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THE DEEP DIVE

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The Adaptation Trap

How squeeze plays keep capable people and organizations stuck

In the January 6, 2026 Brief, we documented **squeeze conditions** as the context people are operating inside. These conditions aren't produced in one place. They emerge from organizational design, relational dynamics, and self-imposed expectations, often co-produced across individual, team, and organizational levels.

This Deep Dive focuses on what happens *inside* those conditions.

Specifically, it examines how everyday responses to pressure quietly form **the Adaptation Trap**.

Squeeze plays are the conscious and unconscious responses people, teams, and organizations make inside squeeze conditions to remain functional when direction won't stabilize. They are the small adjustments, workarounds, and compensations that help reduce uncertainty *locally* when the system can't resolve it *globally*.

These responses are rarely driven by intent to help or preserve the system. They're driven by the need to get through the next meeting, decision, or transition without things falling apart.

People don't choose squeeze conditions. They find themselves inside them. The squeeze plays that follow are often reasonable, even necessary, in the moment. But over time, these repeated adaptations form a closed loop: pressure is absorbed rather than resolved, allowing the conditions that created it to persist.

This is the Adaptation Trap. Over time, these adaptations begin to shape the conditions people are operating inside.

Over the course of a single day, people move in and out of many squeeze plays. Orientation and capacity aren't lost in any one moment. They are spent in the transitions between them, decision by decision, adjustment by adjustment.

What follows are three field logs showing how capable people move through multiple squeeze plays across a single workday. No wonder we're all exhausted.

Field Log: Janice Canoli, Senior Operations Manager

I woke up at 6:00 and checked my calendar before I even sat up. First meeting at 8:00. Already back-to-back. Nothing new. Still, that familiar drop in my stomach showed up before my brain caught up.

By the time the coffee was ready, Slack had three messages waiting. My manager asking if I could "keep an eye on" another team. John asking for five minutes later. Someone else asking if I could "help unblock something." I replied to all of them before finishing my coffee. It felt automatic, like stepping onto a treadmill.

By mid-morning, meetings were already shifting. One pulled forward "to get ahead of things," another cancelled "to create space." I didn't know what the space was for. I felt a flicker of irritation and pushed it down. I adjusted the calendar and moved on.

John messaged again. He needed help pulling something together by end of day. It was the third time this month. I hovered over the reply, considered pushing back, then pictured the back-and-forth. I said yes. It felt faster than explaining why I shouldn't.

The rest of the morning blurred into calls and a lot of nodding. One meeting ended with “we’re aligned.” I wrote it down even though I wasn’t sure what we were aligned on. I told myself it would get clearer later.

At noon, I ate at my desk answering emails. Someone asked for an update on a decision that still hadn’t been made. I felt a flash of panic and sent something vague that sounded confident, hoping it would buy time.

The afternoon brought more requests. Another “can you just take this piece for now?” I told myself it was temporary and said yes again. At 3:45, my manager asked if everything was on track. I paused, then said yes. Nothing had gone wrong. No deadlines missed. No conflicts escalated.

By the time I shut my laptop, I was exhausted in a way that didn’t match the day. Nothing dramatic happened. I just never stopped adjusting.

Field Log: Marco Polo, HR Manager

My morning started with a plan. I had a clear priority and a few solid hours blocked to move it forward. That lasted until mid-morning.

The first meeting ran long. Mostly updates. I stayed because it felt awkward to leave. The second introduced a new angle on a project we supposedly finalized last week. I wrote it down as my stomach tightened.

Then my director asked me to “sense-check” a message before it went out. The decision hadn’t changed. It just needed to sound more confident. I rewrote two sentences and sent it back, wondering when I’d become the editor.

By late morning, my original plan felt irrelevant. Nothing had officially shifted. It just felt like the ground had moved again.

At lunch, a teammate asked if we were still moving ahead with the original approach. I hesitated, then sent something reassuring without being specific. I didn’t want to confuse them or lie.

