

OLE CONSULTING

Leading in Tough Times

A Practical Toolkit for Senior Leaders

Tools, models and habits for leading people and business through uncertainty

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A Word Before You Start

Over the past months I have sat with senior leaders across the region as they describe the pressure they are carrying. Regional uncertainty. Disrupted supply routes. Tighter credit and more cautious customers. Boards and partners who still expect delivery. And through all of it, teams who look to their leader every morning to see whether things are going to be alright.

This toolkit brings together the models I have used with leaders through some of the hardest periods of the last two decades, the themes that come up again and again in the coaching room, and the practical tools that I know work under pressure.

It is not designed to be read front to back. Use it the way you would use a toolbox. When you need to brief your team, turn to the transparency script. When your own energy is running low, turn to resilience. When the Board meeting is next week, turn to the stakeholder and numbers tools.

What is inside

Part	What it covers	Use it when
1. Where We Are	VUCAD, the holding year, the Stockdale Paradox	You need to make sense of the moment
2. The Big Five	Resilience, Empathy, Transparency, Connectedness, Balance	You are leading people through uncertainty
3. Leading the Business Through It	First principles, numbers, Circle of Influence, stakeholders	You are steering performance and managing the Board and key partners
4. Your Plan	Self-assessment, 30-day commitments, coaching questions	You want to turn this into action
Quick Reference	Everything on one page	Keep it on your desk

Lead from the front, but have their backs.

That single sentence is the heart of leading in tough times. Everything in this toolkit serves it.

Part 1: Where We Are

MAKING SENSE OF THE MOMENT

Leading in a VUCAD World

The VUCA model comes from the American military. For the reality leaders face today I add a fifth letter.

	What it means	What it looks like for us now
Volatile	Things change fast and without warning	Supply, demand and credit conditions shifting week to week
Uncertain	The future cannot be predicted with confidence	No clear timeline for when the region settles
Complex	Many interconnected forces at once	Geopolitics, supply chains, lending, partner terms and Board expectations all moving together
Ambiguous	The same facts can be read in different ways	Silence from the Board or a delayed partner decision can be read as threat when it may simply be caution
Diverse	Different people experience it differently	Colleagues of many nationalities, families at home and abroad, each carrying different worries

Leading well in this environment is holistic. You are leading the business through **Others, Strategy and Change**. And underneath all of it you are **Leading Self**. Leaders who neglect the last one eventually find the other three slipping.

2027: A Holding Year

My view is that 2027 will be a holding year for much of the region, with the real restart unlikely before mid-April. A holding year is not a lost year. It rewards the leaders who stay calm, protect what matters most, and position their business to move first when conditions turn.

The Stockdale Paradox

Admiral James Stockdale was the most senior US naval officer held as a prisoner of war in Vietnam, for more than seven years. When asked who did not make it out, his answer was striking: the optimists. They were the ones who said "we will be out by Christmas", and then Christmas came and went, and Easter, and Christmas again. They lost heart. The author Jim Collins, who interviewed Stockdale for his book *Good to Great*, later named what follows the Stockdale Paradox.

Stockdale survived by holding two ideas at the same time:

- **Confront the brutal reality** of your situation today, whatever it is.
- **Retain unwavering faith** that you will prevail in the end.

This is the mindset for a holding year. Do not tell your teams it will all be fine by next quarter. Tell them the truth about today, and give them genuine confidence about the future.

Your Attitude to Stress Is a Choice

Every change event can be read as a **threat** or as an **opportunity**. The event is the same. The reading is yours, and your team will take its reading from you.

"A pessimist sees the difficulty in every situation. An optimist sees opportunity in every difficult situation."

Winston Churchill

Today Is Not Our Tomorrow

- Business is cyclical, fluid and emergent. Every one of you has led through a downturn before.
- Remind yourself and others that this phase will pass.
- Position the situation as fluid, not finite. "This is where we are now" is a very different message from "this is how it is".

Part 2: The Big Five

LEADING PEOPLE THROUGH UNCERTAINTY

Five capabilities separate the leaders whose teams come through hard times stronger from those whose teams come through bruised.

	In one line	Definition
Resilience	Look after YOU	The ability to be strong and resourceful in the face of stress, and to bounce back quickly and adapt to change with relative ease
Empathy	See and hear	The ability to read the emotional state of another, stay out of judgment and be fully present with them, and to use that understanding to inform your leadership choices
Transparency	Open and honest	Being as open and honest as you can about things that impact people's working life, while walking the thin line between over-sharing and appearing evasive
Connectedness	Safety, trust, motivation	People feeling safe and secure, with a sense of belonging, built on respect, reciprocity and relationship
Balance	Know the reality and fight your way out	Acknowledging the reality, while providing positivity, empowerment and enablement

1. Resilience: Look After YOU

Put your own mask on first. You cannot lead others through this if you are running on empty, and your people take their emotional cue from you.

