



PRE-DRILL CAMP 2026 · LEADERSHIP SEMINARS · DAY 2

Leading Under Pressure

"Composed. Decisive. Steady."

Dr. Thomas L. Jones, Jr.

Director of University Bands · All Leaders, Sunday, August 2, 2026

The Hampton University Marching Force

HAMPTON'S HEARTBEAT

Icebreaker

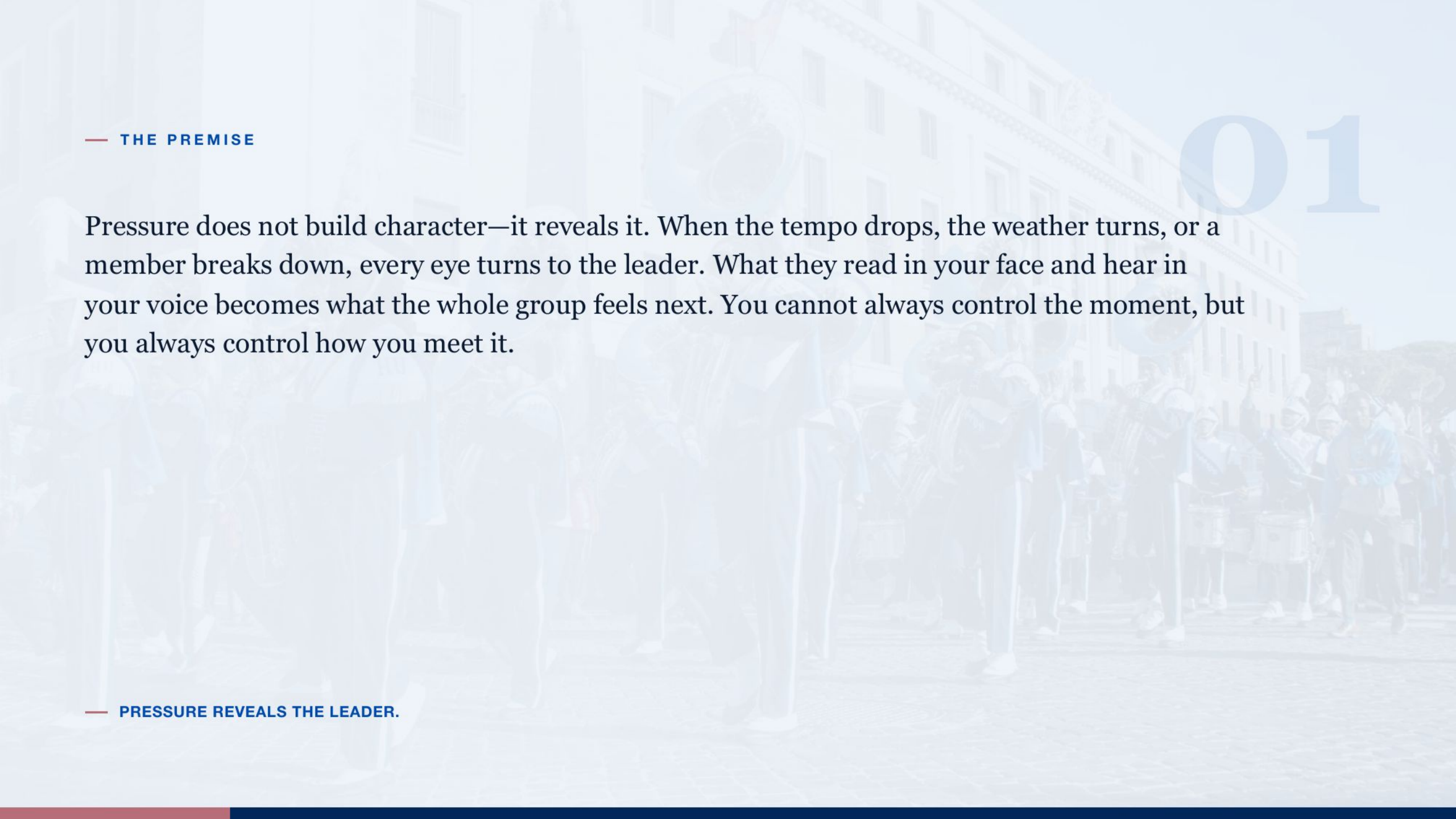
Before Jackie Robinson broke baseball's color line, Branch Rickey warned him he would face vicious abuse—and asked for something harder than swinging back: the discipline not to. Under pressure, the toughest thing to command is your own response.



42 — Rickey Recruits Robinson

youtu.be/nmxKEUXl08s

WATCH · 1:20



— THE PREMISE

Pressure does not build character—it reveals it. When the tempo drops, the weather turns, or a member breaks down, every eye turns to the leader. What they read in your face and hear in your voice becomes what the whole group feels next. You cannot always control the moment, but you always control how you meet it.

— PRESSURE REVEALS THE LEADER.

01

What Pressure Does to You

Know your body's stress response—so it doesn't run you.