The afternoon turned into a series of small adjustments. A conversation about priorities became one about optics. Another ended with “let’s stay flexible.” Flexible toward what?

Later, my director asked me to follow up with another team because “they trust you.” I knew what that meant. I’d be smoothing edges that weren’t mine to smooth. I did it anyway. It was the path of least resistance.

By the end of the day, nothing had blown up. I hadn't failed. I also hadn't moved anything forward in a way that felt real. I shut my laptop unsettled, carrying the sense that I'd been sprinting without knowing which direction the race was in.

***Nothing is technically wrong.
And yet nothing feels oriented.***

Field Log: Laura Bennett, Director of Client Services

I know how this day will go before it starts. Not the details. The pattern. End of quarter. Leadership anxious. Everyone talking about alignment while quietly acting like there are fewer options than there actually are.

Early on, my VP asks if I can "handle" a conversation with a client who's unhappy about a change that wasn't really a change. Just a reframing. I feel the familiar heaviness. This won't be about fixing anything. It'll be about smoothing it over.

The morning is spent buffering. Softening directives so my team doesn't panic. Translating frustration upward into something palatable. Adjusting language so leaders sound decisive without being pinned down later. Protecting people above me from looking bad. That's just part of the job.

Mid-morning, a decision is quietly reversed. No announcement. Just a subtle shift I'll have to explain later without calling it a reversal. I make a mental note of who needs which version of the story and move on.

By noon, I'm carrying several tensions that aren't mine to resolve. A timeline no one wants to renegotiate. A client expectation no one wants to contradict. A promise made upstream that won't survive contact with reality. I don't escalate. Escalation just creates noise. Keeping the surface calm feels responsible.

In the afternoon, my team asks for clarity. I give them as much as I can without lying, choosing my words carefully. Someone thanks me for being "steady." I register it and keep moving.

By the end of the day, I'm worn down by the constant calculation. What can be said. What can't. What will quietly disappear if I handle it right. The work keeps moving. Nothing ever really lands.

The Pattern

How squeeze plays actually work

Squeeze plays are adaptive responses to squeeze conditions. When people lose reliable orientation, they don't stop functioning. They compensate. They adjust how they work, decide, relate, and carry responsibility while contradictions remain unresolved. Squeeze plays are those moment-to-moment adjustments.

***Squeeze plays aren't the origin of the problem.
People do it when orientation disappears and pressure doesn't resolve.***

What's different in today's workplace isn't that squeeze plays exist. It's how often they occur.

Under sustained squeeze conditions, people don't encounter a single decision point and move on. They move in and out of multiple squeeze plays across the day. Each one requires a small recalibration: a shift in attention, tone, expectations, or judgment so work can continue.

The cost doesn't come from any one play. It comes from the frequency, the stacking, and the switching between them. Decisions, priorities, and expectations rarely settle long enough to integrate. Orientation isn't lost in dramatic moments. It erodes in the transitions.

Under sustained squeeze:

- signals conflict
- timing fragments
- authority diffuses
- priorities shift faster than they can stabilize

Output is still expected, even as the conditions required for coherent action are gradually withdrawn. So people step in where structure steps back.

They smooth contradictions. They manufacture provisional clarity. They hold ambiguity internally so work doesn't stall.

This is where squeeze plays quietly become a trap.

Because these adaptations reduce uncertainty locally, pressure is absorbed rather than resolved. The system continues to function. The conditions that produced the squeeze remain intact. Recovery is deferred.

Squeeze plays are hard to see because they often look like competence. Taking responsibility. Staying flexible. Buffering instability. Keeping momentum. These behaviors are frequently praised and rewarded. Over time, orientation stops being shared and adaptation localizes at the human level.

This is how repeated squeeze plays accumulate into the Adaptation Trap: capacity is spent preserving functionality while the underlying conditions remain unchanged.

Common squeeze plays triggered by recurring decision points

When people encounter squeeze conditions, they repeatedly face similar decision thresholds. Different responses produce different squeeze plays.