The two modern additions

- **We have become addicted to stress.** We have fooled ourselves into thinking we do our best work under pressure. Sustained stress narrows thinking, shortens temper and degrades judgment, exactly when you need it most.

- **We have become addicted to our screens.** We are never fully present with others, and we go to bed tired and wired.

Tired and wired: why evenings matter

Your body runs on a daily cortisol rhythm. Cortisol should peak in the morning to get you going, and fall through the evening so the body can wind down, repair psychologically and then repair physically overnight. Late-night calls, news scrolling and email in bed keep cortisol high when it should be falling. You sleep, but you do not recover. In a crisis that runs for months, recovery is not optional.

Habits that work

- **Monitor your stress levels.** Score yourself out of 10 at the end of each day. Three days in a row above 7 is your signal to act.
- **Create healthy boundaries.** A screen curfew. A protected family meal. One morning a week with no meetings before 10am.
- **Reconnect with past accomplishments.** You have led through hard times before. Remember what got you through.
- **Use your organization's health and wellness systems,** and make sure your people know they exist.

Tool: My Personal Energy Plan

Area	Prompt	My commitment
Sleep	What time will screens go off? What time will I sleep?	
Movement	What exercise will I protect, and when?	
Family	Which moments with family are non-negotiable this month?	
Thinking time	When will I step back from the day to think?	
Recovery	What restores me? When will I do it?	
Early warning	What are my personal signs that stress is getting on top of me?	

Reflection: Write down three tough periods you have already led through. What got you through each one? Which of those strengths are you using right now, and which have you forgotten?

2. Empathy: See and Hear

In tough times people do not need their leader to fix everything. They need to feel seen and heard. Many of your people are worried about their families, their jobs and their futures, and some carry worries about loved ones in other countries too.

Listen with the third ear

Listening works at three levels. Each one is harder than the last, and each one gives you more.

Level	You listen for	What it gives you
1. Words	The facts being said	Understanding
2. Emotions	How the person feels about what they are saying	Empathy
3. Intuition	What is not being said: hesitation, energy, body language	The whole person

Habits that work

- **Adopt an empathy mindset.** Before every conversation, ask yourself what this person might be carrying today.
- **Listen with the third ear.** Listen for what sits underneath the words.
- **Use "feel" language as well as "think" language.** "How do you feel about the new targets?" opens a different conversation from "What do you think about the new targets?"
- **Be patient when you can, proactive when you must.**

Remember: Empathy need not involve action. You do not have to solve it. You just need to recognize, see and hear.

Tool: The Ten-Minute Check-In

Use with each direct report at least every two weeks. Keep it human first, business second.

1. How are you, and how is your family?
2. What is weighing on you most right now?
3. How is your team really doing? Who is struggling?
4. What do you need from me that you are not getting?
5. What is one thing that went well this week?

3. Transparency: Open and Honest

Transparency does not mean telling all of the people, all of the time. It means telling them what you can, when you can. Keeping them in the loop. Providing ways for them to talk back.

When leaders go quiet, people fill the silence with their own stories, and those stories are almost always worse than the truth.

Habits that work

- Be honest.
- Ask open-ended questions and show genuine interest in the answers.
- Provide access to information and share what you can.
- Confront difficult situations rather than waiting for them to pass.
- Involve people in decision-making where you can.

The minimum standard

Provide context for your decisions. Even when you cannot share everything, explain why. Their adulthood will surprise you.

Avoid

- Speculation
- Half-truths
- Gossip
- Breaching boundaries and confidences

Be vulnerable. It is OK not to have all of the answers. Saying "I don't know yet, and here is when I expect to know" builds more trust than false certainty.

Tool: The Know / Don't Know / Doing Briefing

Use this structure for every team briefing, town hall or difficult update. It takes five minutes to prepare.

Step	What to say	Example
1. What we know	The facts as they stand today	"Inbound shipments are delayed and we expect lower volumes this quarter than planned."
2. What we don't know	Be honest about the uncertainty	"We don't yet know when shipping will normalize."
3. What we are doing	The actions in your control	"We are working with our partners on alternative routes and focusing the team on our existing customers."
4. What this means for you	Make it personal and practical	"Your role and your priorities for the next month are..."
5. When you will hear next	Commit to the next update	"I will update you again on Monday, whether or not there is news."

