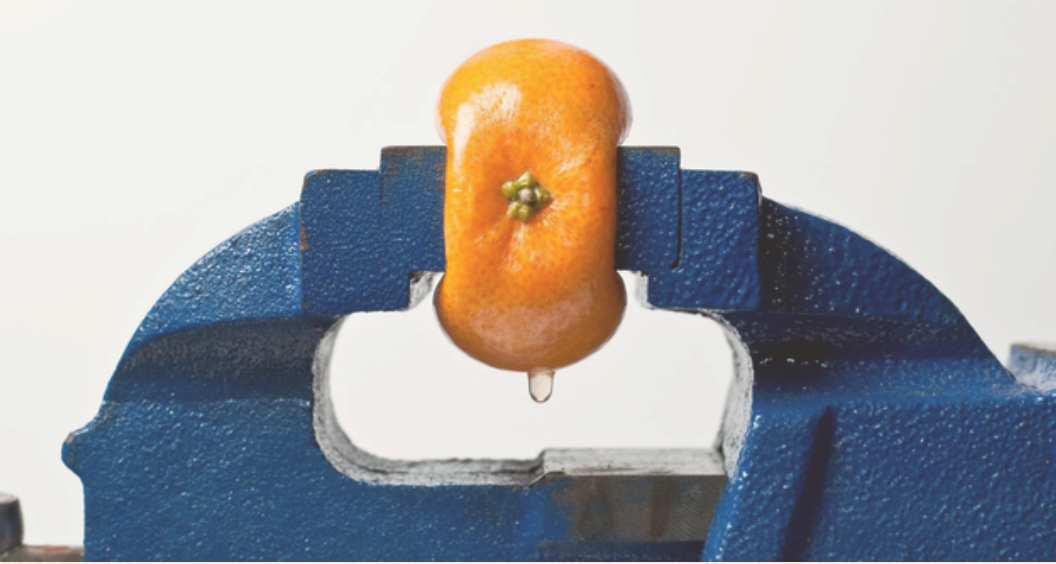




WORKPLACE SQUEEZE COURSE

A Practical Guide To Regaining Orientation
in Complex Work Environments

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Introduction

As you move through this course, you are invited to take on a particular stance. Not as a fixer. Not as a problem-solver. Not as a critic of yourself or others. But as a field agent in your own work life. Curious. Observant. Willing to notice patterns without rushing to conclusions. Open to the possibility that your responses make sense given the conditions you're in.

Before You Begin

Some people will move through the course in a few focused sittings. Others return to it over days or weeks as situations at work surface and shift. There is no correct speed. What matters is giving yourself enough space to notice what's actually happening.

Throughout, you'll be invited to pause, observe, and make sense of what you're noticing. Recording even brief notes will help you track patterns over time and see how your understanding evolves. Take what ever level of notes that works best for you.

The goal is not polished insight. It's awareness. You may also find it helpful to move through this course with someone you trust. A colleague, peer, or friend can offer a different perspective and help you notice things you might miss on your own.

What This Course Is (and Is Not)

This course is an invitation to make sense of what you're experiencing at work.

It is designed to help you:

- recognize when you're operating inside contradictory or absurd conditions
- understand how conditions shape behavior
- notice how you adapt under pressure
- regain orientation and choice

This course is not:

- a productivity system
- a resilience or coping program
- a therapeutic or coaching intervention
- a set of instructions for how you "should" respond

Nothing in this manual is meant to diagnose you, your team, or your organization. The goal is not to judge your responses, but to understand them in context. When situations become confusing or emotionally loaded, it can be hard to see clearly from inside them. Humor and satire are used to create distance and help you regain perspective.

If something makes you laugh, cringe, or feels familiar, treat that as information. Those reactions often point to where pressure has been quietly building.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this, you will be able to:

- recognize when you're operating inside contradictory or "squeezed" conditions
- understand how modern work creates competing demands that shape behavior
- see how your responses make sense within the conditions you're in
- identify recurring patterns in how you adapt under pressure
- gain distance and perspective without blaming yourself or others
- begin to regain orientation and choose small, deliberate next steps
- continue noticing these patterns as they arise in your day-to-day work

How to Use This Course Manual

This course is a reflective practice designed to help you regain orientation in complex work situations.

You are not expected to rush, complete everything in one sitting, or arrive at a specific outcome. The purpose is to slow down just enough to see more clearly what you are operating inside of, how you are responding, and what choices may be available.

This manual is meant to be followed in order, but not rigidly. Some sections will land immediately. Others may make more sense after a few days, or when something familiar shows up again at work. That's expected.

Move at your own pace. Pause when something feels important. Return to sections as needed. There is no "right" speed. What matters most is not completion, but attention.

Before continuing, it may help to have:

- a place to record reflections
- a bit of uninterrupted time
- permission to move slowly when something matters

A Note on Language and Tone

This course uses:

- everyday language
- metaphors and real work examples
- moments of humor and absurdity

These are used to help you see familiar situations from a different angle.

How to Work with the Exercises

Throughout the manual, you'll encounter reflective prompts and exercises. Some are brief and observational. Others invite deeper reflection or imagination. A few suggest optional conversations with others.

These exercises are tools, not tests. Use them where they feel helpful.

If an exercise feels uncomfortable, you can:

- pause and return later
- try a simpler example
- notice your resistance as part of the data

The Squeeze Conditions Assessment

Before continuing into the core modules, you will complete the Squeeze Conditions Assessment. You'll use the results throughout the rest of the course. This assessment is a separate document and serves as your starting point. It draws directly on the patterns and dynamics introduced in this course, helping you locate where they are showing up in your own work context in a more concrete way.

The assessment helps you:

- surface where pressure is concentrating
- identify contradictory demands and constraints
- notice where your effort and attention are being pulled
- capture a snapshot of the conditions you are operating inside

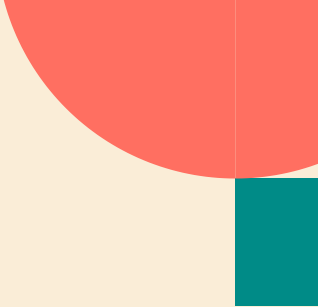
It does not tell you what to do, recommend changes, or evaluate your effectiveness. Think of it as a way to gather raw data before interpreting what it means.

When to Complete the Assessment

Complete the Squeeze Conditions Assessment after finishing Module 1 and before beginning Module 2. Module 1 helps you recognize the experience of the squeeze. The assessment helps you locate it in your own context.

Module 2 then builds on what the assessment reveals. You'll be prompted again at the end of Module 1 to pause and complete it before continuing.

If you've completed the assessment before, you don't need to redo it immediately. Reviewing your responses with fresh eyes after Module 1 may be enough.



Module 1

What is the Squeeze?

Module Orientation:

Why This Comes First

Before you can make choices, adjust your approach, or decide what to do next, you need to be oriented to the environment you're operating in.

Most people skip this step.

They jump straight to problem-solving, behavior change, or resilience strategies. That instinct is understandable. When work feels difficult or overwhelming, it's natural to want relief as quickly as possible.