Common examples include:

- **Absorbing work instead of renegotiating it**
Taking on additional responsibility rather than pushing back on scope, timing, or ownership.
- **Smoothing instead of escalating**
Managing tension privately to protect relationships, optics, or momentum.
- **Manufacturing clarity instead of waiting for decisions to land**
Treating unfinished or reversible choices as settled so work can continue.
- **Buffering others from instability**
Translating, filtering, or containing confusion so it doesn't ripple outward.
- **Deferring recovery to "later"**
Postponing rest, reflection, or recalibration because things never fully settle.

The System

Why squeeze plays have become constant

When we talk about “the system,” we’re not referring to a single policy, leader, or function. We’re referring to the combined conditions that shape how work is designed, paced, coordinated, and evaluated.

In modern work environments, squeeze conditions are generated across multiple domains at once. Authority, accountability, and decision-making rarely align cleanly. Expectations move faster than integration. Relationships carry unresolved tension. Individuals internalize responsibility simply to remain viable.

Under sustained uncertainty, systems tend to respond in predictable ways:

- Responsibility is distributed downward so work continues
- Authority is retained upward or sideways to manage risk
- Priorities remain fluid to preserve optionality
- Timelines and output expectations stay fixed to maintain momentum

The result is a system where:

- Direction exists, but doesn’t stabilize
- Decisions happen, but don’t fully land
- Change occurs, but isn’t integrated
- Responsibility increases while authority does not

***Systems that remove recovery don’t get resilience.
They get quiet compensation.***

From the system’s perspective, this works. Work continues without constant escalation. Risk remains contained. Momentum is preserved. What structures don’t hold, people absorb. Because this works in the short term, it is reinforced. Not intentionally, but structurally. Over time, systems learn they can remain incoherent and still function, as long as humans adapt continuously.

What’s missing isn’t effort or flexibility. It’s coherence. When coherence is absent, adaptation doesn’t resolve. It stacks. People are required to recalibrate repeatedly without shared orientation or recovery. Squeeze plays are how humans compensate in the meantime. They are not the origin of the problem. They are the mechanism that keeps it running.

The Impact

Where the cost accumulates

The system does not experience the cost of squeeze plays the way humans do. The system experiences continuity. Humans experience frequency.

What drains capacity is not a single squeeze condition, but the accumulation of unresolved adaptation:

- the stacking of pressures that never fully resolve
- the switching costs of moving between competing demands
- the absence of settling, where meaning, decisions, and expectations can land

Orientation and capacity aren't lost in any one moment. They are spent in the transitions between plays. When transitions become constant, recalibration rarely occurs.

Over time, systems that rely on continuous human compensation don't become resilient. They become dependent.

They trade:

- shared orientation for private sensemaking
- structural clarity for human buffering
- recovery for sustained output

The work keeps moving. The strain becomes invisible.

***Burnout isn't a failure of effort.
It happens when systems don't allow recalibration.***

This is the cost side of the Adaptation Trap. Pressure is absorbed locally. Continuity is preserved systemically. Capacity is spent human by human, transition by transition.

Eventually, what gets labeled as burnout, disengagement, or resistance is often the residue of prolonged adaptation, not a lack of effort or commitment.

An Invitation

Once squeeze plays are named, something shifts. People stop treating their experience as a personal shortcoming and start recognizing it as a rational response to conditions. What becomes possible is orientation, not instant clarity, but the ability to notice what's happening without immediately compensating or defaulting to autopilot. This creates space to see where work relies on human buffering rather than structural support, and where meaning never has a chance to land.

If you're curious how squeeze conditions may be showing up in your own work, we've created a short diagnostic to help map what you're responding to and where pressure is accumulating in your current role.

You can find the **Squeeze Conditions Assessment** at: BehavingBadlyHQ.com

The investigation continues.



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Investigating the systems we work inside — and how to reclaim the human parts those systems quietly erode.

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