

AN E-BOOK FOR LEADERS • PAWEŁ KARDACH

Leader Balance in Uncertain Times

How to keep a clear head, energy and
direction when the pace of change
won't slow down — and won't.

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Why I wrote this e-book

For 20 years I made decisions in executive roles — at Gates, International Paper, Xerox and Atos. Before I started teaching other leaders about balance, I learned it myself, at the cost of more than one bad decision made on too little energy.

This e-book isn't a collection of generic "work-life balance" tips. What I'm sharing here draws on three sources at once: my own management practice, close to 450 coaching sessions with leaders, and psychological knowledge I keep deepening — currently completing a master's degree in Psychology of Development and Business at SWPS University.

I'm writing this in 2026 — at a moment when the pressure on leaders looks different than it did even five years ago: artificial intelligence is changing the pace of work faster than most organizations can adapt, the generation entering the workforce expects a different leadership style, and economic uncertainty means a "stable quarter" has become a rarity. Under these conditions, a leader's balance stops being a luxury or a topic for holiday reading. It becomes a business competency — exactly like reading a balance sheet or negotiating a contract.

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Why balance is now a business competency

When I started my management career, "balance" was a private matter — something you looked after outside of work, if you had time left for it at all. Today, after two decades in management and a few years of coaching leaders, I see it differently: a leader's balance has stopped being a private matter. It's become a variable that directly affects the quality of decisions made on the organization's behalf.

The reason is simple, if rarely said out loud: a tired, overloaded brain makes worse decisions. It narrows your field of view, clings to the first solution that comes to mind, and loses access to experience that, under calmer conditions, you'd draw on. That's not a matter of character or "willpower" — it's how the human brain works under overload, regardless of seniority or title.

WHY NOW, NOT ALWAYS

Three phenomena are converging today in a way I haven't seen before: (1) the pace of technological change — AI especially — is outrunning most organizations' ability to adapt; (2) younger generations of employees expect a different leadership style than many of us grew up with professionally; (3) economic uncertainty has made long-term planning harder than at any point in recent decades.

In practice, this means today's leader has to make more decisions, in less time, with less certainty about the conditions those decisions will play out in — and do it without a single, proven map, because the map changes faster than we can draw it. These are conditions in which a leader's internal resources — energy, clarity of thought, mental resilience — become a direct source of competitive advantage for the organization, not just a matter of personal wellbeing.

I'm not suggesting you escape this pace in this e-book — that's unrealistic. I'm offering something more practical: a way to stay clear-headed within that pace, instead of operating on an ever-shrinking reserve.

The four pillars of leader balance

In my work with clients — boards, business owners, managers — I always come back to the same simple model. Not because reality is simple, but because a simple model is easier to hold onto in the middle of a crisis week, which is exactly when you need it most.

1. Physical energy

This is the foundation the other three pillars rest on — and usually the first to suffer under pressure. It's not about a perfect training regime. It's about a few non-negotiables: regular sleep (even in crisis weeks — especially in crisis weeks), physical activity as a way to release tension, not just improve fitness, and eating in a way that gives stable energy, not just a caffeine spike between meetings.

2. Decision-making clarity

Time pressure narrows your field of view — psychologists call this the cognitive-tunnel effect. Decision-making clarity is the ability to consciously counteract that narrowing: separating facts from assumptions, telling reversible decisions from irreversible ones, and giving yourself, where possible, even 24 hours before a decision that doesn't have to happen right now.

3. Mental resilience

This isn't the absence of emotion or playing the tough guy. It's the ability to feel pressure, name it, and still make an appropriate decision — instead of one dictated purely by stress. It's built through awareness of your own early overload signals (they're different for everyone — for some it's a drop in patience, for others cynicism, for others still, putting off decisions) and concrete regulation tools, developed ahead of time, before they're needed in a real crisis.

4. Relationships and support

Loneliness at the top of an organization is a real phenomenon — the higher up the structure, the fewer people you can honestly discuss doubts with without risking it being read as weakness. This pillar is about deliberately building relationships — inside the organization and outside it (a mentor, a coach, a trusted advisor) — where you can think out loud before a decision is announced publicly.

None of these four pillars works in isolation. Depleted physical energy weakens decision-making clarity. A lack of supportive relationships makes it harder to build mental resilience. I always work with clients to identify which pillar is currently the weakest link — because that's the one limiting all the others.

It's worth noting that the order in which these pillars "break down" under overload is surprisingly predictable. Physical energy suffers first — it's the easiest area to "borrow" from at the expense of the future (less sleep, a skipped workout, food eaten in a rush). Only later do you see the impact on decision-making clarity and mental resilience — with a delay that makes it hard to connect cause and effect unless you're watching for it deliberately.

