PAPER 1

LEADING CALM AMIDST CHAOS: ARE YOU THE PRESSURE COOKER THAT IS ABOUT TO EXPLODE?

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ABSTRACT

Leading Calm Amidst Chaos: Are you the pressure cooker that is about to explode? examines the increasingly complex landscape that municipal leaders must navigate, offering insights rooted in lived experience and strategic practice. With 34 years of service across four municipalities and as the first female municipal manager in the Western Cape, South Africa, I share a candid, practical perspective on resilience, clarity, and purpose in leadership. From surviving two suspensions to personally coaching over 300 hours with directors, managers, and senior staff, I have witnessed firsthand the human and organisational challenges that define modern municipal management.

Today's municipal environment is characterised by relentless pressures regarding political polarisation, audit and compliance burdens, rapid technological advances, and rising community expectations. Systems that centralise appointment and development decisions at the national level, though well-intentioned, often erode the decision-making latitude of local leaders, while inadvertently undermining high-performing municipalities. For many managers, this results in a cycle of firefighting, decision fatigue, anxiety, and professional isolation, leaving little space for the strategic thinking that municipalities urgently require.

This paper blends professional insight with practical guidance, highlighting how the personal toll of leadership manifests at work, at home, and in health. We shall explore why popular self-help tools, podcasts, and conferences often fail to create lasting change, and why leaders must instead cultivate accountability, reflection, and support systems that sustain real transformation. Attendees will gain actionable strategies to shift from reactive survival mode to proactive, forward-looking leadership. By reclaiming clarity and calm under pressure, municipal leaders can strengthen relationships, improve decision-making, and foster sustainable performance for both their teams and themselves.

INTRODUCTION

Municipal management in South Africa is characterised by persistent instability, competing stakeholder demands, and conditions that test the limits of professional and personal resilience. For those who lead municipalities, the ability to remain composed and effective under extreme pressure is not merely desirable, but it is essential. This capacity for calm, decisive leadership is rarely discussed openly, despite being universally felt as a need among practitioners in the field.

This paper draws on more than 34 years of direct municipal management experience across four municipalities to explore what it means to lead effectively in conditions of chronic institutional turbulence. The author, who served as the first female municipal manager in the Western Cape, brings both professional and deeply personal insights to this subject, having navigated investigations, inter-municipal transitions, and structural gender exclusions that extended even to the absence of maternity provisions in conditions of service at the time. These experiences form the empirical foundation of the central argument that calm is not the absence of problems, but a learnable, practical leadership skill that can be developed and sustained even in the most demanding municipal environments.

The paper addresses a gap between what municipal managers experience daily and what is formally acknowledged in leadership literature and training. Its purpose is to examine the nature of chaos in South African municipal management, to document its human cost honestly and with reference to the available research, and to argue that leading calmly amidst that chaos is both achievable and necessary beginning with small, specific, consistently applied steps that any senior municipal engineering manager can take today.

THE REALITY OF MUNICIPAL MANAGEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

Senior managers in local government in South Africa operate at the intersection of extraordinary institutional complexity and deeply personal sacrifice. Municipal managers are accounting officers and senior managers are cost centre managers, titles that carry not merely administrative responsibility, but full personal liability for the actions and failures of an entire organisation or department. When irregular expenditure is incurred by a department they may not even directly oversee, their name is on it. The legislative environment governing South African local government is among the most complex in the world, with new circulars, new regulations, and new compliance requirements arriving continuously, leaving no margin for ignorance (Thusi & Mamokhere 2024: 241). The law does not recognise exhaustion as a defence. Senior managers are expected to know everything, comply with everything, and account for everything simultaneously, publicly, and under sustained scrutiny.

Stakeholder complexity: Leading in every direction at once

One of the defining features of municipal management in South Africa is the sheer diversity and volume of stakeholders competing for attention, resources, and accountability. Stakeholders include amongst others politicians with their own agendas, the Auditor-General's office with its ever-growing requirements, staff who need direction, motivation, and sometimes discipline, the business community demanding service delivery, residents demanding answers, provincial and national departments, Eskom, and international delegations. Each of these stakeholders has legitimate needs and each has a voice. The senior manager is the one expected to hold it all together, often simultaneously, under public scrutiny, and often when already exhausted.

