



THE SIGNAL

FROM PRESSURE TO POTENTIAL

The Psychological Spring Theory

DARIUSH "DK" KHALEGHI, MS, MBA, PCC

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The Psychological Spring Theory

A spring offers a powerful metaphor for understanding what happens when pressure is applied to people.

The physics is simple. When a spring is compressed, the pressure does not disappear. It is transformed into stored potential energy. The greater the compression, the stronger the spring's restoring force. When the pressure is removed, that stored energy becomes motion.

Three principles help explain this. **Hooke's Law** tells us that compressing a spring creates a restoring force in the opposite direction. **Newton's Third Law** tells us that forces arise in equal and opposite pairs. **The First Law of Thermodynamics** tells us that energy is not destroyed; it is transferred or transformed.

I call the human parallel **Psychological Spring Theory**: when people experience sustained pressure but lack the power or safety to respond, their reactions may be suppressed - but their psychological effects do not disappear. They are absorbed, stored, and transformed.

This may also help explain how the **shadow** operates within the human psyche.

The shadow contains the emotions, needs, impulses, and parts of ourselves that we have learned are unsafe or unacceptable to express. Anger is pushed down. Fear is concealed. Ambition is denied. Vulnerability is hidden. The person may appear calm, agreeable, and compliant, but the rejected material remains psychologically active beneath the surface.

Silence is not the absence of a reaction.

PRESSURE, SHADOW, AND TRANSFORMATION

Consider an unfair relationship between a supervisor and an employee. The supervisor possesses formal authority, while the employee may lack the power to challenge criticism, disrespect, unreasonable expectations, or mistreatment. The employee remains silent because speaking carries consequences.

The anger that cannot confront the supervisor may emerge as resentment toward coworkers. The voice that cannot speak directly may return as sarcasm, withdrawal, passive resistance, or self-criticism. The desire to leave may become disengagement. What cannot be expressed consciously often finds another path.

When pressure is applied without fairness, voice, or dignity, it becomes oppression. When the resulting response cannot be acknowledged, it can enter the shadow. There it may accumulate until it appears through projection, emotional overreaction, burnout, sabotage, rupture - or even symptoms the person does not understand.

Like a spring, every person also has an elastic limit. A spring compressed too far may not rebound; it can become permanently deformed or break. People, too, can be deeply harmed when pressure exceeds their capacity to recover.

But stored psychological energy is not inherently destructive. When brought into awareness, it can be transformed into courage, creativity, boundaries, advocacy, leadership, and change. Shadow integration does not eliminate the energy. It gives that energy a conscious and constructive direction.

The pressure intended to keep someone down may ultimately become the force that propels them forward.

Leaders should never mistake silence for acceptance. Sometimes silence is stored potential. Sometimes it is the formation of a shadow. And sometimes it is energy waiting for the safety, awareness, and courage to move.

Dariusz "DK" Khaleghi, MS, MBA, PCC

Executive Coach | Strategic Advisor | Professor of Leadership & Organizational Psychology