

Mental Fitness for Technology Leaders

Staying steady under pressure — and building teams that can do the same.

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A 90-minute working session for public-sector IT leaders



How we will use 90 minutes

00–10

Frame

Why mental fitness is a leadership system, not a wellness poster.

10–30

The load

Public-sector IT pressure and the emergency-comms parallel.

30–55

Four pillars

Regulate, decide, prioritize, recover — with tools, not theory.

55–70

Practice

A live scenario. Leave with language you can reuse.

70–85

The team

Healthy workplace practices you can actually implement.

85–90

Commit

One 30-day experiment. Questions.



OPENING

A 30-second room check

Raise a hand if any of these have been true in the last 90 days.

- 1 You were on-call, or felt on-call, even when you were not.
- 2 A cybersecurity, outage, or vendor issue followed you home.
- 3 You made a high-stakes decision with incomplete information.
- 4 You absorbed a team member's stress so the work could keep moving.
- 5 You skipped a meal, a workout, or sleep to "just finish this."
- 6 You wondered who is taking care of the person taking care of the systems.



What this session is — and is not

THIS IS

A leadership operating system for high-stakes public-sector work.

Tools for calm, decision quality, and team health.

Language you can take back to a Monday staff meeting.

Permission to treat recovery as readiness — not a luxury.

THIS IS NOT

A clinical mental-health diagnosis workshop.

A replacement for EAP, counseling, or medical care.

A request that you “try yoga and think positive.”

A suggestion that pressure is a personal failing.



WORKING DEFINITION

Mental fitness is the capacity to stay clear, steady, and usable — under load, after load, and while other people are counting on you.



It is not the absence of stress.

It is the ability to perform and recover without burning the people who keep the lights on.



The job nobody fully trained us for

Always-on systems

Citizens, students, and first responders expect the network, the CAD, the ERP, and the phone system to just work.

Invisible risk

Cyber, vendors, legacy infrastructure, and political timelines sit on the same desk — often with the same person.

Thin benches

Public-sector IT is asked to do enterprise work with municipal staffing, municipal pay, and municipal spare capacity.

Borrowed calm

When the room spikes, people look at the IT lead. Your nervous system becomes part of the incident command.



What emergency communications taught me about IT leadership

Radio discipline

Say what matters. Leave the rest. Clarity is kindness under pressure.

One incident, one voice

Too many leaders talking at once creates a second incident.

Train like you'll need it

You do not invent composure during the storm. You install it beforehand.

After-action is respect

We review the work so the next crew is safer — not so we can assign shame.

The body keeps the shift

Adrenaline is not a staffing plan. Recovery is part of the assignment.



Four pillars of mental fitness

01

Regulate

Get your body back online
so your judgment can work.

02

Decide

Protect decision quality
when information is
incomplete.

03

Prioritize

Choose the few things that
actually move the incident.

04

Recover

Treat rest and debrief as
operational requirements.



Your body arrives at the incident first

- **Heart rate climbs**
Tunnel vision, short temper, and “just hit send” decisions follow.
- **The room borrows your state**
Teams regulate off the leader. Panic is contagious. So is steadiness.
- **Willpower is a weak plan**
You cannot think your way out of a flooded nervous system. You have to downshift it.
- **60–90 seconds is enough**
You do not need a retreat. You need a reliable reset you can do at a console.



TOOL

The 90-second reset

1

Feet

Feel both feet on the floor.
Unclench your jaw and drop your
shoulders.

2

Breath

In for 4. Out for 6. Longer exhale
tells the body the emergency is
not inside you.

3

Name

Quietly name three facts: what is
true, what is unknown, what is
not on fire.

4

Next

Choose the next useful action —
not the whole solution.

Do this before you walk into the war room, pick up the phone, or hit send.



Decision quality is a mental-fitness skill

Under load we tend to

What to install instead

Confuse speed with leadership

Separate urgent communication from irreversible decisions

Collect more data as a delay tactic

Name the decision, the deadline, and the “good enough” threshold

Make the decision alone so we “own it”

Use a 2-person check on anything that is hard to undo

Rewrite history after it works

Write down why you chose it — while you still remember



A four-question decision filter

01

What is actually on fire?

Safety, legal exposure, citizen services, data integrity — or just noise?

02

What is reversible?

If we can undo it in 24 hours, decide faster. If we cannot, slow the room down.

03

Who else needs a voice?

Who will live with this at 2 a.m.? Get them in now, not in the after-action.

04

What will we know tomorrow?

If waiting 30 minutes changes the quality of the call, wait. If it does not, move.



