leadership team decided to bring in a team coach to lead off-site debriefs every 3–4 months. Under the guidance of the team coach, members felt more comfortable surfacing critical information. The "safe space" created in the debriefing meetings enabled the team to talk about what did and didn't work when interacting with their non-technical leader, discuss missteps, share feedback sooner, and really listen to one another. After several months, the CTO better understood how to inspire the group, and the team learned how to ask for help when they needed it. Over time, trust was rebuilt and the team communicated better. With more effective new shared services, the team was able to cut costs and help the organization better meet the needs of its shifting customer base.



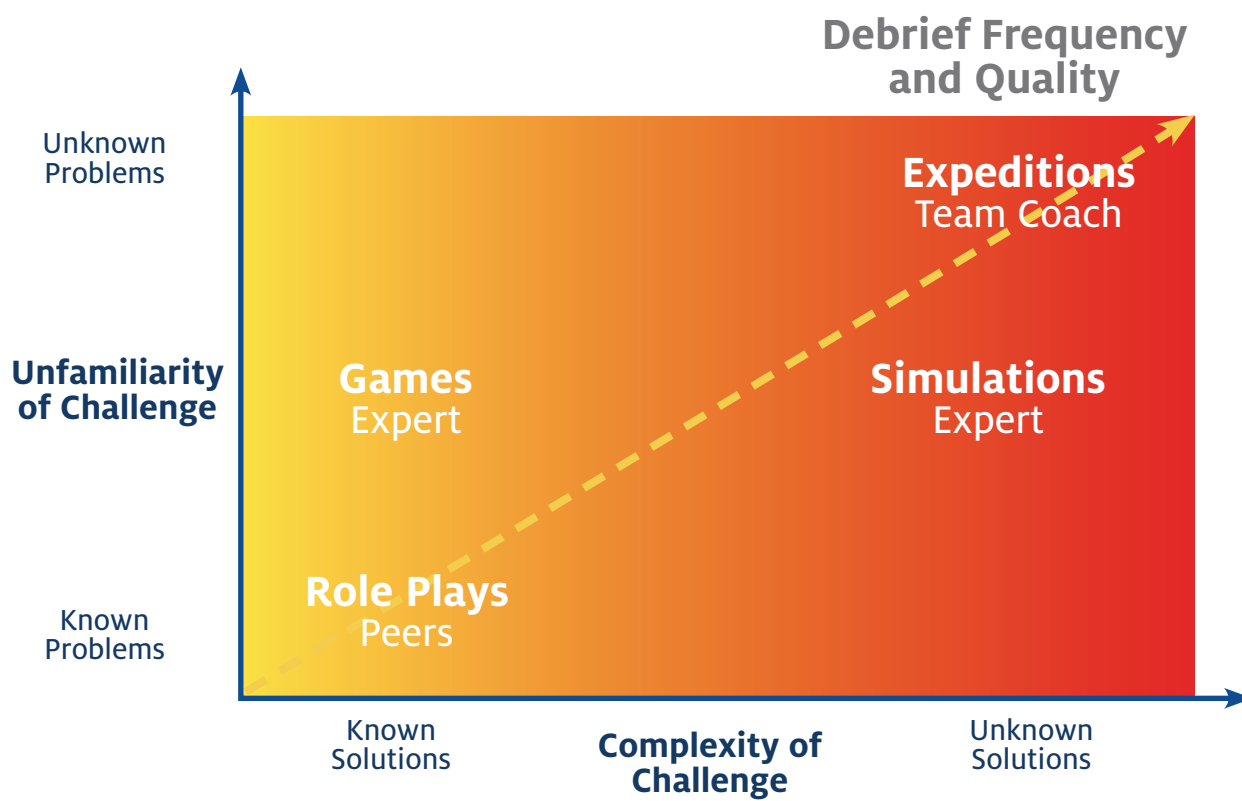
## Getting the Right Practice Also Drives Learning

***The importance of deliberate practice.*** In today's high-stakes business environment, there are fewer and fewer places where leaders can safely fail. Just as professional athletes must practice, so too must leaders. Research shows that peak performers in a variety of fields (from doctors to musicians to athletes) spend thousands of hours in deliberate practice, pushing the boundaries of how they are able to compete. Both quantity and quality of practice repetitions matter to become and remain world class. In roles where one leader's mistake can derail a career or even an entire company, getting the right type of practice matters even more. But leaders often aren't getting enough of it.

