



LEADING THROUGH PROTRACTED CRISIS AND UNCERTAINTY



KONTERRA
RESILIENCE

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

In environments marked by ongoing conflict, chronic insecurity, or persistent uncertainty, managers face unique and often intense challenges. Leading effectively in these situations requires more than just operational management skills—it calls for emotional steadiness, strong communication, compassionate leadership, and the ability to adapt in real time.

We often hear managers saying things like:

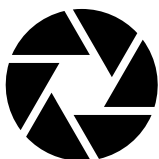
“Last week, I had to cancel check-ins with my team because the air raid sirens wouldn’t stop. Then I found myself apologizing—again—for not having answers. I’m holding it together, but just barely.”

Comments like these reflect the emotional weight that many managers carry in protracted crisis settings. They speak to the constant juggling of priorities, the responsibility of caring for others while managing one’s own limits, and the loneliness that can come with trying to stay strong for the team.

This guide is designed to deepen your insight into the impacts of long-term uncertainty and offer practical, experience-tested strategies you can use to support your team and advocate within your organization.

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WHAT MAKES THIS SO HARD?



Leading through a protracted crisis is different from leading through an emergency. In an acute crisis, there's adrenaline, a clear timeline, and usually a clear end point. But prolonged uncertainty is relentless. It drains cognitive and emotional reserves and forces managers into roles that may feel unsustainable over time. You're expected to be an anchor—for your

team, and often for your community—even when you are navigating the storm yourself.

Your responsibilities are not only operational, but deeply relational and emotional. You may be tasked with motivating a team while holding space for grief, advocating up the chain while buffering downward, and maintaining hope without knowing when—or if—the pressure will let up. Some of the specific challenges include:

- **Holding space for distress while maintaining direction** – Being present with your team's emotional needs while still moving things forward.
- **Communicating hope without giving false reassurance** – Providing a sense of meaning and motivation, even when outcomes are uncertain or dire.
- **Being a buffer for your team without burning out yourself** – Shielding your staff from excess pressure while still trying to meet external demands.
- **Balancing empathy with accountability** – Supporting your team compassionately while still ensuring critical work gets done.

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Managers often carry the weight of their team's wellbeing with little time or space to process their own stress. The mental juggling act—of logistics, emotions, competing expectations, and personal fatigue—can feel overwhelming.

Naming these tensions is a first step toward navigating them. The sections that follow offer practical ways to support your team through what may be one of the most demanding seasons of your leadership.

UNDERSTANDING COMMON IMPACTS



Chronic exposure to high-threat or uncertain environments can take a heavy toll—not just physically, but cognitively, emotionally, and relationally. Unlike acute stress, which activates a temporary burst of energy and focus, ongoing stress wears people down over time. It erodes reserves, narrows perspective, and makes even small decisions feel overwhelming. The longer the uncertainty persists, the more likely individuals and teams are to experience:

- **Persistent stress and fatigue** – A constant low-level activation of the stress response system can lead to exhaustion, even in the absence of acute crisis moments.
- **Difficulty concentrating or making decisions** – The brain’s executive functioning is impaired when it is continuously on alert, reducing clarity and increasing errors.
- **Heightened irritability, anger, or withdrawal** – These are common signs that someone is overloaded and nearing burnout.
- **Disillusionment or loss of hope** – As the crisis stretches on, people may begin to question whether their work is meaningful or whether conditions will ever improve.
- **Reduced motivation and productivity** – Energy and focus fluctuate widely, and capacity to “push through” becomes limited.
- **Tense or fractured team dynamics** – Stress often increases defensiveness, miscommunication, and conflict—even in strong teams.

Ongoing stress wears people down over time. It erodes reserves, narrows perspective, and makes even small decisions feel overwhelming.

These effects don’t always show up as dramatic breakdowns. More often, they emerge gradually—in quiet disengagement, in silences during team meetings, in slower email responses, or in the hesitancy to speak up.

These challenges are compounded when staff are also worried about family and friends, navigating disrupted services, facing limited mobility, or working in physical danger or isolation. The mental load is often invisible—but it is very real, and it has real consequences for how people show up, connect, and perform.