This is not merely an administrative challenge. It is a leadership challenge of the highest order. Research confirms that inadequate leadership, dysfunctional governance systems, and insufficient implementation of recruitment policies are among the primary contributors to poor service delivery in South African municipalities (Thusi & Selepe 2023: 689-690). The very managers who are expected to resolve these failures are themselves trapped within the same dysfunctional systems. It is symptomatic of a governance environment in which political patronage, nepotism, and

the deliberate manipulation of administrative processes have become normalised (Mlambo et al. 2023: 36-37).

It would be dishonest to suggest that technical incompetence plays no role in South Africa's service delivery failures. In some documented cases, it clearly does (Mlambo et al. 2023: 36-37). The more common and more consequential pattern is different where qualified, competent individuals placed inside governance structures are so compromised by political interference, chronic vacancy, and instability that even sound technical judgement cannot translate into sound outcomes (Thusi & Mamokhere 2024: 244). The distinction matters, because it changes where the solution has to be aimed.

Compliance overload and the weight of accountability

The volume of compliance demands placed on South African municipal managers is staggering. The Municipal Finance Management Act, the Municipal Systems Act, audit requirements, performance reporting frameworks, supply chain regulations, and intergovernmental obligations collectively create a legislative burden that no single individual can realistically carry without structural support.

In practice, structural support takes different forms depending on who is positioned to provide it. At the institutional level, it means dedicated compliance and governance capacity through e.g. a compliance officer, a shared services arrangement with neighbouring municipalities, or a formally delegated authority framework that distributes accountability rather than concentrating it in one office. At the individual level, it means the manager's own use of peer review before sign-off, structured escalation protocols, and induction support for newly appointed engineering managers who are handed this liability with little preparation. Much of this, however, remains outside any individual official's control: Staff establishments, budget allocations for specialist posts, and national capacity-building programmes through CoGTA and SALGA are systemic levers; not personal ones. This is precisely why the recommendations offered later in this paper distinguish between what can be built by the individual, what must be built by the institution, and what can only be resolved at a national policy level.

Research has consistently shown that monitoring and evaluation systems in South African municipalities are poorly implemented, not because the frameworks do not exist, but because municipal employees and managers are not adequately supported or capacitated to implement them (Yekani et al. 2024: e3-e4). Weak monitoring structures, inconsistent frameworks, and insufficient cooperation between oversight institutions and municipalities leave engineering and administrative leaders without the basic management tools needed to function effectively (Yekani et al. 2024: e4-e5). The result is a compounding cycle where the less effective the internal systems, the greater the compliance failures, and the greater the compliance failures, the heavier the personal accountability that falls on the senior manager.

Uncertainty as a leadership condition

Perhaps the most psychologically corrosive dimension of municipal management in South Africa is the condition of sustained uncertainty. Senior managers can be suspended at any time. They can be held personally liable for decisions they did not make. The ground beneath their feet is never solid.

Research into governance failures in South African municipalities has documented widespread instability in senior management positions, with prolonged acting appointments and high vacancy rates in critical roles, including chief financial officers, chief audit executives, and chief risk officers that are directly linked to poor governance outcomes and rising irregular expenditure (Thusi & Mamokhere 2024: 244). Political interference in administrative matters further destabilises the environment in which managers work, creating what has been described as an unstable operating context that actively threatens initiatives for sustainable service delivery (Thusi & Selepe 2023: 691).

The human cost: When pressure becomes personal

The impact of these conditions does not remain at the office. The social isolation that comes from no longer knowing who you can trust, the vigilance of measuring every relationship of who might use what you say against you, is exhausting in a way that is difficult to describe to those who have not experienced it.

The physical consequences are equally real and equally under-acknowledged. Persistent fatigue. Disordered eating. No time for exercise. Anxiety that manifests as chest tightness, disordered breathing, and the inability to switch off. These are not signs of weakness. They are the physiological responses of a human being under sustained, extreme pressure. Research on leadership in South African local government has noted that the psychological demands of managing in environments characterised by political instability, personal liability, and systemic dysfunction are qualitatively different from those faced by managers in stable institutional environments (Whitaker & Siegelaar 2025).