***Safe heat "throws teams into the deep end."*** Asking your leaders to solve tough challenges in a safe place to practice puts them in learning mode. Safe heat can be useful for teams that are feeling overmatched by a challenge, during corporate off-sites for team-building, or for entire divisions that are undergoing a transformation.

We recommend 3 powerful options to create more resilience and agility in the midst of heat:

- **Games** get leaders to solve a unique challenge, and offer practice hours. Collaborating despite lots of unknowns. They help teams to learn on the fly.
- **Simulations** force leaders to work through situations that mirror real business realities. They help teams see the impact of their efforts and decisions in real time.
- **Expeditions** offer the highest "safe heat," forcing leaders to tackle complex and unfamiliar problems like sailing in a fleet or working on a pit crew together with minimal training. They help a team bond instead of break when gripped by fear.



Isolating the variables easiest to control that elevate heat—uncertainty and complexity—allows you to predict how the practice types may feel, as compared to similar real challenges in the workplace. Games and simulations help teams practice responding to situations where problems are clear, but solutions aren’t (as in Level 2 heat).

Expeditions allow teams to work on challenges where they feel “in over their heads” and cannot accurately anticipate what the scope of challenge or solution will be, stirring up emotions and behaviors similar to leading amidst disruptive change at work (as in Level 3 heat). These experiences help leaders upgrade their mindsets, disrupt their prior ways of leading, and move away from patterns that no longer serve them or the organization.<sup>6</sup>

**Teams must also debrief after practice to extract richer learning.** That’s one reason why expeditions and other high-heat practice opportunities are so powerful: Expert support is built in. There’s someone available to intervene on the fly, help them navigate complex emotions, and evaluate alternate courses of action that might be more successful. This combination of heat and real-time debriefing accelerates development and generates otherwise hard-won shifts in how leaders think and act. That makes talent far more valuable to the organization, both in the short- and long-term.



## CASE STUDY: How One Client's Sailing Expedition Drove Breakthroughs

### The Challenge

We worked with a Fortune 100 technology company that was growing by acquisition and needed to change its culture to be more collaborative and less individualistic. Leaders were facing extreme heat at work, and needed to practice making decisions that benefited the entire company, not just their own team targets.

### The Impact of a Team Sailing Expedition

CCL carefully customized a sailing expedition for the team to simulate aspects of their marketplace and culture on the open sea. With minimal training, leaders had to create a sailing strategy that maximized team and organizational performance, while accounting for shifting wind conditions. Since no one was a sailing expert, team members had to trust one another and learn to lead through others. As they experimented, practiced, and then debriefed their actions, breakthroughs emerged about the importance of making sacrifices to benefit the whole group.

**Types of breakthroughs commonly experienced through practice.** Through our partnerships with clients, we've led teams through custom expeditions including Formula One racing, training wild horses, racing in Jeeps, and setting up new businesses amidst the disruption caused by active volcanoes. Again and again, we've seen expeditions like these put leaders into a learning mode. Common realizations we've heard leaders share following such experiences:

- *Leading with my expertise and needing to be the smartest person in the room may actually slow us down.*
- *Failure is our accelerator; we need to learn quickly from it, not fear it.*
- *Debriefing done real time is worth the extra time.*
- *By sharing the right information across silos, we can realign and execute more quickly.*
- *Talking about our fears and emotions accelerates our ability to adapt and change together.*

We've also heard from clients after such expeditions how much their leaders appreciated having a safe place to build their resilience through practice, experiment in chaotic situations, and see results unfold without damaging their careers—or the organization.



## CONCLUSION

# Assess Your Organization's Heat Levels

Heat experiences, whether from stretch assignments on the job or in deliberate practice scenarios, can create huge learning opportunities for organizations. But if your leaders are not receiving the proper support throughout a heat experience, what's their likelihood of success?

**Consider whether you have a heat issue that needs your attention.** Chances are, your leaders are already experiencing heat, and may even be talking about the heat and stress they face in your organization, but they don't know what to do about it. If you're not having conversations about how heat is impacting your talent and the support they need, some of your leaders may already be overheating.