But acting without orientation often leads people to work harder inside conditions that haven't been properly understood.

This module is designed to slow things down just enough for you to see clearly.

Not to fix anything yet. Not to decide anything yet. But to understand what kind of situation you're actually in.

What You're Practicing in This Module

This module is not about solving anything.

It's about learning to notice when you are operating inside contradictory or incoherent conditions, without immediately trying to explain them away, optimize them, or push through them.

Orientation begins with seeing what is actually happening, **often by making sense of it after the fact rather than reacting inside it.**

In this module, you are practicing that first move: **noticing.**

1.1 When Work Stops Making Sense

Many people come to this course with a quiet but persistent feeling that something isn't adding up.

Not because everything is falling apart.
Not because there's a dramatic crisis.

But because the effort required to simply keep things moving feels disproportionately high.

Let me show you what that looks like.

A Day in the Life of Joe

Consider this common scenario:

Joe is a senior leader whose role is described as “strategic.” His calendar is filled with back-to-back meetings, approvals, escalations, and updates.

Each request is reasonable. Each meeting has a purpose. Taken together, they leave no time for strategic work.

Joe isn’t failing. He’s adapting to contradictory expectations.

He compensates by working longer hours, thinking late at night, and preparing extensively so he can make progress in small pockets of time. From the outside, he looks capable. Inside, capacity is slowly being consumed.

This pattern appears across industries, roles, and sectors. The specifics change. The logic doesn’t. Nothing dramatic has happened. No one is being unreasonable. And yet, by the end of the day, you feel oddly behind, slightly tense, and unable to say exactly why. That feeling is often the first sign that orientation is slipping.

If you relate to Joe's day to day, you might also notice:

- you're busy, yet progress feels thin
- decisions take longer and involve more people
- your role sounds clear on paper but not in practice
- you constantly adjust, translate, or compensate
- there's a sense of strain that never quite releases

When people try to explain this experience, they often turn inward. They tell themselves they need to be more organized, more resilient, more efficient, or more patient. Sometimes they assume the discomfort is just the cost of seniority, complexity, or modern work.

Those explanations can feel unsatisfying because they don't fully account for what's happening. Most people turn this inward. They assume they need to be better. This course starts from a different assumption: the strain is often **structural, not personal**.

1.2 Structural Compression: The Design Conditions Behind Squeeze

Squeeze is not simply stress or poor leadership. It emerges when contradictory structural requirements are layered into a system without a corresponding increase in capacity, clarity, authority or slack.

These contradictions are rarely accidental. They are built into governance, incentives, roles, reporting structures, and decision design.

Structural compression typically appears when at least two of the following conditions are present:

Contradictory performance expectations

Example: Deliver quarterly growth while transforming the operating model.

Stated values misaligned with incentive structures

Example: Reward collaboration publicly while compensating individual competition privately.

Expanded scope without expanded authority

Example: Broaden participation while retaining centralized approval.

Increased signal volume without filtering structures

Example: More data, dashboards, and reporting without clearer decision boundaries.

Escalating time pressure without increased capacity

Example: Faster cycles with the same staffing levels.

Individually, each condition may appear manageable. Stacked together, they create compression.

When these conditions persist, people adapt to stabilize short-term viability.

Over time:

- Adaptation becomes normalized.
- Discernment narrows to what preserves survival.
- Reinforcing patterns remain untouched.
- The organization appears functional while misalignment deepens.

Squeeze is the lived experience of sustained structural compression.

Recognizing compression is the first step toward restoring discernment and decision integrity.

1.3 The Adaptation Trap

The reason this becomes hard to see is because people adapt. We compensate. We normalize contradiction. We work longer. We get better at smoothing friction. What begins as temporary adjustment becomes the default. That's how orientation quietly slips.

But adaptation doesn't feel like failure. It feels like professionalism. It feels like resilience. It feels like maturity. It feels like being someone who can handle pressure.

And because the system continues to function, the adaptation is rewarded. Deadlines are still met. Clients are still served. Reports are still delivered.

So the adjustment becomes institutionalized. What was once a workaround becomes policy. What was once a compromise becomes strategy. What was once temporary becomes embedded.

That is the trap. The system stabilizes around distortion. And the more competent the people inside it are, the harder it becomes to see.

The Adaptation Trap is about people trying to create success under environmental constraints. The very skills that allow people to survive compression also prevent the organization from recognizing it.

Restoring orientation requires interrupting this cycle not by blaming adaptation, but by examining what adaptation has been quietly preserving.

1.4 Pressure Is Familiar. The Squeeze Is Something Else.

Pressure is a normal part of work. Deadlines approach. Projects peak. Certain seasons are more demanding than others. What Joe is experiencing isn't just pressure. It's something more persistent.

Pressure rises and falls.
The Squeeze feels different.

The Squeeze emerges when work environments ask people to carry ongoing contradictions without resolving them.

In practical terms, this often looks like being asked to:

- think strategically while staying deeply involved in the details
- take ownership while avoiding overstepping
- move faster while reducing risk
- collaborate broadly while delivering independently

Each request makes sense on its own. None of them are unreasonable.

The strain comes from being expected to hold all of them at once, over extended periods, without clear guidance about priorities or trade-offs.

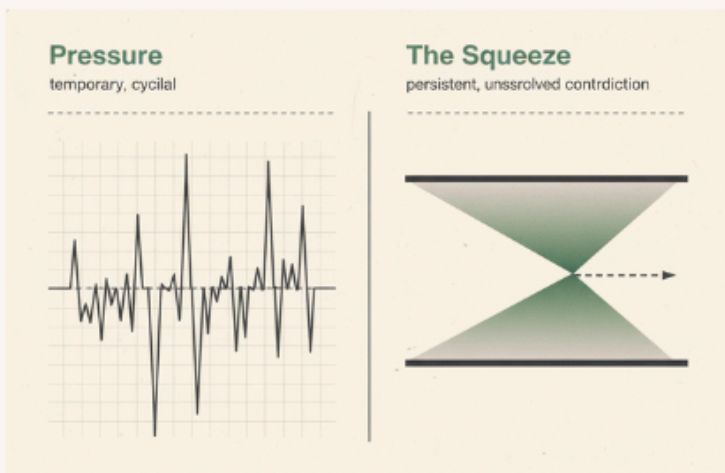
Over time, this creates a sense of compression. People aren't just busy. They feel constrained, pulled in multiple directions, and unable to fully satisfy competing expectations.

This is what we mean by **the Squeeze**.

The diagram below illustrates the difference between temporary pressure and the ongoing constraint of the squeeze. Notice how one fluctuates, while the other narrows over time.

Pressure vs The Squeeze

(Temporary demand vs. persistent constraint)



1.5 Where the Squeeze Shows Up

The Squeeze doesn't appear in one place. It shows up in different layers of your work.

Sometimes it's **directional**. Clarity keeps shifting. Priorities wobble. You're recalibrating more than you're deciding.

Sometimes it's **structural**. Roles blur. Authority doesn't match responsibility. Workarounds become normal.

Sometimes it's **relational**. You're absorbing tension. Translating between people. Smoothing friction quietly.

