

Leadership Capacity Cycle

Self-Assessment Tool

All leaders cycle through five phases of capacity. The goal is not to never leave the Expansive phase, but to recognize shifts early, intervene effectively, and recover quickly. This assessment helps you identify where you currently are and what that means for your leadership.

The Five Phases

1. EXPANSIVE

Full access to wisdom, creativity, patience, and connection. This corresponds to ventral vagal activation - the 'safe and social' state where your highest capacities are available.

Signs you are here:

- You feel curious rather than defensive when challenged
- You can hold multiple perspectives simultaneously
- You respond thoughtfully rather than react quickly
- You feel connected to others and genuinely interested in their experience
- Creative solutions come easily

2. TENSIVE

Beginning activation. Capacity narrows but functionality remains. This is the early warning zone - intervention here is most effective.

Signs you are here:

- You notice subtle body tension (jaw, shoulders, chest)
- Your patience is shorter than usual
- You feel slightly rushed or pressured even without external deadline
- You are functional but not at your best
- Small annoyances feel larger than they should

3. DEFENSIVE

Threat response active. Reactive behavior replaces responsive behavior. Judgment is impaired. This is sympathetic activation - fight or flight.

Signs you are here:

- You feel the urge to defend, attack, or escape
- You interrupt others or struggle to listen fully
- You see situations in black and white terms
- You feel certain you are right and others are wrong
- Your body is visibly activated (rapid heartbeat, flushed, tense)

4. DESTRUCTIVE

Prolonged dysregulation causing damage to self, relationships, and outcomes. Words are said and decisions are made that create lasting consequences.

Signs you are here:

- You say things you later regret
- You make decisions that damage relationships or trust
- You feel out of control or like someone else is driving
- Others withdraw from you or become defensive in response
- You experience shame or regret afterward

5. RECOVERING

Returning to baseline. Rebuilding capacity after dysregulation. This phase is often overlooked but is essential for sustainable performance.

Signs you are here:

- You feel depleted or tired after activation
- You are reflecting on what happened
- You may feel embarrassed, regretful, or self-critical
- Your body is slowly calming but not yet settled
- You need space before engaging in demanding situations

Your Current State Assessment

Use this section to identify where you are right now. Be honest - awareness is the first step to change.

1. Right now, which phase best describes my state?

_____ Expansive _____ Tensive _____ Defensive _____ Destructive _____ Recovering

2. What physical sensations am I noticing in my body?

3. What triggered the shift from my last state (if I have shifted)?

4. What percentage of my time this week have I spent in each phase?

Expansive: _____% Tensive: _____% Defensive: _____% Destructive: _____% Recovering: _____%

5. What patterns do I notice about what moves me between phases?

6. What practices help me return to Expansive?

Key Insight

The earlier you catch a shift, the easier it is to intervene. Most leaders wait until they reach Defensive or Destructive before attempting to regulate - by then, biological momentum makes change difficult. Build the habit of checking your state regularly, especially in Tensive phase, where small

interventions yield large results.

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