Tool: Bad News with a Plan (for the Board and Key Partners)

Bad news delivered early with a plan builds trust. Bad news discovered late destroys it. Never let your Board or your key partners be surprised.

	Prompt
Situation	What has happened, in two sentences, without excuses
Impact	The numbers: volume, revenue, margin, cash
Actions	What we are already doing, and what we will do next
Ask	What we need from you: decisions, support, flexibility
Next update	When and how you will hear from me again

4. Connectedness: Safety, Trust, Motivation

Connectedness is people feeling safe and secure, with a sense of belonging to the team and the organization. It rests on respect, reciprocity and relationship. In tough times, connected teams pull together. Disconnected teams pull apart.

Help people connect the dots

People hold on when they can see how their work connects to something bigger. Make the line of sight explicit.

Level	Question to answer for your team
Vision, Mission, Values	Why do we exist, and what do we stand for, especially now?
Strategic Intent and Scorecard	What are we focused on through this period, and how will we measure it?
My Work	How does what I do every day contribute?
My Team	How does my team help the business get through this?
My Deal	What can I expect from the company, and what does the company need from me?

Habits that work

- **Try to catch people doing something right**, and say so publicly.
- **Leverage common goals to bind your teams**. One shared target pulls people together across functions.
- **Ask "how can the team help with that?"** Make problems shared, not solitary.

Tool: The Weekly Win. End every weekly team meeting by asking each person to name one thing a colleague did well. It takes five minutes and it changes the temperature of a team.

5. Balance: Know the Reality and Fight Your Way Out

Balance is the Stockdale Paradox in daily practice: acknowledging the reality, while providing positivity, empowerment and enablement.

Safety versus threat

When people feel under threat, they protect themselves. They withdraw, keep their heads down and stop taking initiative. When people feel safe, they bring motivation, engagement and their best thinking. Your job is to move your people from threat to safety, so that you can enable them.

Tool: The Balance Check

Before any team communication, ask yourself three questions:

1. Have I **named the reality** honestly?
2. Have I given them a genuine **reason for confidence**?
3. Have I given them **something they can do** about it?

If the answer to any of these is no, the message is not ready.

Part 3: Leading the Business Through It

STEERING PERFORMANCE UNDER PRESSURE

The Big Five are about how you lead people. This part is about how you lead the business, and the stakeholders around it.

Go Back to First Principles

When everything is moving at once, strip it back. What is the one thing you must deliver over the next six months, and what are the few things that genuinely drive it? First principles give you a fixed point to steer by when the noise is loud.

Tool: My Strategy on a Page

	Your answer
My macro goal for the next six months	
Controllable driver 1	
Controllable driver 2	
Controllable driver 3	
Controllable driver 4	
What I will stop doing	
How I will know I am on track	

Know Your Numbers

With supply disrupted and customers more cautious, the numbers move every week. When the Board or a key partner asks a question, the answer should come from you before it comes from Finance. In a crisis, credibility is built on numbers and on a plan.

Tool: The Weekly Leader Dashboard

Measure	Why it matters now	This week	Trend
Cash and liquidity	A rolling 13-week cash forecast. Cash buys time.		
Stock on hand and in transit	Days of cover, by product line		
Order bank	Confirmed orders, new orders and cancellations		
Customer demand	Inquiries, conversion and customers delaying decisions		
Receivables	Aged debt. Who is paying slowly?		
Recurring revenue	Service, contracts and repeat business often hold up best in a downturn		

Measure	Why it matters now	This week	Trend
Fixed cost run rate	What the business costs each month to stand still		
People	Attendance, attrition, key people at risk		

Adapt the measures to your business. The principle is a single page, updated weekly, that you know by heart.

Tool: Three Scenarios, Decided Now

The worst time to make big decisions is in the middle of the storm. Agree your scenarios and actions now, while you are calm, so that when a trigger is hit you act rather than debate.

	Base case	Downside	Severe
Assumption	Disruption eases from Q2 2027	Disruption persists through 2027	Further escalation
Trigger indicators			
Pre-agreed actions			
Who decides			

Questions to test your revenue resilience

- Which revenue streams hold up when new sales fall? Service, recurring contracts, government, existing customers?
- How can we make it easier for customers to keep buying from us when money is tight?
- What support can we negotiate with our suppliers and principals on terms, stock and targets?
- Where can we take cost out without damaging our ability to come back strongly in the restart?