Sometimes it's **self-imposed**. You're holding standards no one explicitly asked for. Maintaining invisible expectations.

And over time, it impacts capacity. Attention narrows. Recovery slows. Thinking becomes reactive.

These aren't personality traits. They're pressure lenses. In the assessment that follows, you'll explore each of these directly.

1.6 Capacity Is What Quietly Takes the Hit

When contradictions persist, capacity doesn't disappear suddenly. It erodes quietly.

Capacity is often misunderstood as time or energy. In reality, it includes much more than that. Capacity also includes:

- attention
- emotional bandwidth
- decision clarity
- the ability to recover
- the space to think rather than react

In BBHQ research published in the 2026 Workplace Absurdities Report, one pattern appeared again and again:

people weren't overwhelmed simply because they had too much work to do. They were exhausted because they were compensating for incoherence and a major impact is **loss of orientation**, or our bearings on a day to day basis. They spent capacity translating unclear expectations, smoothing over contradictions, buffering risk, holding unresolved tensions, and managing emotional fallout.

Much of this work is invisible. It doesn't show up on calendars, project plans, or job descriptions.

But it consumes enormous capacity over time. This is why people often feel tired without being able to point to a single cause.

1.7 The Capacity Freeze (A Metaphor)

Imagine walking alongside a river.

At first, the water is flowing. It's cold, but it moves. You can see where it's fast, where it slows, and where you need to step carefully.

As the temperature drops, the surface begins to freeze.

At first, nothing looks wrong. The river appears stable. People keep walking on it. Life goes on. But underneath the surface, movement slows. Pressure builds. Cracks form invisibly.

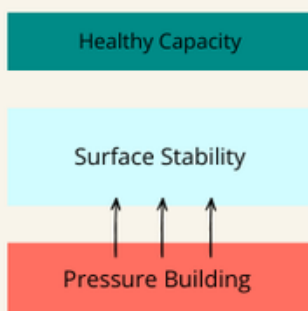
The danger isn't the cold.
It's the false sense of stability.

This is what happens to capacity under prolonged squeeze conditions.

People keep functioning. Work continues. From the outside, everything appears fine. But orientation is lost. It becomes harder to see what matters, where the risks are, and what's actually happening beneath the surface. By the time problems become obvious, capacity has often been frozen for a long time.

The diagram below shows how things can appear stable on the surface, even as pressure continues to build underneath.

Capacity Freeze Under Persistent Confusion & Contradiction



Orientation slips before performance slips.

1.8 Absurdity as an Early Warning Signal

When capacity begins to freeze, subtle absurdities start to appear. Absurdity, in this context, is not incompetence or chaos. It is the visible mismatch between what the system says it is doing and what is actually happening.

These moments may not look like obvious breakdowns. They are often quiet distortions that don't quite make sense and are easy to dismiss.

For example:

- meetings to decide whether a decision can be made
- processes designed to reduce risk that increase it
- initiatives that never fully finish but never fully stop
- language that sounds precise but clarifies little

These patterns are often brushed off as “just how things are,” or “the cost of complexity.” In this work, absurdity is treated differently.

Absurdity is information. It signals that people are adapting intelligently to structural conditions that no longer fully align. It is often the earliest visible sign that orientation is narrowing. When absurdity increases, discernment is already under pressure.

Reflection: Absurdity Spotting

Take a moment to write down and describe a situation at work that would sound strange, illogical, or faintly ridiculous to someone outside your organization.

If it helps, imagine:

- how a six-year-old might describe the situation
- how a documentary narrator would explain it in a neutral tone

This exercise is about creating distance.

1.9 Three Ways Humans Make Sense of What's Happening

When work starts to feel confusing or strained, people are already responding –body, mind, heart, often before they can articulate why. Human sensemaking unfolds across three different temporal modes.

First, signals emerge (Pre-sensemaking).

Before people interpret anything, they feel it. Tension shows up as irritation, humor, silence, discomfort, or moments that feel faintly absurd. Something registers as “off” without yet becoming a thought. These early signals are not insight or analysis. It’s raw information.

Next, sensemaking happens in real time.

As situations unfold, people adjust on the fly. They hesitate, push forward, change tone, avoid topics, crack a joke, or make a quick decision. This kind of sensemaking is fast, embodied, and often unconscious. It helps people stay oriented enough to keep moving in the moment.

Later, sense-making happens after the fact.

With some distance, people look back and reflect on what actually happened. They notice patterns, contradictions, and recurring dynamics that were hard to see while they were inside them. This kind of sense-making is slower, more deliberate, and easier to put into language.

All three are natural. All three matter. They serve different purposes.

This course focuses primarily on **reflective sense-making**. That is intentional.

Before people can change how they respond in the moment, they need enough distance to understand the conditions they're operating inside, the patterns that have formed, and the adaptations they've been making without realizing it.

As you move through your workday, real-time sensemaking will continue to happen. In this course, you're practicing how to work with those moments after the fact using reflection, language, and sometimes humor so orientation can be restored and choice can widen over time.

1.10 What the Squeeze Is and What It's Not

It's important to be clear about what the Squeeze is and what it isn't, because unnamed conditions often turn into self-judgment.

The Squeeze is not a personality trait, a mindset, or a resilience gap. It's not something you "have," like stress or burnout.

The Squeeze refers to conditions that arise when work environments generate ongoing contradiction without resolution.

In day-to-day terms, this means that what feels like a personal struggle is often a reasonable response to an unreasonable configuration of expectations.

You're not failing to cope.

You're operating inside conditions that require constant adaptation.

Understanding this distinction is one of the most important shifts this course supports. It allows you to move from self-criticism to situational awareness.

Module 1 Reflection (Optional)

You may find it helpful to note:

- where work currently feels compressed or contradictory
- what feels less personal after reading this module
- where capacity may be quietly freezing

No action is required yet. Clarity is enough for now.

Pause Here... Complete Your Squeeze Assessment

Before beginning Module 2, complete the Squeeze Conditions Assessment.

You'll use your assessment notes directly in Module 2, so take your time.

When you're finished, return here and continue to Module 2.

Closing This Module

You've now been oriented to:

- the difference between pressure and the Squeeze
- how contradiction impacts capacity
- why absurdity is a useful signal
- why this experience isn't a personal failure

In the next module, we'll look at patterns under pressure – the recurring dynamics that form when these conditions persist.

That's where what you're experiencing starts to become visible.

Module 2

Patterns Under Pressure

Seeing What Repeats, Not What's Personal

Module Orientation: Why Patterns Matter

Once you've oriented to the Squeeze itself, the next question usually arises quickly:

Okay... so what exactly is happening here?

Most people answer that question by pointing to specific moments.

A meeting that went badly.

A decision that stalled.

A leader who sent mixed signals.

A project that never quite landed.

Those moments matter. They often carry emotion, frustration, or confusion. But on their own, they don't explain very much.

This module invites a shift in how you look. Instead of focusing on individual incidents, you'll begin paying attention to **what repeats**.

Patterns are what emerge when the same conditions operate over time. They're not about who is at fault. They're about what reliably shows up when pressure and contradiction persist.