That's why, in practice, I always start work with a client by mapping out what that order looks like for them — which signals appear first, before they're even visible to others in their behaviour. It's the simplest way to get an early warning, instead of reacting only once the costs are already high.

Three traps the most committed leaders fall into

Paradoxically, it's not the least engaged leaders who most often lose their balance. It's the ones who care the most — about the organization, the team, the results. Being engaged isn't the problem in itself. The problem is three specific traps that engagement easily falls into.

Trap 1: "I'll rest once this project is done"

The trouble is, at today's pace there's always another project before the last one finishes. Rest postponed "until" that point in practice never arrives — and a recovery deficit builds up quietly, until it shows up in a worse form: declining decision quality, irritability, cynicism.

Trap 2: Confusing availability with responsibility

Many of the leaders I work with equate being a good leader with being constantly available — answering messages at any hour, joining every meeting "just in case." That's a false form of responsibility — in practice it leads to scattered attention and no room for the strategic work that requires the focus constant availability makes impossible.

Trap 3: Treating recovery as a reward, not a strategy

Rest you have to "earn" is the first item on the agenda to fall victim to every crisis week — and under today's conditions, crisis weeks happen more often than not. Recovery that's a fixed part of the plan (not a conditional reward) survives a crisis week in reduced form, but it doesn't disappear entirely.

A CHECK-IN QUESTION

Before you read on, pause for a moment: which of these three traps do you fall into most often? Awareness of your own pattern is the first, necessary step to changing it.

A 30-day plan

I'm not proposing a revolution — in the middle of a demanding quarter, a revolution wouldn't stick anyway. I'm proposing four concrete, small changes, one a week, which in practice with clients bring the most lasting results.

Week 1 — Map your own early signals

For a week, notice how your body and thinking react to rising pressure — before you consciously react to it. Write it down, even in one sentence a day. That record becomes your own "early warning system" for the months ahead.

Week 2 — Schedule recovery like a meeting with a key client

Pick one fixed block of time each week — at least 90 minutes — and put it in your calendar as a non-negotiable appointment. It doesn't matter whether it's a workout, a walk without your phone, or time with family. What matters is that it has the same status in your calendar as a conversation with the board.

Week 3 — Introduce one boundary on availability

Pick one specific time of day (e.g. after 8pm) or one day a week when you deliberately don't respond to work messages. Start with one boundary — easier to hold than overhauling everything at once.

Week 4 — Try the "what would I see in a week" model on one hard decision

On your next decision made under time pressure, ask yourself: what decision would I make if I had a week? You won't always have that week — but the question alone helps you step out of the narrowed field of view pressure creates.

TO BE HONEST

This plan won't solve your organization's structural problems or change the market's pace. What it will give you is something you have real control over, starting now — how you respond to that pace. That's usually a sufficient starting point for deeper change.

When it's worth bringing in outside support

The plan in the previous chapter works for many leaders — but not for every situation. There are moments when it's worth considering someone alongside you from the outside: a coach, a mentor, or both, depending on what the situation calls for.

Coaching is worth it when a situation is new to you, there's no single right answer, and what's missing isn't information but space — to reach your own conclusion. Mentoring is worth it when you need a proven path: someone who's already been in a similar management situation and can share their experience directly. In practice, you usually need both, at different stages of the same engagement.

I work with clients in both roles — as an accredited ICF coach, and as a mentor with 20 years of executive experience. That combination lets me understand not just what a leader should do, but why, under pressure, they often do something else — and how to consciously change that.

Let's start with a conversation

If, after reading this e-book, you recognize yourself in one of the traps described here — let's talk. A free initial call (45-60 minutes) will help name your most important goal and check whether we're a good fit. No obligation.

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An experienced leader and manager who became a coach and mentor. For 20 years he held executive roles, including at senior-executive level, building divisions of international organizations — Gates, International Paper, Xerox and Atos — in the paper, automotive, textile and ITO industries. As a manager, he built and rolled out coaching programmes and processes inside the organizations he worked for, before becoming an outside coach himself.

Today, as an accredited ICF Coach, Neuro-Change Master Trainer and MBA graduate, he supports executives, business owners and managers with decisions, organizational change and building resilience — combining management practice with psychological knowledge he keeps deepening (currently completing a master's degree in Psychology of Development and Business at SWPS University, defense planned for Q1 2027).

He has run Healthtime for 6 years. He has conducted close to 450 coaching sessions with managers and specialists. He works online — with clients worldwide — and in person in the Tricity area, Poland, in Polish and English.

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