If your division or organization answers "yes" to 2 or more of these statements, it may be time to have a conversation about how to manage the heat more wisely:

- *Our company is afraid our big bets on how to succeed in the future might not work.*
- *We are struggling to navigate the complexity of the challenges we face.*
- *Our industry is transforming, causing us to lead in unfamiliar territory.*
- *Our leaders' behaviors demonstrate an aversion to risk.*
- *We don't learn from failure fast enough.*

**Then, take action.** Organizations that fail to identify when their leaders are experiencing heat—or misdiagnose the level of heat and then misalign their support—are in trouble. Like wildfires, unmanaged and unattended, heat experiences can rage out of control, leading to burnout, disillusionment, failure, and frustration—and the loss of top talent. But harnessed well, heat can accelerate transformational learning and results.

When organizations provide adequate support to their leaders and teams experiencing heat, everyone benefits. In particular, organizations that offer safe places to practice and build up heat tolerance see their people at the highest levels thrive. These resilient leaders are the ones who will carry the organization forward into the future, delivering groundbreaking results and transformations that would not otherwise be possible.

The spark is already lit. It's up to you to tend the flame.



## Ready To Take The Next Step?

If your organization is ready to move towards a more open, safe organizational culture or wants to leverage the power of heat through creating opportunities for deliberate practice, contact CCL to learn more about partnering with us in a custom engagement.

We can help you analyze where the hot spots are in your organization and what type of support is needed to minimize risk and maximize learning. We can also help your teams hold more effective debriefs by equipping them with the skills needed to listen deeply and give constructive feedback. Our [Better Conversations Every Day™](#) program, available in CCL-delivered versions or a scalable, licensed, train-the-trainer model, can help improve dialogue and infuse your organization with a coaching culture. And our Workshop Kits on [Listening to Understand](#) and [Feedback That Works](#) can help them ask the right questions, become better listeners, and give more frequent and effective feedback.

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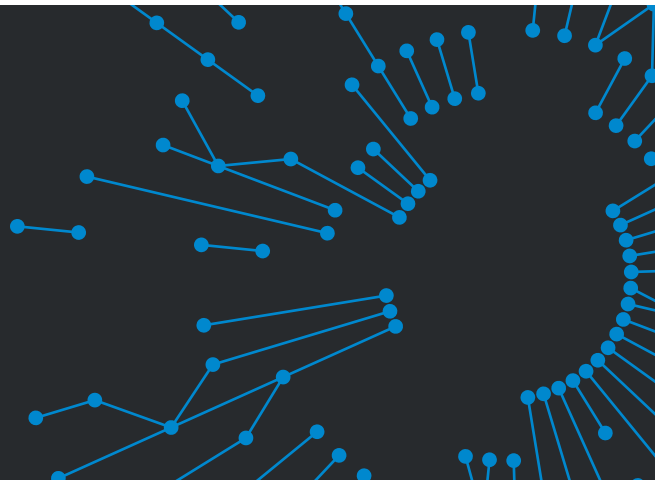
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## About the Author

**Chris Watz** is a senior faculty member at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®). Prior to joining CCL, Chris led transformational change at a global level. His leadership in this domain resulted in streamlined business processes, increased efficiencies, and an accelerated way for developing leaders who could handle greater complexity while operating at scale.

At CCL, Chris works with Fortune 500 and other fast-growth companies who need to transform how they lead to keep pace with change. Based on insights from his own leadership heat experiences spanning over 40 countries, Chris became fascinated with how to push boundaries to develop leaders faster and deeper. He received his Master's in Organizational Behavior Psychology & Program Evaluation from Claremont Graduate University. He enjoys rock climbing to practice calculated risk-taking and resilience.

### Contributors & Heat Experts:

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To learn more about this topic or the Center for Creative Leadership's programs and products, please contact our Client Services team.

+1 800 780 1031 +1 336 545 2810 [info@ccl.org](mailto:info@ccl.org)





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[ccl.emea@ccl.org](mailto:ccl.emea@ccl.org)

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia  
[ccl.ethiopia@ccl.org](mailto:ccl.ethiopia@ccl.org)

Berlin, Germany  
[ccl.dach@ccl.org](mailto:ccl.dach@ccl.org)

Johannesburg, South Africa  
[southafrica.office@ccl.org](mailto:southafrica.office@ccl.org)

London, United Kingdom  
[ccl.uk@ccl.org](mailto:ccl.uk@ccl.org)

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[ccl.cis@ccl.org](mailto:ccl.cis@ccl.org)

**Asia Pacific**  
[www.ccl.org/apac](http://www.ccl.org/apac)

**Singapore**

+65 6854 6000  
[ccl.apac@ccl.org](mailto:ccl.apac@ccl.org)

Gurgaon, India  
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