Seeing patterns is what allows people to stop personalizing what is, in fact, structural.

2.1 Why Isolated Incidents Don't Tell the Whole Story

When something goes wrong at work, the most natural response is to focus on what just happened. A conversation felt tense. A decision got reversed. An initiative lost momentum.

The problem with focusing only on moments is that they can make everything feel random or personal. One day it's this issue. The next day it's something else. People end up reacting continuously without understanding what's driving the repetition.

Patterns tell a different story. A pattern is something that:

- shows up again and again in slightly different forms
- persists even as people or projects change
- shapes behavior over time, often invisibly

Patterns don't require bad intent to form. They emerge through interaction between roles, expectations, incentives, constraints, and relationships.

Once a pattern is in place, people tend to adapt to it rather than question it. Over time, the pattern starts to feel normal, even inevitable.

This is why people often say, *"That's just how things work here,"* without being able to explain why.

2.2 Patterns Sit Between Conditions and Behavior

One of the most important distinctions in this work is the difference between conditions, patterns, and individual responses.

Conditions are the broader forces at play:

- pace
- uncertainty
- competing demands
- risk sensitivity
- resource constraints

Patterns form when those conditions persist without resolution. Individual behavior comes last.

When people skip straight from conditions to behavior, they often end up blaming themselves or others for responses that make sense in context. Patterns help explain why certain behaviors keep appearing, even when no one consciously chooses them.

They create the field within which people decide what's reasonable, safe, or necessary.

How Patterns Under Pressure Emerge & Reinforce Over Time



2.3 What We Mean by “Patterns Under Pressure”

Patterns under pressure are not personality traits, roles, or types of people. They are recurring situational dynamics that emerge when work stays incoherent long enough.

They tend to be:

- predictable
- recognizable across roles and organizations
- environmentally created
- behavior-shaping

People don't cause these patterns. They **enter them**. This distinction matters because it changes how people relate to what they're experiencing. Instead of asking, "What's wrong with me?" they begin asking, *"What kind of situation am I operating inside?"*

That shift alone often brings relief and creates space for clearer thinking.

2.4 The Core Patterns Under Pressure

Through observation and research, several core patterns appear when work environments remain under prolonged squeeze conditions.

You may recognize some of these already.

Urgency Without Orientation

Everything feels important, but nothing feels clear. People stay busy, react quickly, and struggle to prioritize because direction keeps shifting.

Contradictory Expectations

People are asked to hold opposing demands at the same time, without clarity about trade-offs. Success in one area quietly creates risk in another.

Decision Risk Inflation

Ordinary decisions start to feel career-limiting. Reviews multiply, approvals stack up, and decisions are delayed to reduce perceived risk.

Effort–Impact Disconnect

People work hard, but visible progress feels limited. Rework increases. Energy is spent without a sense of traction.

Authority–Responsibility Mismatch

People are held accountable for outcomes they don't have the authority to shape, leading to escalation loops and quiet resentment.

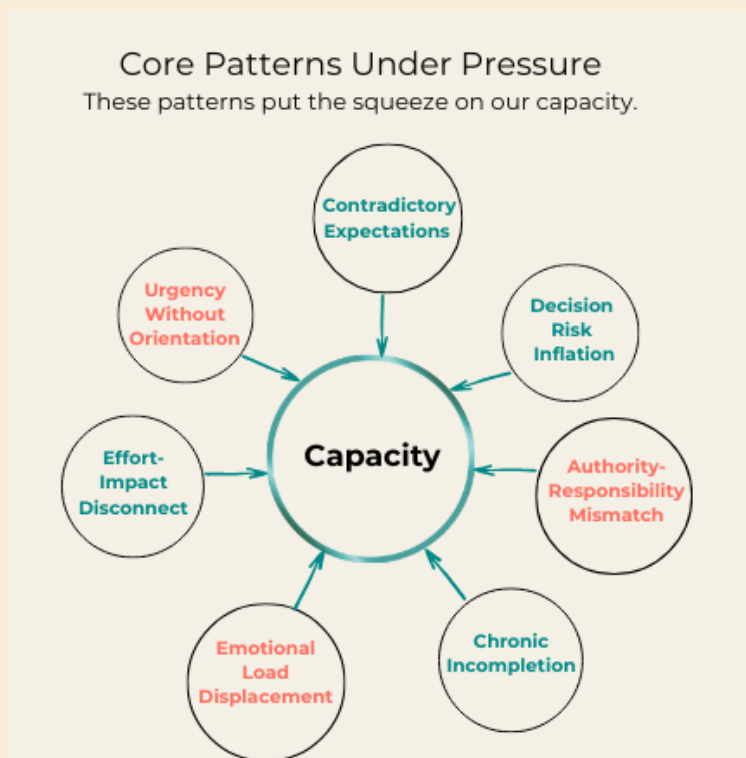
Emotional Load Displacement

The system offloads emotional regulation onto individuals. People are expected to stay positive, absorb strain, and smooth over tension.

Chronic Incompletion

Work starts but rarely finishes. Pilots, drafts, and initiatives linger without closure, creating a constant sense of unfinished business.

These patterns are not exhaustive, and they don't appear in isolation. They often overlap and reinforce one another.



2.5 Working With the Squeeze Conditions Assessment

The Squeeze Conditions Assessment is designed to help you identify which of these patterns are most active in your current work environment. It's not a diagnostic tool. It doesn't measure performance or capability. It's a way of making invisible conditions visible. As you review your assessment responses, resist the urge to treat them like a scorecard. There is no "good" or "bad" profile.

Instead, look for:

- clusters
- repetition
- persistence over time

The value of the assessment lies in what it helps you notice, not in how you score.

2.6 Making Sense of What You See

Once you've reviewed your assessment, pause before moving on. Patterns tend to feel obvious in hindsight, but surprisingly hard to see from the inside. That's because people adapt to them gradually. What once felt strange becomes normal. Use this moment to reflect on what surfaced, without rushing to interpret or act.

Reflection: Interpreting Your Patterns

Consider the following questions:

- Which patterns show up most consistently?
- Which ones feel most draining over time?
- Which have been present the longest?
- Which surprised you?

As you reflect, notice any impulse to judge yourself or others. Gently redirect your attention back to the situation itself. This is about understanding the field, not assigning blame.

You may also find it useful to explore these questions with someone you trust. Instead of answering them alone, you might ask:

- “Does this feel true to you as well?”
- “Are we seeing the same thing, or something different?”
- “Where do you feel tension that hasn’t been resolved yet?”

These questions are not just for reflection. They can also open shared understanding. These questions are not just for reflection. They can help surface what may not yet be fully seen.

2.7 How Patterns Quietly Shape Behavior

Once patterns stabilize, they begin to invite certain responses. People don't usually wake up and decide to change how they work. Behavior shifts gradually as they adapt to what seems to be required.

For example:

- When urgency persists, people stay busy to appear responsive.
- When decisions feel risky, people reopen discussions or delay closure.
- When authority is unclear, people escalate or withdraw.
- When effort doesn't translate into impact, people either over-function or disengage.

