
STEADY AT THE HELM

Sustaining leadership capacity for municipal CAOs

May 22, 2026 · Proven HR





About me

20+ years in HR — public, private, and non-profit.

WHY THIS SESSION

The CAO seat is one of the few senior roles where the pressure is structural, not situational. I built this session because the leaders who last aren't the ones who work hardest — they're the ones who've figured out how to carry the weight without breaking under it.

STRATEGIC HR

LEADERSHIP CAPACITY

PEOPLE-CENTERED CULTURE

The next 90 minutes

01

Diagnose

20 MIN

Why your role specifically degrades decision quality. The pressure profile of the CAO seat.

02

Triage

40 MIN

An ER-tested system for sorting signal from noise. Two scenarios you'll work through live.

03

Carry

30 MIN

Composure as a practice. Your 30-day plan, written before you leave the room.

By the end: *you will have a written plan for the one pressure to handle differently, the one decision habit to change, and the one boundary to reinforce.*

Your pressure profile

Hands up if any of these describes your last 7 days. Keep count.

1

You made a decision you'd normally take 24 hours to consider.

2

You replied to a non-urgent message faster than necessary just to clear it.

3

A councillor's tone changed how you spent the next 90 minutes.

4

You handled something someone else could have handled.

5

You ate lunch at your desk, in a meeting, or not at all.

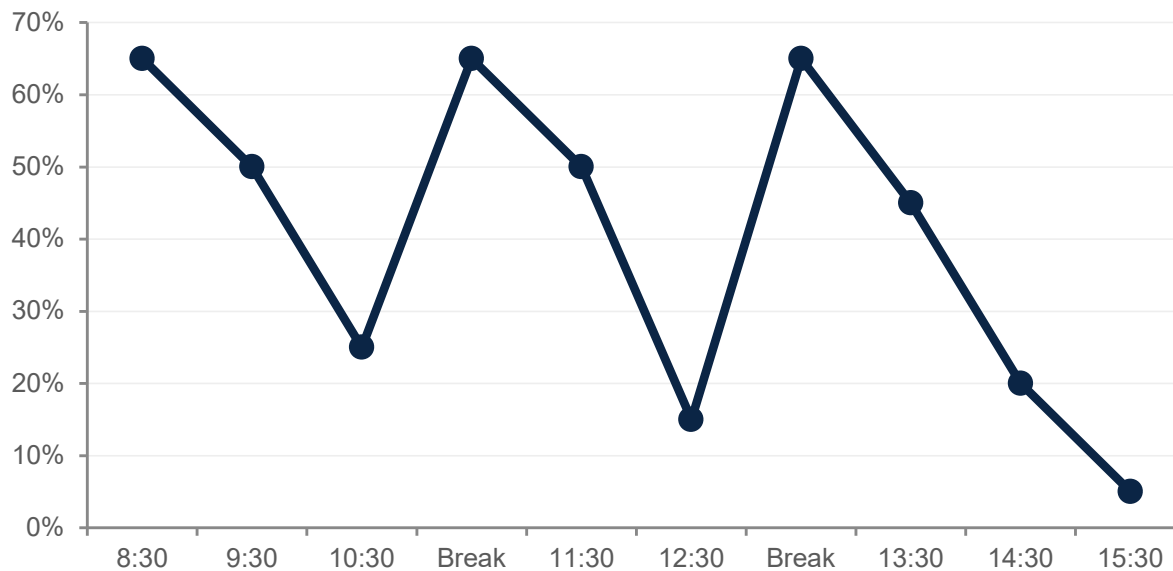
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You went home and replayed a conversation in your head.

0–2 you're in a recovery window · 3–4 you're in the middle of the squeeze · 5–6 this session is for you

Decision quality is not constant.

It degrades on a timeline you can actually predict.



Source: Danziger, Levav & Avnaim-Pesso, PNAS 2011 (n = 1,112 rulings).

