

THE UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTH

Research across Canada & the U.S. identifies **leadership behaviour**, not call volume, as the #1 driver of morale and psychological distress in fire and EMS.

Organizational injustice predicts distress more strongly than traumatic incident exposure.

Britt et al., 2021

MORAL INJURY ≠ BURNOUT ≠ PTSD

Moral injury is a wound to conscience; a response to witnessing ethical betrayal. A rational response to irrational treatment. Not weakness.

Burnout = depletion.

PTSD = fear response.

Moral injury = betrayal by the system.

WARNING SIGNS OF MORAL INJURY

- ▶ Cynicism that wasn't there before
- ▶ Anger disproportionate to the trigger
- ▶ Dread on the way to work, even after time off
- ▶ Loss of pride in a job you once cared about
- ▶ Withdrawal from people you used to trust

HOW CULTURES ERODE

- 1 Trust erodes & broken promises accumulate
- 2 Accountability vanishes & double standards appear
- 3 Loyalty weaponized & dissent becomes betrayal
- 4 People check out & emotional withdrawal as survival

Cultures erode through small, tolerated compromises. (Haight & Sugden, 2018)

THE WORKPLACE CIVILITY SPECTRUM · Where Does Your Department Sit?

Zone	Behaviour & Impact
GREEN: Respectful	Honest dialogue, constructive feedback, humour that builds. People speak up. Trust grows.
YELLOW: Disrespectful	Gossip, exclusion, passive-aggression. Cynicism spreads. Quiet disengagement begins.
ORANGE: Dysfunctional	Favouritism, retaliation for honesty. Fear takes hold. Moral injury begins.
RED: Toxic	Abuse of power, bullying, public humiliation. Psychological harm. Operational risk.

Adapted from Clark (2019) & Laschinger and Fida (2014). Framework: VandeSchoot (2025)

THE CODE RED SELF-CARE PLAN

Tactical. Evidence-based. Built for people staying inside broken systems.

- 01 Identify the Contaminants** Name the specific stressor causing harm. Naming creates distance and restores control. *Gross & John, 2003*
- 02 Control the Exposure** Set deliberate limits on engagement. Protect cognitive bandwidth — you can't serve flooded. *Maslach & Leiter, 2016*
- 03 Build External Supports** Connect outside the system. Loneliness amplifies moral injury. Peer and family support buffer it. *McEwen et al., 2023*
- 04 Document, Don't Detonate** Keep a private record. Distance prevents impulsive retaliation. Your record is your armour. *Near & Miceli, 2016*
- 05 Protect What's Still Good** Identify your anchor - mission, crew, craft. Maintaining purpose fosters post-traumatic growth. *Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004*

LEADERSHIP IMMUNITY TRAINING

"Leadership immunity isn't apathy. It's armour."

Separate Self from System You are not the dysfunction. Detachment interrupts rumination and stops you internalizing the system's failures as personal failures. *Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008*

Stay Grounded Slow exhalation activates your parasympathetic system. One deliberate breath changes your physiological state before it tips. *Porges, 2011*

Choose Professionalism Your reputation outlasts any toxic leader's tenure. You cannot control how they lead. You can always control how you respond. *Mealer & Jones, 2013*

Redefine Winning Sometimes winning means surviving with your values intact. Leaving a broken system doesn't mean you quit; it means you refused to be consumed by it.

WHEN TO SPEAK UP — WHEN TO STEP BACK

SPEAK UP WHEN

- Safety is at risk
- You have documentation
- You have trusted allies
- Cost of silence outweighs speaking

STEP BACK WHEN

- Retaliation is predictable
- System has proven it won't respond
- Mental health is already tipping
- Acting from anger, not principle

If you recognize moral injury in yourself: · name it · contact your EAP ·
· ask for a first-responder-informed clinician · connect with peer support ·