These responses often look like individual choices. In reality, they are shaped by the patterns people are operating inside. Understanding this helps reduce judgment of yourself and of others.

2.8 Same Conditions, Different Experiences

Two people can work in the same environment and experience it very differently. This doesn't mean one of them "gets it" and the other doesn't.

It usually means:

- their roles carry different risks
- they're accountable for different outcomes
- they're protecting different things

Patterns don't affect everyone equally.

Recognizing this can explain why:

- one person complies
- another challenges
- another withdraws
- another over-functions

All of these can be reasonable responses to the same underlying conditions.

Optional Reflection-in-the-Wild

If it feels useful, consider asking one trusted person:

- "Does this pattern sound familiar to you?"
- "Where do you see me compensating or carrying extra load?"

Listen without explaining or defending. This is not feedback to act on. It's perspective to consider.

2.9 What Patterns Make Possible and Limit

Patterns are not inherently good or bad. They emerge because, at some point, they help people function under pressure. The problem is not that patterns exist. The problem is when they persist beyond their usefulness.

Over time, patterns can:

- limit what people consider possible
- narrow perceived choice
- normalize strain
- quietly freeze capacity

Seeing patterns doesn't automatically change them. But it does restore orientation. And orientation is what makes deliberate choice possible.

2.10 Why Orientation Shrinks Under Pressure

Most people assume poor decisions happen because people did not think hard enough. That is rarely true. Under squeeze conditions, something else happens. As volatility rises: Data increases. Ambiguity increases. Speed expectations increase. To cope, organizations install filters. Filtering is necessary. Without filtering, nothing moves. No decision would ever get made.

But here is the trap. The same filters that preserve efficiency also suppress weak signals.

Over time: Ambiguity gets treated as noise. Friction gets treated as nuisance. Doubt gets treated as delay. Slack gets treated as waste. Inquiry gets treated as inefficiency.

Orientation does not shrink because people are careless. It shrinks because **the system rewards motion over recalibration.**

When orientation shrinks: Thresholds rise. Anomalies must be louder to be taken seriously. Commitments happen faster. Distortion accumulates quietly.

The Squeeze is not just time pressure. It is **signal compression under acceleration.** Disciplined orientation does not eliminate filtering. It governs filtering we do on a day to day basis.

The question becomes: ***What are we filtering out that we can no longer afford to ignore?*** That is the practice as part of orientation.

Module 2 Reflection

You may want to note:

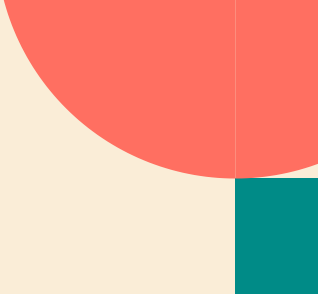
- which patterns feel most familiar right now
- which ones you've adapted to without realizing it
- what feels less personal after naming these patterns

Closing This Module

You've now:

- shifted from moments to patterns
- named recurring dynamics under pressure
- separated conditions from individual behavior
- restored some distance from self-blame

In the next module, we'll look at how people adapt inside these patterns – the moves they make to cope, protect, and keep things moving. That's where squeeze plays come in.



Module 3

Squeeze Plays

Practicing Sense-Making Under Constraint

Module Orientation:

What This Module Is Really About

In the first two modules, you learned how to recognize the conditions you're operating inside and the patterns that tend to emerge when work stays incoherent for long periods of time.

This module turns the lens inward. Not to analyze your personality. Not to diagnose behavior. And not to fix anything.

This module introduces a **practice of sense-making at the individual level.**

Sense-making is not about arriving at the right answer or choosing the "best" response. It is about learning how to see what you are doing, understand why it makes sense given the conditions, and decide whether you want to continue participating in that way. The goal here is not change. The goal is conscious participation.

3.1 What a Squeeze Play Is (and Why Everyone Has Them)

A squeeze play is a short-term, adaptive move someone makes when work feels compressed, contradictory, or unclear.

People make squeeze plays in order to:

- reduce risk
- regain a sense of control
- preserve credibility or dignity
- maintain momentum
- protect energy, influence, or standing

Squeeze plays are not flaws or failures.

They are intelligent responses to difficult conditions. You don't "have" a squeeze play the way you have a trait or a tendency. You make squeeze plays inside particular environments. When conditions change, squeeze plays often change too.

This is why labeling people by their behavior is so often misleading. What looks like over-functioning, withdrawal, or indecision from the outside is frequently a rational move from the inside.

3.2 Conscious, Unconscious, Intentional, Unintentional

One of the most important distinctions in this work is the difference between autopilot and choice.

Some squeeze plays are unconscious. They happen so automatically that people don't realize they're making them. These responses often formed earlier in a career, or during periods of sustained pressure, when they were the safest available option.

Other squeeze plays are fully conscious and intentional. People know exactly what they're doing, understand the impact, and choose the move anyway because, given the conditions, it still feels like the best available option. Neither is wrong.

A squeeze play only becomes problematic when there is a gap between:

- what you're doing
- the impact it's having
- what actually matters to you now

This module is not about closing that gap for you. It's about helping you see whether a gap exists at all.

3.3 Why Absurdity Is a Signal, Not a Just a Joke

Many squeeze plays are difficult to see because they look like competence.

They look like being responsive.

Being helpful.

Being thorough.

Being flexible.

Being professional.

This is precisely why humor and satire are used intentionally in this work.

Research on learning, cognition, and sense-making shows that people gain insight when they can create **just enough distance** from their own experience.

Humor and absurdity do this without minimizing what's happening. They interrupt automatic narratives and allow people to see familiar situations from a slightly different angle. Absurdity doesn't trivialize work. It reveals the logic underneath it.

When something suddenly sounds ridiculous when you say it out loud, it's often because a pattern has just become visible. That moment of recognition is not mockery. It's orientation.

3.4 Using Absurdity as Data

In this work, absurdity is not just something to notice. It's something you can use.

Satirical sense-making is a way of amplifying signals that are already present but easy to ignore. It works by gently exaggerating, reframing, or externalizing a situation so its underlying logic becomes visible.

This is not about being funny, clever, or provocative. It's about creating just enough distance from your own experience to see patterns that are hard to detect from the inside. You are already doing this informally when you:

- laugh at something that shouldn't be normal but somehow is
- repeat a phrase and hear how strange it sounds
- tell a work story and watch someone outside your context blink in confusion

These moments are sense-making opportunities. Later stages of the Reclaim work use satirical sense-making more explicitly, especially in collective settings. In this course, you're being introduced to its logic. It's an opportunity to practice noticing when absurdity is trying to tell you something.

Micro-Practice: Language as a Signal (Optional)

Write down three phrases you've heard yourself say recently at work that sound reasonable on the surface but feel slightly ridiculous when you hear them aloud.

Examples might include:

- "It's not ideal, but it's where we are."
- "Let's just get something out there."
- "We'll circle back once things settle."

Now ask:

- What conditions make this sentence make sense?
- What does it quietly normalize?
- What does it make unnecessary to question?

You're not analyzing yourself. You're listening for the logic of the system speaking through language.