Competing priorities are the real job

NOW

Citizen or employee harm, active compromise, broken 911 / payments / payroll / instruction.

NEXT

Work that prevents the next NOW. Patching, backups, staffing, vendor risk, documentation.

NOISE

Urgency without consequence. Status theater. Meetings that could be a note. Other people's panic.



Scripts for competing demands

To an elected official or executive

"We can do that. Here is what moves if we do it this week."

To a vendor

"Send the written impact and the rollback plan. We will not decide from a slide."

To your team

"This is NEXT, not NOW. Protect the incident. I'll take the heat upstairs."

To yourself

"If everything is urgent, I have not chosen. Choosing is the job."



Table scenario: Friday at 4:40

A core system is degraded. The help desk queue is climbing. A council member is texting you. Your senior analyst is already at a child's game. A vendor wants a "quick call." Someone posts about it in a local Facebook group.

1

90-second reset. What three facts do you name?

2

NOW / NEXT / NOISE. Sort the inputs.

3

What is your first sentence to the team — and to the official?



Recovery is not a reward

Sleep is a security control

Tired leaders miss the small signal that becomes the breach, the outage, or the bad hire.

Movement clears the shift

A 12-minute walk after an incident does more than another status meeting.

Debrief the humans

What did we see? What did it cost us? What do we change before the next one?

Protected off-time

If the director never unplugs, the team will not either. Model the boundary you want.



A 15-minute human after-action

Facts

What happened, in order, without the soundtrack.

Friction

Where did we get stuck — tools, authority, information, or people?

Cost

Who ran hot? Who covered extra? What did we postpone?

Keep

What worked that we should repeat on purpose?

Change

One process change. One sentence we will use next time.

Close

Thank people specifically. Then send them home if you can.



Healthy workplace practices that survive real life

Make on-call visible

Rotate it. Pay or time-off it. Publish who is actually holding the page.

One channel in an incident

Pick the source of truth. Side texts create a second incident.

No-hero staffing

If only one person can do it, you do not have a process. You have a single point of failure.

Meeting hygiene

Default to 25 minutes. Require a purpose. Cancel when the purpose dies.

Name the load

In 1:1s ask: What is heavy? What should we stop? What would help this week?

Protect the newcomers

New analysts absorb culture fast. Do not teach them that burnout is the initiation.



Performative wellness helps no one

Pizza and a poster

Food is not a mental-fitness program. Neither is a slide that says “self-care.”

Open-door as strategy

Availability without boundaries trains people to escalate everything to you.

After-hours heroics as culture

What you praise, you reproduce. Stop celebrating the 2 a.m. email.

Outsourcing care to HR only

EAP matters. So does how you run the Tuesday stand-up.

Asking staff to be well in an unwell system

Fix the on-call, the decision rights, and the meeting load — then talk about resilience.



A personal operating system for the week

Monday	Name the three outcomes that would make this a successful week. Everything else is a candidate for NOISE.
Daily	One protected block with no meetings. Even 45 minutes. Defend it like an outage window.
After incidents	Reset. Human after-action. Then a hard stop if the threat is contained.
Weekly	A 20-minute review: what drained me, what I postponed, who I need to thank or unblock.
Always	A person who can tell you the truth when you are running hot. Not a committee. A person.



COMMITMENT

One 30-day experiment

Pick one. Write it down. Tell one person.

Reset

Use the 90-second reset before every high-stakes conversation for 30 days.

Filter

Run NOW / NEXT / NOISE in Monday staff meetings. Put the words on the agenda.

After-action

Hold a 15-minute human debrief after the next incident — even a small one.

Boundary

Set one protected off-window and keep it unless safety is actually at risk.

Voice

Teach the team one script from today and use it in public so they hear you mean it.

Ally

Name your truth-teller. Ask them to watch for when you start running hot.

What to walk out with

A definition

Mental fitness = clear, steady, and usable under load.

A reset

Feet. Breath. Name three facts. Choose the next action.

A filter

What is on fire? What is reversible? Who else? What will we know tomorrow?

A sort

NOW / NEXT / NOISE — and language for each.

A debrief

Facts, friction, cost, keep, change, close.

A stance

Recovery is readiness. Heroics are a design flaw.



QUESTIONS · DISCUSSION

What is one practice you want to take back?

If the question is clinical or personal, we can talk after — and I'll point you to the right resource.



THANK YOU

**The systems depend on you.
You get to depend on a system too.**

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GA GMIS Fall 2026 · Duluth, Georgia
Mental Fitness for Technology Leaders

If you or a colleague is in crisis: 988 · agency EAP · peer support