THE PAROLE STUDY

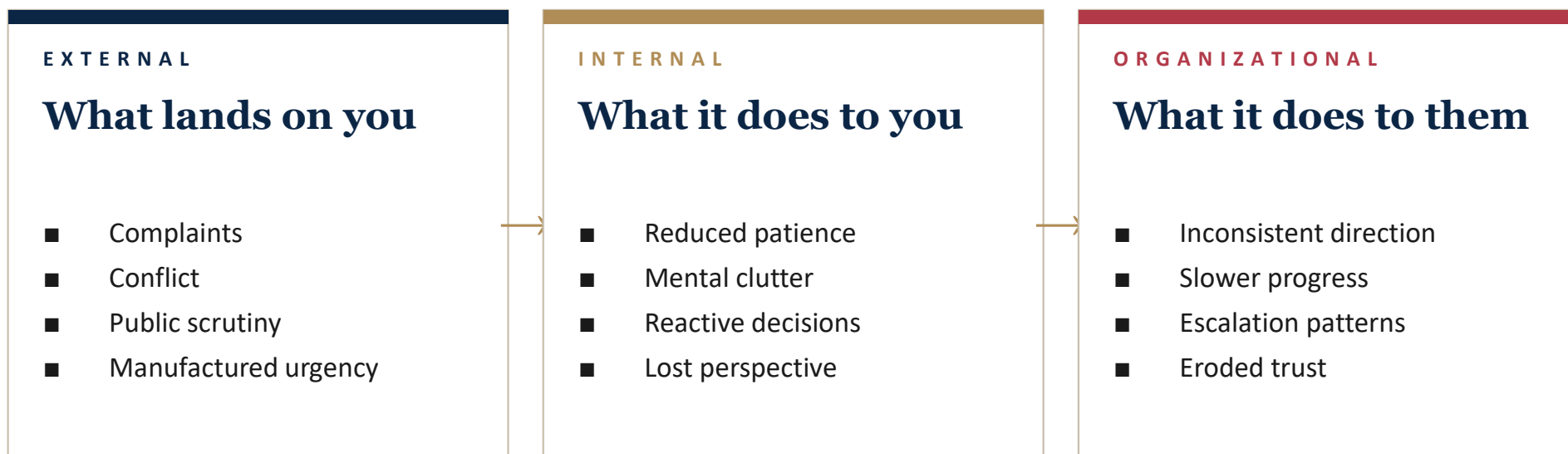
65% → ~5%

Favorable rulings dropped from ~65% at the start of a session to near zero by the end.

After a meal break: back to 65%.

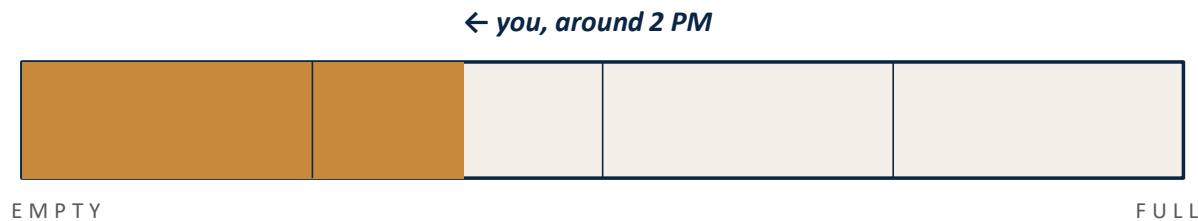
The pressure cascade

Pressure doesn't stay where it starts. It moves.



Capacity is finite.

It is replenished, not infinite.



WHAT DRAINS IT

- Decisions made under interruption
- Conversations you over-own
- Ambiguity you carry that isn't yours
- Reactive replies you didn't need to send

WHAT REFILLS IT

- Genuine breaks (not screen-switching)
- Decisions deferred to the right person
- Uninterrupted thinking blocks
- Closed loops — actually finishing things
- Sleep. Always sleep.



AN ARCHETYPE

The CAO who made every right call

Responds inside the hour. Takes every meeting. Reads every report personally. Returns calls on weekends.

Eighteen months later, other people have quietly stopped bringing problems forward. They are solving them — or not — without engagement from the top.

Not one decision was wrong. The pattern was.