3.5 An Absurdly Familiar Scene

Picture this.

A meeting ends with vague agreement and no clear decision. There's a pause. Everyone feels the uncertainty, but no one names it. As people log off, one person says, "I'll just take a first pass and circulate something."

That first pass becomes a draft.

The draft becomes a plan.

The plan becomes execution.

Weeks later, that same person is quietly frustrated, wondering how they ended up owning something they never agreed to lead. From the outside, they look capable and proactive. On the inside, they feel stretched, resentful, and oddly stuck.

This is not a personality issue. It's a squeeze play that makes sense in an environment where ambiguity is high and follow-through is rewarded more than clarity.

3.6 Common Squeeze Plays (Described, Not Labeled)

Across many organizations, certain adaptive moves appear again and again.

Some people respond to sustained urgency by staying visibly busy. Calendars fill. Activity becomes a form of safety. When direction is unclear, motion signals value.

Others respond to inflated decision risk by reopening conversations. Each additional review feels like protection. Delay becomes safer than closure.

Some people withdraw strategically. After seeing ideas go nowhere, they stop offering them. They do what's asked, conserve energy, and quietly disengage from influence.

Others absorb emotional load. They smooth tensions, reassure colleagues, and carry the mood of the room, while structural issues remain untouched.

Each of these is a squeeze play.

Each makes sense to the person making it.

3.7 Practicing Radical Reflection™

Before you begin the exercises in this module, it's important to name the stance you're being invited into.

Throughout this course, you're practicing what we at BBHQ call **Radical Reflection**. This is not introspection in the usual sense, and it's not analysis for the sake of understanding yourself better in isolation.

Radical Reflection is a **reflective sense-making practice**. It happens after the fact, when there is enough distance to interpret experience without defensiveness or urgency.

Radical Reflection is a way of making sense of experience in context. It asks you to notice what you are doing while staying connected to the conditions you're operating inside. Rather than asking, "Why am I like this?", it asks, "Why does this response make sense here?"

This kind of reflection is **deliberately embodied, not just cognitive**. It pays attention to reactions, tension, tone shifts, humor, discomfort, and moments of absurdity. These are often the **earliest signals** that something is off, even before you can explain why.

In real time, these signals show up as sensations, jokes, irritation, hesitation, irony, or a vague sense of unease. Radical Reflection™ helps you return to those moments after the fact, before they are rationalized away or overwritten by explanations. In doing so, it preserves information that is often lost when reflection becomes purely analytical.

If something makes you laugh, cringe, feel defensive, or feel uncomfortably familiar, that's not a distraction. It's **data**.

Humor and satire are part of this practice because they create just enough distance to hold those signals without collapsing into judgment or urgency.

The goal is not to be clever or funny, and it's not to fix yourself. The goal is to step out of autopilot, reconnect with what you noticed but didn't yet understand, and regain orientation.

As you move into the exercises that follow, approach them with curiosity rather than critique. You are not trying to arrive at the right interpretation. You are practicing how to see.

3.8 Exercise: Interpreting One Familiar Squeeze Play

Choose one squeeze play that feels familiar and relatively easy to look at. Not the one that feels most charged yet.

Describe it in detail:

- what tends to trigger it
- what you do, step by step
- what problem it quietly solves
- what happens immediately afterward

Now pause. Ask yourself:

- What is this move trying to protect?
- What would feel riskier if I didn't make this move?
- When did this response start making sense?

This is intended as interpretation, not judgment.

3.9 From Recognition to Impact

Recognition often leads to a second realization: impact. Not just on outcomes, but on you.

Some people discover that a squeeze play they've been using unconsciously no longer sits well with them. Others realize that a move they've been questioning is actually a deliberate, values-aligned choice. Both outcomes are valid.

The key question is not *"Should I stop doing this?"*
It's: ***"Knowing the impact, how does this sit with me now?"***

If the answer is *"I'm aware, and I'm okay with it,"* that's sufficient. If the answer is *"Something feels off,"* that's information not instruction.

3.10 Exercise 2: A Second, Deeper Example

(Optional, but encouraged)

Now choose a second squeeze play.

This one may feel:

- more identity-linked
- harder to name
- easier to justify
- more emotionally loaded

Approach it experimentally.

Describe:

- how long it's been in place
- what it gives you
- what it costs you over time
- what it asks you to sacrifice

Then reflect on this question: ***When I imagine continuing this indefinitely, how does that feel?***

You are not being asked to decide anything yet.

You are practicing noticing fit.

3.11 Optional Sense-Making With Another

Sense-making doesn't always happen best in isolation. Often perspective sharpens when it's reflected back to us.

If it feels appropriate, consider sharing one squeeze play with a trusted colleague, friend, or peer not the most serious one, but one you can hold lightly.

You might ask them:

- "Does this pattern sound familiar to you?"
- "What do you notice when I describe this?"

Listen without defending or explaining. This is not feedback to act on. It's a mirror.

3.12 Stepping Out of Autopilot

Autopilot is not failure. It is efficiency under strain.

Choice returns when:

- behavior is named
- impact is understood
- intent is acknowledged

That is the shift this module supports. You may notice that awareness alone begins to change how you show up not because you decided to change, but because you can now see what you're doing.

Closing Reflection for Module 3

Take a moment to note with no action required:

- which squeeze plays you are choosing consciously
- which ones you want to explore further
- where awareness alone has already shifted something

Closing This Module

This module was about learning a practice of sense-making as part of reclaiming orientation, including two specific methods we use at BBHQ: Radical Reflection™ and Satirical Sensemaking™. In the next module, we'll look at how this practice helps restore orientation and widen choice, even when conditions don't change.

Module 4

Reclaiming Orientation

From Awareness to Deliberate Participation

Module Orientation:

What “Reclaiming” Means

Up to this point, the work has been about seeing clearly. You’ve examined the squeeze conditions you’re operating inside. You’ve learned to recognize patterns under pressure. You’ve identified squeeze plays and practiced making sense of why they exist. This module is about what comes after awareness without turning awareness into obligation.

In this work, orientation refers to your ability to understand what kind of situation you’re in, recognize what’s shaping it, and know how you’re positioned within it. When orientation slips, things may still look stable on the surface, but it becomes harder to see what matters, what’s changing, and what options are actually available.

Reclaiming orientation does not mean fixing the system, confronting everyone, or making dramatic changes. It does not mean finally figuring out “the right answer.”

Reclaiming means regaining enough clarity to **choose how you participate**, even when conditions remain complex, contradictory, or imperfect.

This is not about control.

It's about agency.

4.1 Orientation Is Not Certainty

When people feel disoriented at work, they often assume the problem is lack of clarity, information, or alignment.

In this work, **sense-making is how orientation is regained and maintained.**

It's the process of noticing patterns, interpreting experience in context, and testing understanding through small, reversible moves. Orientation is the outcome. Sense-making is the means. But orientation is not the same as certainty.

Orientation means:

- understanding what kind of situation you're in
- recognizing the forces shaping behavior
- knowing what is and isn't within your influence
- having a sense of where you stand inside it all

You can be oriented without having answers.
And you can be highly informed while still feeling completely lost.