- ◆ Under threat, the brain's alarm center floods your body with adrenaline: heart racing, breath shortening, muscles tightening. This **fight-or-flight** response is automatic.
- ◆ Psychologist Daniel Goleman calls the takeover an "**amygdala hijack**"—the emotional brain seizes control before the thinking brain can catch up.
- ◆ The cost is **tunnel vision**: narrowed attention, worse memory, rushed decisions. The moment you most need to think clearly, your body makes it hardest.
- ◆ You cannot switch the response off, but you can **manage it**. That skill is the whole game.

Source: Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* — the "amygdala hijack."

Use the Pressure

A little pressure sharpens you. Too much undoes you.

- ◆ Over a century ago, Yerkes and Dodson found performance follows an **inverted U**: too little pressure and you go flat; too much and you fall apart.
- ◆ The **peak sits in the middle**—enough tension to focus and energize, not so much that you seize up.
- ◆ Pressure is not the enemy. Flat, bored, and careless loses games too. The goal is to **find your zone**, not to feel nothing.
- ◆ Learn where your peak is—and learn to pull yourself back down when you have shot past it.

Source: the Yerkes-Dodson law (1908) — arousal and performance.

Control the Body First

The fastest way to a calm mind is a slow breath.

- ◆ You cannot think your way calm in one second, but you can **breathe your way** there. Slow breathing signals the body that the threat has passed.
- ◆ Use **box breathing**—the tool soldiers and first responders train: in for four, hold four, out four, hold four. Two or three rounds resets you.
- ◆ A long, controlled **exhale** is the switch. It slows the heart and clears the tunnel vision.
- ◆ Do it **before** you speak or decide. Steady the body, and the steady mind follows.

Source: Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, *On Combat* — combat / tactical breathing.

Threat or Challenge?

The same pressure, read two different ways.

- ◆ Your body reacts to how you **label** a moment. Call it a threat and you brace to survive; call it a challenge and you rise to compete.
- ◆ Research on stress shows the pounding heart before a big moment is **fuel, not fear**—your body getting you ready to perform.
- ◆ Tell yourself, and your people, "**this is our moment**"—not "this is going wrong." The reframe changes the chemistry.
- ◆ Leaders who read pressure as a challenge decide better and recover faster. **Choose the read.**

Sources: Alia Crum (stress mindset); Jeremy Jamieson (stress reappraisal).

You Fall to the Level of Your Training

You don't rise to the occasion—you sink to your preparation.

- ◆ When the pressure hits you will not magically get better; you will do **what you have drilled**. Reps are what you fall back on.
- ◆ **Rehearse the hard moments** on purpose: the tempo change, the rain call, the confrontation. Practiced pressure is familiar pressure.
- ◆ The more real your practice, the **smaller the shock** when it counts. This is why we drill a thing until it is boring.
- ◆ Confidence under pressure is not a feeling—it is **evidence** that you have been here before.

Source: stress inoculation training (Donald Meichenbaum); the maxim attributed to Archilochus.

Decide, Then Move

Under pressure, indecision is its own decision—a bad one.

- ◆ Fighter pilot John Boyd taught the **OODA loop**: Observe, Orient, Decide, Act—then run it again, faster than the problem can change.
- ◆ You will rarely have all the information. **Make the best call you can** with what you have, and adjust as you learn.
- ◆ A **good decision now** usually beats a perfect one too late. Frozen is the worst option on the field.
- ◆ Once you decide, **commit**. A team can follow a clear call; it cannot follow a leader who keeps flinching.

Source: Col. John Boyd, USAF — the OODA loop (Observe, Orient, Decide, Act).

Slow Is Smooth, Smooth Is Fast

When it speeds up, you slow down.

- ◆ The instinct under pressure is to rush—and rushing is how mistakes stack up. **Deliberate beats frantic**, every time.
- ◆ **Triage.** Name the one thing that matters most right now and do that first. You cannot fix everything at once.
- ◆ Slow your voice and your movements. A calm tempo from the leader **slows the whole room** to a pace it can handle.
- ◆ Smooth reps done right are faster than fast reps done twice. **Take the extra half-second** and get it right.

Your Calm Is Contagious

The group catches whatever the leader is feeling.

- ◆ Emotions spread. Researchers call it **emotional contagion**—a group unconsciously syncs to the mood of the person in charge.
- ◆ **Panic spreads. Poise spreads.** Whichever one you show, you are handing it to everyone watching you.
- ◆ In the hard moment, your people read your **face, voice, and posture** before they hear a single word. Manage those first.
- ◆ You do not have to feel calm to **project** calm. Project it anyway—and you will often talk yourself into it.

Source: Sigal Barsade, "The Ripple Effect" — emotional contagion in groups.

After the Moment

How you recover matters as much as how you respond.

- ◆ When it is over, **reset**. Do not drag the last mistake into the next set—the group takes its cue from whether you let it go.
- ◆ **Debrief, don't dwell**. What worked, what didn't, what we change next time—then close the book.
- ◆ Name the poise you saw out loud. Praising it **trains the team** to reach for it again.
- ◆ The leaders who last are the ones who **learn from pressure** instead of being worn down by it.