Work Your Circle of Influence

Think of three rings. Most of the energy leaders lose in tough times goes on the outer ring.

Ring	What sits there	Examples now	Your response
Concern	Things that affect you but you cannot change	Regional conflict, global supply chains, interest rates and lending policy	Acknowledge it, then let it go
Influence	Things you can shape but not decide	Partner and supplier terms, bank relationships, Board expectations, customer confidence	Work these angles deliberately
Control	Things that are yours	Your decisions, your cost actions, your communication, your behavior	Put your best energy here

Exercise: List your ten biggest worries right now. Place each one in a ring. Cross out the ones that sit only in Concern. For each one in Influence, write the one action you will take this week. That is your plan.

Manage Your Core Stakeholders

Three groups matter most: your **Board**, your **Top Team** who are your allies, and your **People**. Your key partners, such as principals, major suppliers and lenders, sit alongside the Board as a group you cannot afford to surprise.

Tool: My Stakeholder Map

Stakeholder	What they need from me now	Cadence	How
Board and shareholders	No surprises. The numbers, the plan, the risks, early	Monthly, plus within 24 hours of any material change	Short pre-read, Bad News With a Plan
Key partners and suppliers	Honest view of the market, a credible plan, partnership	Every two weeks	Call with the senior counterpart
Top Team	Alignment, clarity on priorities, your support	Daily huddle, weekly review	Fifteen minutes, standing agenda
People	To see you, hear from you and trust you have a grip	Weekly or every two weeks	Know / Don't Know / Doing briefing
Banks and finance partners	Confidence in the business, early conversations	Monthly	Relationship call
Key customers	Reassurance and flexibility	As needed	Personal contact for the top accounts

A crisis operating rhythm for your Top Team

A short, disciplined daily huddle keeps a leadership team aligned when conditions change daily. Fifteen minutes, standing agenda:

- 1. Safety and people:** is everyone and their family OK?
- 2. Cash:** anything that has moved?
- 3. Supply:** what is arriving, what is delayed?
- 4. Customers:** what are we hearing?
- 5. Decisions:** what needs deciding today, and by whom?

Part 4: Your Plan

TURNING THIS INTO ACTION

Self-Assessment

Score yourself honestly from 1 (rarely) to 5 (consistently) for the last month.

	Statement	Score
Resilience	I protect my sleep, energy and recovery, even under pressure	
Resilience	I notice my own stress early and act on it	
Empathy	I regularly ask my people how they and their families are, and listen to the answer	
Empathy	I listen for feelings, not just facts	
Transparency	My team knows what I know, what I don't know and what we are doing	
Transparency	My Board and key partners hear bad news from me first, with a plan	
Connectedness	Every person on my team can explain how their work matters right now	
Connectedness	I catch people doing something right, and say so	
Balance	I name the reality honestly, while giving genuine reasons for confidence	
Balance	I spend most of my energy on what I can control or influence	

Your two lowest scores are where to start.

My 30-Day Leadership Commitments

	My commitment	How I will know
I will start		
I will start		
I will start		
I will stop		
I will ask for help with		

Questions to Bring to Coaching

- Where am I spending energy on things I cannot control?
- Who in my team is struggling quietly, and have I noticed?
- What conversation am I avoiding, with my Board, a key partner or my team?
- What would I do differently if I truly believed this phase will pass?
- What do I want my people to say about how I led them through this?

Quick Reference

LEAD FROM THE FRONT, BUT HAVE THEIR BACKS

	Remember	Do this week
Resilience	Look after YOU. Put your own mask on first	Screens off one hour before sleep
Empathy	See and hear. You don't have to fix it	Ten-minute check-in with each direct report
Transparency	What you can, when you can	One Know / Don't Know / Doing briefing
Connectedness	Help them connect the dots	Catch three people doing something right
Balance	Name the reality, then enable	Run the Balance Check on your next message

	Remember	Do this week
First Principles	One macro goal, four controllables	Complete your Strategy on a Page
Know Your Numbers	Credibility is built on numbers and a plan	Set up your Weekly Leader Dashboard
Circle of Influence	Concern, Influence, Control	Place your ten worries in the rings
Stakeholders	No surprises for the Board and key partners	Complete your Stakeholder Map

The Stockdale Paradox. Confront the brutal reality of today, and retain unwavering faith that you will prevail in the end.

Today is not our tomorrow. This phase will pass. Position it as fluid, not finite.

With warm regards and great respect,

Dr. Brendan McCann

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