This course is not trying to give you certainty.
It's helping you recover your bearings.

4.2 Why Choice Narrows Under Pressure

Under sustained pressure, choice tends to collapse.
Not because people stop caring, but because:

- risk begins to feel higher than it actually is
- options feel fewer than they really are
- energy is spent maintaining stability rather than exploring alternatives

This is why squeeze plays become repetitive.
They're familiar. They're efficient.
They feel safer than experimenting.

Over time, people stop noticing that other responses might be possible at all.

Reclaiming orientation starts by noticing where choice has quietly narrowed often without you realizing it.

4.3 A Familiar Example: The Invisible Yes

Imagine being asked to “just support” a project.
You don’t say yes explicitly. You don’t say no either.

You attend one meeting. Then another.
You review a document. You offer a suggestion.

Weeks later, you’re effectively responsible.
At no point did you choose this and yet, here you are.

This isn’t necessarily a failure of boundaries. It’s what happens when orientation erodes and participation becomes implicit rather than deliberate.

4.4 Widening the Choice Space (Without Forcing Action)

Widening choice does not mean adding more options immediately. It means pausing long enough to see that there is a choice. Often, that pause alone creates relief.

The goal here is not to decide what to do next, but to restore a sense of internal flexibility – the feeling that you are not trapped inside a single response.

When orientation improves, people often report feeling:

- less rushed
- less personally implicated
- more able to hold uncertainty without reacting

That shift matters.

4.5 Exercise: Noticing Where Choice Has Collapsed

Think about one situation where you feel stuck, overextended, or resigned. Describe it plainly.

Then reflect on:

- what feels inevitable about this situation
- what you believe “has to” happen
- what you believe is “not possible”

Now gently question that story but by examining it.

Ask yourself:

- What am I assuming is fixed here?
- What am I treating as non-negotiable without checking?
- Where did I stop imagining alternatives?

This is not about optimism. It’s about accuracy.

4.6 Small, Deliberate Shifts (Not Big Moves)

Reclaiming orientation rarely begins with big changes. It usually starts with small, deliberate adjustments in how you participate.

For example:

- name uncertainty instead of absorbing it
- ask a question instead of taking on more work
- pausing before responding
- choosing not to fill a silence
- continuing a squeeze play consciously and owning that choice

These moves may look insignificant from the outside. Internally, they signal a return to agency.

4.7 Exercise: One Deliberate Adjustment

Choose a situation you've been reflecting on.

Ask yourself:

- If I were slightly more oriented here, what might I do differently?
- What is one small adjustment that would restore a sense of choice?
- What would feel like participation rather than reaction?

Describe the adjustment in simple, concrete terms. You are not committing to it yet. You're practicing imagining yourself with more room to move.

4.8 Staying Out of the Fix-It Trap

A common reaction after gaining clarity may be the urge to fix everything at once. Pause there. Before changing roles, rewriting strategy, confronting leadership, or redesigning your entire workflow, stay with orientation a little longer.

Stay until:

- you can describe the situation without blame
- you can name what is and isn't within your influence
- you can see at least two possible responses, not just one
- you are choosing your next move, not reacting to pressure

Orientation is not about:

- becoming more resilient
- tolerating the intolerable
- taking responsibility for systemic problems
- carrying more load more gracefully

It is about deciding where you will and won't invest your energy, consciously. Sometimes the most oriented choice is to stay, knowing why. Sometimes it is to change how you engage. Sometimes it is to begin preparing for a transition. All are valid.

4.9 Optional: Reflection With Others

If you've been sharing parts of this work with trusted others, this can be a useful moment for reflection.

You might share:

- an assumption you've noticed
- where choice felt narrower than you'd thought
- one small adjustment you're considering

This is not about advice or validation. It's about hearing yourself think out loud.

4.10 The Reclaim Loop:

Orient → Experiment → Re-orient

Reclaiming orientation does not end with insight. It continues through action but not the kind of action most of us were taught.

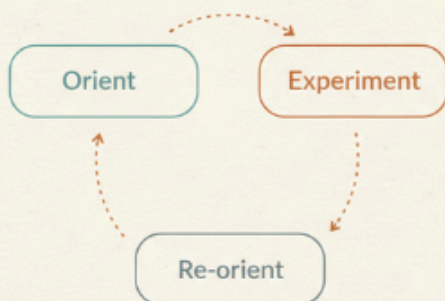
In this work, action is not a solution to implement or a decision to finalize. It is a way of learning more about the situation you're already inside.

At BBHQ, we work with a simple practice loop:

Orient → Experiment → Re-orient

The Reclaim Loop

(An Adaptive Orientation Practice)



You've already been practicing the first part, **orient**.

Orientation means you can describe what's happening without collapsing into urgency, blame, or self-criticism. You understand the squeeze conditions, the patterns under pressure, and the squeeze plays you tend to make.

From that orientation, **experiments** become possible. Not fixes. Not permanent commitments. But small, reversible moves that generate information.

After experimenting, **you re-orient.**

You notice:

- what shifted
- what stayed the same
- what surprised you
- how your own experience changed

That updated understanding then informs the next cycle. There is no final step. Only better orientation, better experiments, and more conscious participation over time.

4.11 Optional Practice: Real-Time Sensemaking

Before closing this module, here is a short practice to help you notice a different mode of sensemaking.

Up to this point, you've been practicing reflective sense-making looking back on experience to understand conditions, patterns, and your own adaptations.

There is another kind of sensemaking that happens much earlier. It happens in the moment, often before we have words for it.

Real-Time Sensemaking

Real-time sensemaking shows up as signals rather than conclusions. People don't stop to analyze.

They react.

They adjust.

They joke.

They hesitate.

They change tone.

They go quiet.

They exaggerate.

They deflect.

They say something that lands sideways in the room.

Humor, irony, sarcasm, and exaggeration are especially common carriers of these signals.

They are not distractions. They are often early indicators that something doesn't quite add up. This practice is not about speaking up, correcting anyone, or being clever. It is about noticing.

Micro-Practice: Signal Spotting (Real Time)

For one workday or part of a day, simply observe. Do not intervene. Do not interpret yet. Just notice.

Pay attention to moments where:

- someone makes a joke that lands a little too accurately
- irony or sarcasm slips into the conversation
- someone laughs and then immediately moves on
- a phrase gets repeated because it feels uncomfortable to examine
- exaggeration is used to make something tolerable
- humor smooths over uncertainty, tension, or contradiction

Include your own responses as well.

Notice:

- when you use humor to cope, deflect, or test the waters
- when something feels absurd before you can explain why
- when your body reacts before your thinking catches up

You don't need to write anything down in the moment. Just register: "That felt like a signal."

After the Fact (Brief Reflection)

At the end of the day, jot a few notes:

- What kinds of moments stood out?
- Where did humor or irony appear most often?
- What seemed to get smoothed over?
- What felt hard to say directly?
- Did you notice patterns repeating across conversations?

This is not about decoding meaning yet. It's about learning to notice earlier.