FROM EMERGENCY MEDICINE

“

In the ER, we don't treat busy as a status. We treat everything as Red, Yellow, or Green. Busy is a feeling. Triage is a discipline.

— Dr. Darria Long, ER physician · TEDx,
Why we get burned out — and what to do about it

Most CAOs run their day

in EVERYTHING IS RED mode.

If everything is urgent, nothing is.

The job for the next 40 minutes is to give you a sorting system that runs faster than your reactivity. Same idea as the ER: classify before you respond.

ACT 02 · TRIAGE

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STEADY AT THE HELM

9/22



ACT · 02

Triage

Sorting signal from noise — before you respond.

Three lights.

Every input that lands on you is one of these three things.

RED

SIGNAL

Act now

A real risk to people, finances, legal exposure, or operational integrity. Rare. Usually fewer than one per day.

Operational incident · Legal exposure · Media on deadline

AMBER

POLITICS

Navigate

Has stakeholder weight but no operational urgency. Needs acknowledgement, judgement, and a careful response — not speed.

Councillor complaint · Public inquiry · Stakeholder displeasure

GREEN

NOISE

Acknowledge & release

Loud, but not yours to solve. Volume does not equal importance. Most of your inbox lives here.

FYI cc'd email · Routine complaint · Repeat opinion

The decision filter

Three questions. In this order. Before you respond to anything.

01 Is this urgent — or just loud?

Filters Red from Amber/Green. Loud ≠ urgent.

02 Is this mine to solve?

Filters what stays with you from what gets routed.

03 Does it require a decision now — or a decision soon?

Filters real time pressure from manufactured time pressure.

Then ask: what is the smallest responsible next step?

SCENARIO 01

The 4:50 PM councillor call

THE SITUATION

It's Friday at 4:50 PM. A councillor calls — irritated. A resident has complained about a delayed permit. The councillor wants the file 'looked at tonight' and an answer 'first thing Monday.' The permit is in normal queue. Your planner is off until Tuesday.

Most CAOs reply within 12 minutes.

RUN THE FILTER

1. Red, Amber, or Green?

Why?

2. Is it yours to solve?

Or someone else's?

3. Smallest responsible next step?

When triage breaks

Five distortions show up. Most CAOs default to one or two.



Rush

Compress the timeline.
Decide before you have to.



Over-own

Take responsibility for
issues that belong to
others.



Avoid

Postpone the conversation
that's actually required.



Over-explain

Decision was right;
defending it burns the
fuel.



React

Respond to the urgency in
the room, not the issue at
hand.

Which one is yours?

Be honest. The one you do most often — not the one you wish you did most often.

- A RUSH**
- B OVER-OWN**
- C AVOID**
- D OVER-EXPLAIN**
- E REACT**



SCENARIO 02

The escalation that isn't yours

THE SITUATION

Your Manager of Maintenance walks into your office. There's a conflict between two of his foremen — one accused the other of cutting corners on a paving job. He wants you to 'just sit in' on a meeting tomorrow to lend weight.

Every unnecessary escalation reduces your decision capacity.

WHAT'S REALLY BEING ASKED?

1. **Is this yours?**
Or is he borrowing your authority?
2. **What does saying yes cost?**
Now and as a precedent.
3. **How do you say no without abandoning him?**



ACT · 03

Carry

*Composure as a practice. The plan you take
with you.*

Composure is a practice.

Not a personality trait. Not a moral virtue.

THE PRINCIPLE

Your pace sets the pace of the room.

If you escalate, the room escalates. If you slow down, the room slows down. The CAO sets tempo whether or not the CAO means to.

FIVE MECHANICS

- 1 Pause** — Two seconds before you reply. Out loud or silent.
- 2 Lower your voice** — Volume down by half. Forces them to lean in.
- 3 Slow your breath** — Longer exhale than inhale. Resets the nervous system.
- 4 Neutral framing** — "Help me understand..." not "You can't..."
- 5 Defer the response** — "Let me come back to you on that."

The 3-breath reset

Useful before a council meeting, after a hard call, or right now.

1

BREATHE OUT

Empty fully. Longer than feels natural.