MANAGERS SET THE EMOTIONAL TONE



Your emotional regulation matters more than you might think. Neuroscience research shows that emotions are contagious—your team will pick up on your stress, anxiety, calm, or confidence. To lead well in crisis, cultivate habits that help you stay emotionally grounded. Habits such as:

- **Pausing before team calls or meetings** to take 90 seconds for grounding. Breathe. Reset your tone by repeating calming anchor phrases to yourself like:
 - > “Steady and present.”
 - > “Calm is contagious.”
 - > “Even in uncertainty, I can respond with care.”
 - > “I don’t need to fix everything to lead well.”
- **Naming your emotional state when appropriate:** “I’m feeling unsettled too, but I’m here and we’ll get through this together.”
- **Regularly doing things that help you “discharge” and manage your own stress and tension:** Physical movement, sleep, venting to a trusted peer, mindfulness, and/or periodically stepping away from media and inputs. Your own wellbeing is not separate from your leadership—it’s foundational to it.

Your team will pick up on your stress, anxiety, calm, or confidence. To lead well in crisis, cultivate habits that help you stay emotionally grounded.

You don’t have to be perfectly calm all the time—but every time you ground yourself before showing up for your team, you’re reinforcing resilience and helping shape a stronger and more supportive team culture.

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PRACTICAL TIPS FOR SUPPORTING TEAMS

You don't need to end or fix the crisis to lead effectively. Much of your impact as a manager comes through how you communicate, how you model behaviors, and how you shape the team culture. The following sections highlight five areas where you can make a significant difference.



1. Acknowledging and Normalizing the Impact

People cope better when they feel seen and understood. Pretending everything is fine doesn't help anyone—and silence can be isolating. Managers play a key role in setting the tone for open, honest communication. When you speak candidly about stress, acknowledge the difficulty of the current context, and model self-awareness, you help normalize the emotional experience for others. This builds trust, fosters psychological safety, and decreases shame.

Try the following:

- **Name the stressors.** Be specific: "This week has been particularly tough with [X event], and I know many of us are feeling it."
- **Validate emotions and reactions.** Let people know it's OK to struggle. Say things like:
 - > "It's normal to be struggling to focus right now."
 - > "We're all carrying a lot—let's take that into account."
 - > "It's understandable to feel tired or unmotivated—this is hard."
 - > "This isn't just about workload—it's about working under constant strain. That's a different kind of exhaustion."
- **Model honest reflection.** Without oversharing, you can say things like, "I've been finding it difficult to focus lately too—I'm making a few adjustments this week to help me manage."
- **Adjust expectations out loud.** Instead of silently lowering the bar, communicate transparently: "Let's reduce the scope of this deliverable so we can prioritize rest and recovery where possible."
- **Encourage self-compassion.** Remind your team (and yourself) that functioning at less than 100% in this context isn't a failure—it's a sign of humanity.

When you speak candidly about stress, acknowledge the difficulty of the current context, and model self-awareness, you help normalize the emotional experience for others.

This doesn't lower standards—it builds trust. It tells your team: You are allowed to be human. You are allowed to be impacted. And you are still valuable and needed.



2. Setting Realistic Expectations

Holding onto pre-crisis standards can create shame, anxiety, and burnout—for you and your team. The reality is that capacity in crisis environments fluctuates dramatically. Instead of measuring success against normal benchmarks, redefine what progress looks like under pressure.

Here are some ways to set and model realistic expectations:

- **Distinguish between essential and non-essential.** What truly needs to happen this week? What can wait? Give staff clarity on where to focus their limited energy.
- **Recalibrate timelines regularly.** Acknowledge that shifting circumstances may require new deadlines. Involve your team in these decisions to increase ownership and clarity.
- **Talk about capacity openly.** Say things like, “How’s your bandwidth this week?” or “Would it help to redistribute anything?” Normalize the idea that people may be functioning at 70% (or less)—and that this is still valid and valuable.
- **Watch for silent overload.** Some staff won’t speak up about feeling overwhelmed. Pay attention to missed deadlines, shorter replies, or low engagement as possible signals.
- **Encourage boundary-setting.** Give your team permission to say no or delay non-critical work. Model this by setting your own limits: share when you’re taking breaks or adjusting priorities. Your behavior gives others permission to adjust.
- **Use team-wide resets.** When things feel frayed, try a “reset week” focused on recovery, backlogged tasks, or regrouping. These small pauses can help teams regain clarity and momentum.