The Pressure Playbook

When it counts, run these four—in order.

1 Breathe

Steady the body first. One slow, controlled exhale before you speak or decide.

3 Decide

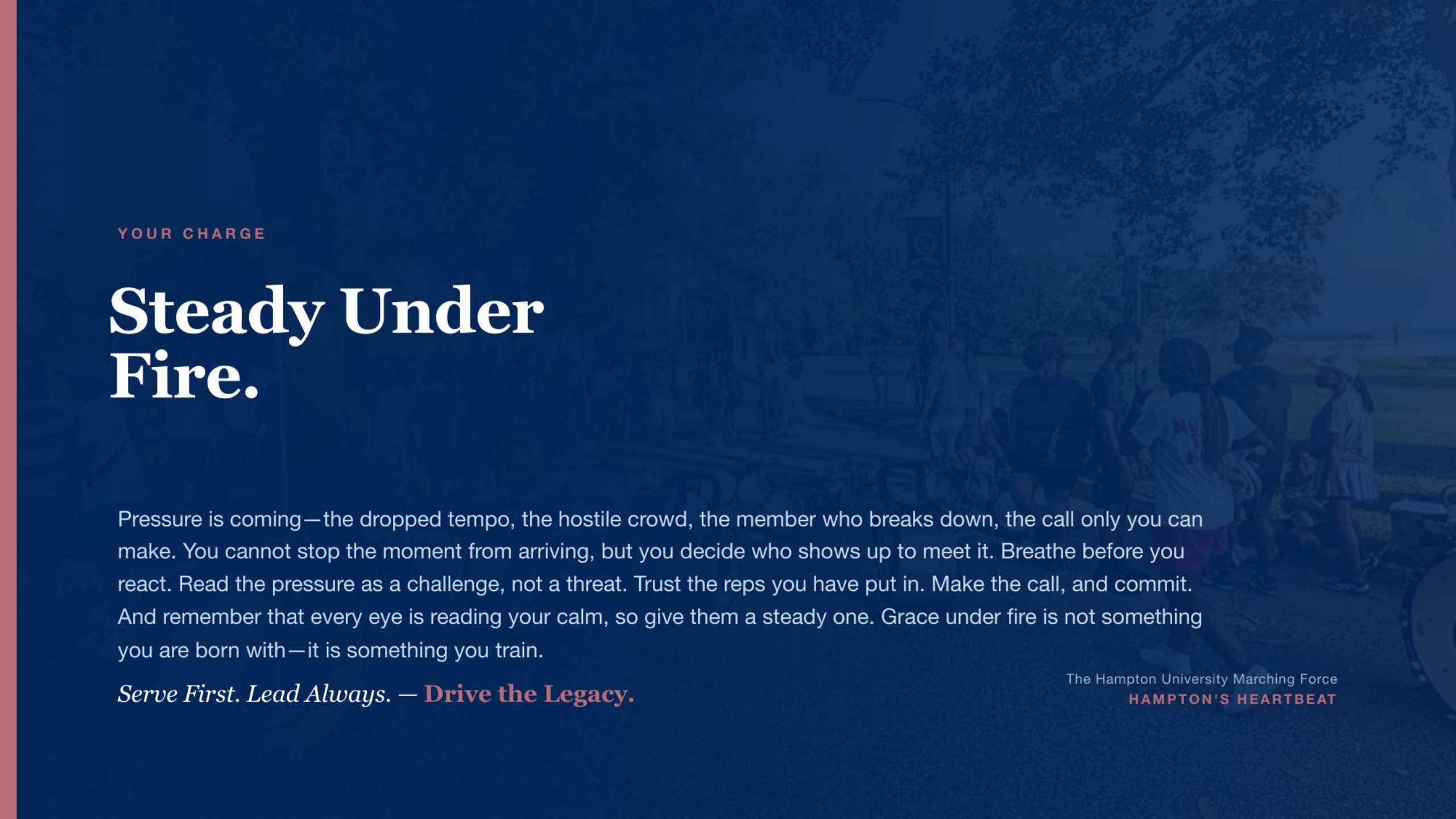
Make the best call with what you have, commit to it, and adjust as you go.

2 Prioritize

Name the single most important thing right now, and do that one first.

4 Project

Show the calm you want the team to feel—face, voice, and posture, steady.

A background image of a marching band on a field, overlaid with a dark blue gradient. The band members are wearing white uniforms and are positioned in a line, some holding instruments. The scene is outdoors with trees in the background.

YOUR CHARGE

Steady Under Fire.

Pressure is coming—the dropped tempo, the hostile crowd, the member who breaks down, the call only you can make. You cannot stop the moment from arriving, but you decide who shows up to meet it. Breathe before you react. Read the pressure as a challenge, not a threat. Trust the reps you have put in. Make the call, and commit. And remember that every eye is reading your calm, so give them a steady one. Grace under fire is not something you are born with—it is something you train.

Serve First. Lead Always. — **Drive the Legacy.**

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