8 counts

2

BREATHE IN

Through the nose. Don't gulp.

4 counts

3

REPEAT × 3

That's it. 30 seconds total.

0:30

Your 30-day plan

Three lines. Specific. Written in pen.

ONE PRESSURE

to handle differently

From your distortion (A–E). Name the situation, not the trait.

ONE DECISION HABIT

to change

From the filter. Which question will you start asking first?

ONE BOUNDARY

to reinforce

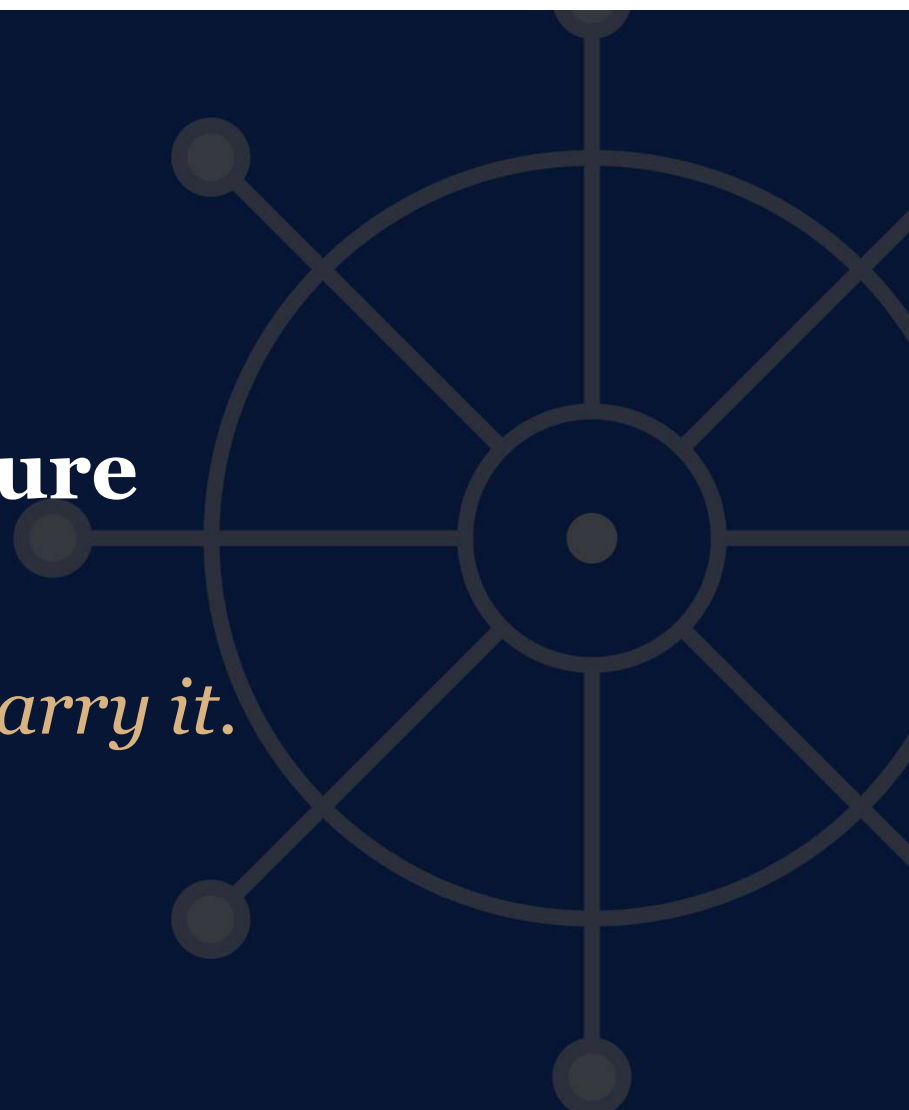
Something you'll stop accepting onto your plate.

Take 4 minutes. The page in front of you. Write it. Don't over think — just write.

**You cannot remove pressure
from the role.**

You can only change how you carry it.

Steady hands. Steady pace. Steady at the helm.



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Questions.

And then — let's keep talking.



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