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3. Counteracting Powerlessness and Disillusionment

Prolonged stress can lead to a creeping sense of futility—like nothing we do makes a difference. This feeling can quickly drain motivation and morale across a team. One of your most powerful tools as a manager is your ability to help restore a sense of purpose, choice, and hope, even in small ways.

Here are some ways you can help your team feel more grounded and empowered:

- **Reduce uncertainty where possible.** Share what you know, even when the news isn't ideal. Hearing, "There's no update yet, but here's what we're focusing on today," helps people feel anchored.
- **Focus on what can be controlled.** Help your team identify areas where they still have agency: routines, tone of communication, task prioritization, or peer support. Highlighting choice—no matter how small—reminds people they are not helpless.
- **Name and celebrate small wins.** In uncertain times, completing a task, showing up for a teammate, or making progress on a project is meaningful. Recognizing these moments helps restore confidence and forward momentum.
- **Fight the negativity bias.** Our brains are wired to focus on threat and danger, especially during crisis. Intentionally point out what's working. Highlight examples of resilience, cooperation, or creativity you've seen within the team.
- **Invite the team to co-create moments of hope.** Ask, "What's something we've done recently that we're proud of?" or "What's a positive outcome we can work toward together?" This keeps forward-looking thinking alive.
- **Offer perspective.** Without denying difficulty, help people zoom out. "This month is tough, but we've made it through other hard times." Or, "This isn't forever. We're in a chapter—not the whole story."
- **Model hopeful realism.** You don't need to be overly optimistic. Instead, hold space for difficulty while reminding people that effort still matters and that connection and meaning can still be found.

One of your most powerful tools as a manager is your ability to help restore a sense of purpose, choice, and hope, even in small ways.

These small shifts—offering clarity, affirming effort, and connecting people to each other and their purpose—are powerful antidotes to the helplessness that protracted crisis can breed.



4. Building Team Cohesion

Connection won't erase hardship, but it helps people endure it far better. Sustained uncertainty can make people feel isolated, unseen, or disconnected from purpose. Intentional team-building, even in brief and informal ways, can help maintain a sense of belonging, shared purpose, and collective identity.

As a manager, you can:

- **Start meetings with short personal check-ins.** Ask how people are doing—not just what they're doing.
- **Share appreciation and encouragement** regularly and specifically.
- **Celebrate small wins and human moments.** Acknowledge completed reports, successful calls, or someone who helped a colleague.
- **Recognize personal milestones.** Birthdays, work anniversaries, or even a child's graduation—small notes or shoutouts build goodwill.
- **Encourage moments of levity.** Share a light anecdote, photo, or meme that fits your team culture. Laughter can be a pressure valve.
- **Give staff explicit permission to care for themselves—and model it.** Make visible when you take a short break, sign off on time, or set a boundary.
- **Use buddy systems or peer check-ins.** Encourage informal support between colleagues, especially in teams spread across locations.

Intentional team-building, even in brief and informal ways, can help maintain a sense of belonging, shared purpose, and collective identity.

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5. Communicating Upwards

Part of leading well in a protracted crisis is not only managing your team, but also managing the expectations and demands coming from above.

Senior leaders or headquarters staff are often removed from the day-to-day realities of your environment. They may underestimate the strain your team is under or overestimate your capacity to maintain usual levels of performance. Bridging that gap is essential.

To manage up effectively:

- **Describe what's happening on the ground.** Be clear and specific about how current events are impacting your team. Share both operational disruptions and human impacts. Use stories or concrete examples to help senior leaders visualize the context.
- **Offer clear tradeoffs.** When new tasks or requests come in, frame your response around what's possible: "If we shift our focus to Task A, we will need to delay Task B. Here's what I recommend." This signals collaboration, not resistance.
- **Name limits explicitly.** Don't assume others will infer that your team is stretched too thin—say it directly and professionally: "We're currently operating at reduced capacity due to ongoing disruptions. Here's what's realistic for this week."
- **Make specific asks.** Whether it's for deadline extensions, staffing support, or simply space to regroup, be direct: "To complete this, we would need [X support] or a deadline shift to [Y date]."
- **Position yourself as a steward.** Frame your boundary-setting as protecting long-term sustainability and effectiveness, not as being difficult. "My goal is to keep the team focused and functional—we need to limit non-essential tasks this month to avoid burnout."
- **Enlist your own manager.** Ask them to help buffer your team from unrealistic timelines or last-minute requests. Give them language they can use when advocating upward on your behalf.

