

# CHIEFSTRONG

The Psychological Load of Leadership and the Science of Sustaining It  
Deputy Chief Laurie VandeSchoot, MSc



“

***The Fire Chief can be the loneliest job in the Fire Service.***

**- Frank Leto, FDNY**

# The Hidden Cost of Command

72%

of fire chiefs report  
significant  
occupational stress

*Regehr et al., 2021  
J. Occupational Health Psychology*

3–5×

higher burnout risk in  
command vs. line roles

*Halpern et al., 2012  
Disaster Medicine & Public Health Preparedness*

58%

of PSP leaders meet  
criteria for moral injury  
symptoms

*Papazoglou & Chopko, 2017  
Traumatology*

***Leadership strain is not weakness. It is a predictable neurobiological response to cumulative high-stakes exposure. Chronic load, not acute trauma, drives long-term decline.***

*McEwen, 1998 — NEJM | Arnsten, 2015 — Nature Reviews Neuroscience | Violanti et al., 2017*

# Three Mechanisms That Erode Command Well-Being

## Moral Injury

*Moral conflict from leadership decisions with consequences.*

- Decisions that harm personnel, resource allocations, unjust organizational orders, poor incident outcomes...
- Shame, self-condemnation, cynicism, withdrawal

*Griffin et al., 2019 — Psychological Services  
Litz et al., 2009 — Clinical Psychology Review  
Papazoglou & Chopko, 2017 — Traumatology*

## Decision Fatigue

*Reduced executive function from sustained high-stakes decisions.*

- Increased risk acceptance and shortcut bias
- Emotional regulation failure with the same limited resource
- Stress cascades to team morale and safety culture

*Baumeister et al., 1998 — JPSP  
Hockey, 2011 — Psychological Review  
Cropanzano et al., 2003 — Journal of Applied Psychology*

## Leadership Isolation

*Loss of peer connection after promotion to command.*

- 64% of senior PSP leaders: no peer for open dialogue
- ↓40% peer support after promotion to command
- 2× reluctance to seek mental health help

*CACP Survey, 2019  
Loo, 2003 — Canadian Police College*

***These three forces interact and compound, and they are predictable, which means they are addressable.***



“

***You can't pour from  
an empty cup.***

***- Maybe Norm Kelly  
- Maybe Zen Master Ryutan  
- Whoever it was, great advice***

# Why Standard Resilience Training Falls Short for Leaders

	Standard Resilience Programs	What Command Leaders Need
<b>Focus</b>	Acute trauma and PTSD symptoms	<b>Cumulative moral and cognitive load</b>
<b>Target audience</b>	Line personnel, front-line responders	<b>Senior leaders have a different exposure profile</b>
<b>Social support model</b>	Peer support groups, buddy checks	<b>Executive isolation requires distinct support structures</b>
<b>Recovery model</b>	Time off, debriefing post-incident	<b>Ongoing load requires ongoing micro-recovery</b>
<b>Moral component</b>	Largely absent	<b>Central that moral injury is a leadership-specific risk</b>
<b>Effectiveness evidence</b>	Moderate for acute stress	<b>Limited evidence for senior leaders (literature gap)</b>

# Evidence-Based Strategies: Building Command Resilience

01

## Micro-Recovery Protocols

Brief recovery between decision cycles. 10-minute recovery periods reduce cumulative fatigue by up to 34% in command roles.

*Trougakos et al., 2008 — Academy of Management Journal*

02

## Moral Processing Conversations

Scheduled, facilitated conversations with trained peers to process moral load. Distinct from debriefing.

*Nash & Litz, 2013 — Journal of Traumatic Stress*

03

## Executive Peer Support Networks

Confidential, rank-appropriate peer support for command leaders. Structured dialogue, not informal support.

*Youssef & Luthans, 2007 — Journal of Management*

04

## Decision Architecture

Protecting cognitive resources through delegation and decision scheduling frameworks.

*Loehr & Schwartz, 2003 — The Power of Full Engagement*

05

## Organizational Wellness Accountability

Leadership wellness treated as an operational risk factor within succession and performance planning.

*Kellerman, 2012 — The End of Leadership | Kearney et al., 2009 — JOB*

06

## Professional Help as Strength

Normalizing institutional access to mental health support for leaders. Modelling help-seeking at the top.

*Stuart, 2019 — J. Military, Veteran & Family Health*

# Beta Cohort: Program Design & Delivery

Arizona Fire Chiefs Association

16

Fire Chiefs  
(Invitation-Only Participants)

4

Trained  
Facilitators

2

Immersive  
Days

12-month

Peer Support  
Commitment

## What ChiefStrong Is:

### Not leadership development.

A peer-based mental wellness initiative addressing executive command strain.

### Trauma-informed structure.

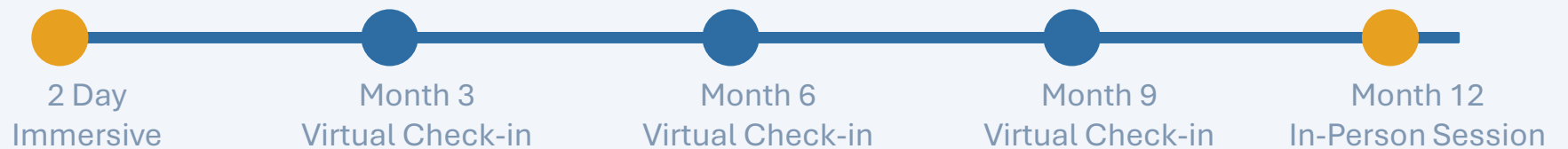
Psychological safety, predictable structure, and clear ethical boundaries. Focus on containment, not processing.

### Peer containment practice.

Structured discussion and scenario-based engagement for executive-level peer support.

## 12-Month Peer Support Arc

*Confidential chief-to-chief  
network · Accountability · Long-  
term psychological protection*



# Preliminary Pilot Findings

Beta Session Participant feedback | n = 21 Fire Chiefs | Post-session evaluation survey

**100%**

would recommend  
to other Chiefs

**85%**

exceeded  
expectations

**85%**

content reflected  
real-world experience

**82%**

significant/moderate  
awareness shift

**91%**

felt competent in  
applying peer support

## Peer Connection

**100%** reported improved peer connection

**73%** described the change as 'very positive'

**100%** positive facilitator feedback (with themes of methods, connections, and expertise)

## Key Takeaway Themes

*Open-ended responses*

- Peer relationship building
- Personal wellbeing strategies
- Professional networking
- Boundary setting practices
- Support capability development

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# THANK YOU

*The strength to lead others begins with the courage to protect yourself.*



**Connect & Continue the Conversation**

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