Working With This in Conversations

If you choose to explore this with others, you might start with questions like:

- What feels contradictory about what we're being asked to do?
- What are we optimizing for right now, really?
- Where are we feeling pressure that doesn't quite make sense?
- What are we not saying that might be shaping how we're working?

Why This Matters

By now, you've seen that sensemaking doesn't happen in just one mode. Some of it happens in the moment, through signals like humor, hesitation, tone shifts, and absurdity. Some of it happens after the fact, when you have enough distance to reflect, name patterns, and regain perspective.

This course emphasizes reflective sense-making because orientation is restored through distance first. That distance is what makes choice visible again.

Over time, reflective sense-making sharpens your ability to notice earlier signals, and those signals give reflection better information to work with. That practice of interplay – not certainty or control is what sustains orientation.

Looking Ahead

For now, noticing is enough. You are not being asked to intervene in real time or act on every signal you observe. The aim is simply to stay in relationship with what's happening, rather than being carried by it. To stay consciously in the infinite game, consciously in the workplace as a complex adaptive system.

In the next module, you'll focus on how orientation is lost and regained over time, and how this practice can be sustained without becoming another task, habit, or performance.

Closing Reflection for Module 4

Take a moment to notice:

- where orientation already feels steadier
- where pressure feels less personal
- where you sense more room to choose how you participate

Closing This Module

Reclaiming orientation does not mean changing your circumstances overnight.

It means recovering the ability to participate deliberately, even when conditions remain complex, ambiguous, or constrained.

The final module turns to what it means to stay oriented over time, without turning sensemaking into another obligation.

Module 5

Staying Oriented Over Time

Sensemaking as the Ongoing Practice that Sustains Orientation

Module Orientation:

Why This Module Matters

This course is not meant to be completed once and set aside.

It introduces a way of seeing and like any way of seeing, it only stays useful if it's returned to periodically.

This final module is not about discipline, habit formation, or personal optimization.

It's about staying oriented in environments that will continue to be complex, contradictory, and fast-moving. Its about practicing the practice of orientation.

Nothing here requires you to do more. It simply helps you recognize when it might be time to pause, look again, and re-engage the practice.

5.1 Orientation Is Not a Permanent State

It's tempting to think of orientation as something you "get back" and then keep. In reality, orientation fluctuates. You can feel clear and grounded one week, then disoriented again the next, especially when conditions change, pressure spikes, or new demands appear.

That doesn't mean the practice failed. It means you're human, operating inside living systems. The aim is not to stay oriented all the time. The aim is to notice sooner when you've lost your bearings.

Sense-making is what allows orientation to be renewed when it slips.

5.2 Early Signals That Orientation Is Slipping

Most people don't lose orientation suddenly. It erodes gradually. Some early signals include:

- feeling busier without feeling effective
- repeating the same conversations without movement
- defaulting to familiar squeeze plays more quickly
- irritation that feels disproportionate
- a sense of resignation or quiet withdrawal

These are not warnings to panic. They're invitations to pause and re-engage sense-making.

5.3 Re-Entering the Practice (Gently)

When orientation slips, the temptation is often to:

- push harder
- fix something quickly
- add structure
- take control

This course suggests a different move.

Re-enter the practice by asking a small number of familiar questions:

- What kind of situation am I in right now?
- What feels compressed or contradictory?
- What squeeze plays am I noticing?
- Am I choosing my responses or running them?

You don't need to answer everything. Often, naming one thing is enough to restore perspective.

5.4 A Short Re–Orientation Exercise

The next time you feel off-balance, try this:
Take five minutes and write a few sentences answering:

- “Right now, work feels like...”
- “The main pressure I’m carrying is...”
- “The move I’m most tempted to make is...”

Then pause and ask:

“Does this still make sense and do I want to keep participating this way?”

No decision required.

This is about staying in relationship with your own experience, rather than drifting away from it.

5.5 Choosing When Not to Intervene

One of the quiet insights people gain through this practice is knowing when not to act.

Not every pattern requires a response.

Not every squeeze play needs to be adjusted.

Not every moment of discomfort signals misalignment.

Sometimes, the most oriented move is to notice and continue, consciously. That choice is different from endurance or avoidance. It comes from clarity.

5.6 Sense-Making as a Shared Language

Although this course focuses on individual sense-making, many people find that its greatest value comes from having a shared language with others. Over time, you may notice yourself saying things like:

- “I think we’re inside a squeeze here.”
- “That feels like a pattern under pressure.”
- “I might be making a squeeze play – slow down.”

You don’t need formal sessions or facilitation for this. Sometimes, shared language alone reduces friction and restores orientation.

5.7 Beyond This Course

For some people, this course will be enough. For others, it may open questions that feel larger:

- about sustainability or identity
- about how much adaptation is too much
- about what you want next
- or application with colleagues, your team or working with your client

Those questions deserve more than quick answers. This course gives you a steadier place to stand while you consider them. The deeper satirical sense-making work explores those layers more fully, at both the individual and collective levels. That work requires more time, more reflection, and often more friction than a focused orientation practice allows.

Here, the aim is **foundational**. This course stops where orientation becomes stable. That boundary is deliberate.

Applying This Work with Your Team or Clients

You can also begin using this in **conversations with others** to surface what may not yet be fully seen. The same questions you worked with in the Squeeze Assessment can be used in:

- One-on-one conversations
- Team discussions
- Client work

Final Reflection

Before closing, take a moment to reflect on:

- what you see more clearly now
- what feels less personal than it did before
- what you want to stay curious about

Nothing needs to be finalized. Orientation is not about closure. It's about continuing with awareness and returning to the Reclaim loop as a daily practice.

Course Close

This course was not designed to give you answers or solutions. It was designed to make work more intelligible. By recognizing squeeze conditions, patterns under pressure, and your own adaptive responses, you've practiced staying oriented in complexity without blaming yourself or oversimplifying the system.

You may feel clearer. You may feel unsettled.

You may feel both. All of that is consistent with regained orientation.

You now have:

- language for experiences that once felt personal or isolating
- a way to inquire with others, your team and clients
- a way to notice when work has slipped into persistent contradiction
- a practice for making sense of your own adaptations without judgment
- a simple loop you can return to whenever orientation begins to erode

This is not something to complete or master.

It's something you return to as conditions change.

If You Like Further Support

For some, this course is enough. For others, it opens questions worth exploring further.

BBHQ offers:

- Orientation sessions (individual or small group)
- Collective sense-making workshops
- Satirical sense-making labs
- Ongoing research and publishing

You can return to this whenever work starts to feel unclear, heavy, or quietly absurd again.

About Behaving Badly HQ

Behaving Badly HQ is a research and sensemaking studio focused on one question:

Why do capable people behave in ways that seem irrational inside modern work systems?

We examine the conditions that shape behavior, and the patterns that emerge when orientation drifts.

This course is one entry point into that ongoing investigation.

About the Author

Charleen Johnson is the founder of Behaving Badly HQ and the author of the 2026 Workplace Absurdities Report. Her work examines how modern organizations, as complex adaptive systems, shape human behavior under pressure.

Through research, experimentation, and applied field work, she develops practical tools for regaining clarity in ambiguous conditions.