The disintegration of purpose

What makes all of this particularly devastating is that most municipal managers entered local government out of genuine commitment. Somewhere in the middle of the chaos, that original purpose becomes buried under layers of stress, fear, and exhaustion. Anxiety creeps into every decision. Tempers fray in meetings, creating strained relationships with political principals and colleagues. The work that once felt meaningful begins to feel like pure survival.

This erosion of purpose is not merely a personal tragedy. It is a systemic one. South Africa's infrastructure has declined from a C to a D rating over the past decade, and is drifting toward a classification of no longer fit for purpose (Wall 2024, Art. #1310). The survey of 669 engineering professionals conducted by Rust et al. (2021, Art. #1030) found that the main reasons cited for infrastructure deterioration were a lack of maintenance, lack of institutional capability, insufficient funding, and chronic overloading of existing systems. Behind every one of those institutional failures is a human being, a manager, an engineer, or a technical leader who was either too overwhelmed, too isolated, or too demoralised to implement what they knew needed to be done. The infrastructure crisis in South Africa is, at its core, also a leadership wellbeing crisis.

What has been tried and why it has not been enough

Senior managers facing these conditions have not been passive. They have tried blood pressure monitoring apps, self-help books, breathing exercises, leadership podcasts, personal trainers, and performance frameworks. They attend conferences hoping to find a new tool or model that will finally bring order to the chaos. In those moments, each new approach feels like it might work.

This pattern of throwing oneself into everything, working all hours, trying to solve everything at once is what might be called wild working. It is counterproductive, because it crowds out the small, consistent habits that actually build resilience, i.e. regular exercise, reflection, rest, and honest conversation.

The deeper problem is isolation. Most senior managers are managing all of this alone. They do not want to burden their partners and they do

not know who they can trust to speak frankly to. In an environment where openness can be weaponised, candour feels dangerous, but that isolation makes everything harder. Research on senior management functioning in South African local government confirms that the absence of consistent, confidential support structures and spaces in which managers can think clearly, process decisions, and develop inner stability is a critical missing element in the professional support ecosystem for municipal leadership (Whitaker & Siegelaar 2025).

SMALL STEPS THAT YOU CAN TAKE TODAY

The preceding sections have painted an honest and, at times, uncomfortable picture of what it means to be a senior municipal engineering manager in South Africa. The institutional dysfunction, the political interference, the compliance overload, the personal liability, and the slow erosion of purpose are all real. They are documented, researched, and widely experienced, but documentation without direction serves no one. The purpose of this section is therefore not to add to the weight of what has already been described, but to offer something concrete, i.e. a set of small, executable steps that can begin shifting the internal conditions of leadership, even when the external conditions remain unchanged.

The starting point is a neurological one. Research by Leaf (2025: 38-40) confirms that dramatic, sweeping change attempted once and abandoned is neurologically far less effective than small, repeated, intentional actions practised consistently over time. The brain rewires through repetition. This matters enormously for municipal engineering managers, whose instinct, as shaped by years of technical problem-solving, is to identify the biggest problem and apply the most comprehensive solution available. Under pressure, that instinct becomes counterproductive. It produces wild working, throwing everything at the problem simultaneously, working all hours, attempting to solve everything at once, and in doing so crowding out the very habits that would actually build resilience (Leaf 2025: 27-34). The steps below are deliberately small.

Step one: Name your pressure with precision

The first and most foundational step is to stop carrying pressure as a vague, undifferentiated weight and begin locating it with specific detail. Specific insight changes everything (Leaf 2025: 35-38). For one week, each time a pressure surfaces, whether it is a compliance deadline, a political encounter, a staffing crisis, or a sleepless night, work through six honest questions: Who is involved? What happened or is happening? When does it hit hardest? Where are you when it surfaces? Why does it affect you so deeply? And how often does it show up?

This exercise is not administrative. It is diagnostic. Research on monitoring and evaluation failures in South African municipalities consistently shows that managers who lack the reflective space to assess what is actually happening around them are unable to course-correct before failures become crises (Yekani et al. 2024: e4-e5). The same principle applies internally. You cannot manage pressure you have never clearly seen.

Consider a senior engineering manager whose chest has been tight for weeks. Naming it precisely might reveal that it is not the workload itself that is the problem, but the late-night messages from a Councillor questioning a decision that was signed off weeks earlier, and that this happens almost every Sunday night.