Part of leading well in a protracted crisis is not only managing your team, but also managing the expectations and demands coming from above.

Remember, supporting and shielding your team isn't obstruction—it's protecting your team's ability to deliver what matters most. By communicating clearly and proactively, you help shape expectations and create a healthier buffer between your team and external pressures.

KEY COMMUNICATION PHRASES



You don't need perfect words—just words that are grounded, clear, and human. These phrases can help validate emotions, set realistic expectations, and restore a sense of purpose:

To acknowledge the impact and validate emotions:

- > “This is tough, and it’s OK if you’re feeling it. I am too.”
- > “It’s very normal to feel tired or distracted right now—this is not business as usual.”
- > “We’re carrying a lot. Let’s take that into account as we move forward.”

To help reframe and focus:

- > “Let’s focus on what we can actually influence today.”
- > “We can’t do everything, but we can choose what matters most this week.”
- > “Doing our best under these conditions looks different—and that’s OK.”

To show appreciation and reinforce effort:

- > “Thank you for showing up today. That alone takes energy.”
- > “You’re doing meaningful work in hard circumstances. I see it.”
- > “This was a small win—but it matters. Let’s recognize that.”

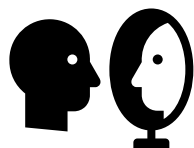
To model boundary-setting and sustainability:

- > “We’ll need to say no to some things to protect our capacity for what’s essential.”
- > “I’ve adjusted our goals this week so we can focus on recovery and resilience.”
- > “I’m taking a short reset today and encourage you to do the same when you need to.”

To advocate upward or communicate limitations:

- > “I’ve raised our current capacity concerns with HQ by communicating... Let me know if there’s anything else I should flag.”
- > “To complete this request, we’ll need either additional support or more time. What would be most helpful?”
- > “Here’s what we can realistically deliver by [X date], given the ongoing context.””

REFLECTIVE CHECKLIST FOR MANAGERS



Protracted crisis tests us in deep and enduring ways. If you're reading this, you're likely already doing more than you think.

Remember, leading well through uncertainty doesn't mean having all the answers. It means showing up, staying connected, and adapting with care.

When you pause, reset, and communicate calmly you reinforce steadiness for your team. When you say no to an unreasonable demand or adjust expectations because of situational realities, you protect everyone's energy. When you check in with a colleague, you remind them (and yourself) that leadership doesn't have to be lonely.

Make time to pause and reflect. Talk with your peers. Reach out for guidance, feedback, or support. Keep going—but don't go alone.

- ☐ What is helping me stay grounded before I speak with my team? What else could help?
- ☐ How am I signaling that wellbeing and boundaries are valued?
- ☐ What signs of stress, fatigue, or resilience am I seeing in the team?
- ☐ Are we celebrating effort as well as outcomes?
- ☐ What assumptions or expectations need to be recalibrated?
- ☐ What supports do I need right now?
- ☐ Have I communicated clearly and effectively with my own supervisor this week?
- ☐ Have I connected with a peer or sought support for myself this week?

ABOUT KON TERRA

At KonTerra, we specialize in supporting clients that operate in complex and high-stress environments where organizations and their staff face difficult challenges.

When staff work in high-pressure roles or locations with elevated exposure to threat, suffering, graphic content, or conflict, they are at risk of experiencing overload, attrition, and stress reactions such as burnout. The KonTerra Group works directly with individuals, leaders, and teams to equip them with tools to better understand and manage the challenges they face.

Providing support in a meaningful way is only possible with the right people. The experience and sensitivity of our counselors, trainers, and coaches allows us to work with clients in a way that is unique. Our specialists all share two attributes which equip them to deliver excellent support: all are veteran mental health clinicians (master's or doctoral-level); and experienced supporting staff in high-stress and high-stakes environments and roles.



Services delivered by our uniquely positioned professionals include:

- Individual Counseling and Coaching
- Virtual and Onsite Training and Educational Events
- Staff Wellbeing Assessments
- Manager Support and Consultations for Organizations and Leaders
- Critical Incident Response Services

If you are interested in learning more about any of the above services, please contact your KonTerra Account Manager or email: info@konterragroup.net.