Step two: Choose one priority and take one small action

Once specific pressures have been identified, the next step is to resist the impulse to address all of them simultaneously. Choose the single highest-priority pressure, the one that is consuming the most cognitive and emotional energy right now and ask four questions about it (Leaf 2025: 38-42): What one small action can I take this week to begin shifting this? What negative thought can I replace with a more honest and constructive one? When exactly will I do this, and how will I remind myself? Who can hold me accountable? Write the answers down. Make the action small, specific, and scheduled. The infrastructural decline documented across South African municipalities is in part a consequence of technical leaders who knew what needed to be done but operated in conditions that made consistent, disciplined action impossible (Rust et al. 2021, Art. #1030). Rebuilding that capacity for consistent action begins with the individual, not the system.

That same manager chooses this as the priority. The small action: Drafting one paragraph, this week, for a written decision-log protocol that closes off the after-hours re-litigating of decisions already signed off. It is scheduled for Wednesday afternoon. The accountability partner: A colleague in another municipality who has agreed to ask, simply, "did you send it?" on Thursday.

Step three: Sit with the pain before you try to fix it

This is the step that most engineering managers, trained to solve problems quickly and move on, find most counterintuitive, but it is the most important one. From the work of Eurich (2017), as applied by Leaf (2025: 42-44), the instruction is to sit with the pain that is causing the pressure for a minimum of eight minutes, not to wallow in it, but to understand what it actually means, where it genuinely comes from, and what it has been trying to communicate. Follow this with twelve minutes of deliberate daily reflection, which is genuine, quiet, directed reflection on the broader picture of your life and your leadership. Research on leadership functioning in South African local government confirms that the absence of reflective practice is a critical missing element in the professional support ecosystem for municipal managers and is one whose absence directly correlates with poorer decision-making, higher rates of burnout, and deteriorating governance outcomes (Whitaker & Siegelaar 2025). This is twenty minutes a day of investment that this step requires.

Sitting with the tightness in his chest for eight minutes surfaces something underneath the irritation. The feeling that surfaces is not anger at the Councillor, but a fear of being blamed publicly for a decision that was, in fact, correctly made. The reflection that follows makes clear that this fear has been quietly driving decisions for months without ever being named.

Step four: Stop managing the pressure alone

Perhaps the most structurally significant step available to senior municipal engineering managers is also the one most consistently avoided, i.e. finding a confidential, consistent space in which to think clearly, speak honestly, and develop the kind of inner stability that does not depend on the external environment being cooperative. The isolation that characterises the lives of most senior managers in South African local government is not merely uncomfortable (Thusi & Selepe 2023: 692). It is professionally dangerous. It narrows decision-making, amplifies anxiety, and accelerates the erosion of the purpose that brought most of these managers into local government in the first place. The missing ingredient is a consistent, confidential relationship with someone who genuinely understands the specific world of South African municipal management, within which tools and frameworks can be applied with sustained support and honest accountability (Leaf 2025: 40-44).

The earlier concern about who can be trusted is legitimate, and it is precisely why this space cannot be found inside the same organisational

or political ecosystem that generates the pressure in the first place. It is not a colleague, a subordinate, or a political principal — each of these carries their own stake in the outcome. Viable options include a professional coach or mentor with no reporting relationship to the municipality, a peer from another municipality whose distance from local politics makes candour safer for both parties, structured mentorship through professional bodies such as IMESA or ECSA, or confidential counselling through an Employee Assistance Programme extended specifically to senior technical staff, who are often excluded from these services in practice even where they exist on paper.

Managed alone, the fear identified in step three would have stayed private, quietly shaping decisions from the background. Shared, even briefly, with someone outside the reporting line, it becomes something that can be examined and worked with rather than simply carried.

CONCLUSIONS

Senior municipal engineering managers in South Africa are not failing because they lack technical competence, professional commitment, or genuine desire to serve their communities. They are operating inside a system that is, by every measurable indicator, in serious and accelerating decline. It is a system characterised by political interference, governance dysfunction, compliance overload, chronic under-resourcing, and a near-total absence of the professional support structures that sustained high-performance leadership actually requires (Rust et al. 2021, Art. #1030; Wall 2024, Art. #1310; Thusi & Mamokhere 2024: 244).

The pressure that builds inside that system is real, it is documented, and left unaddressed it is dangerous, not only to the individuals carrying it, but to the infrastructure, the communities, and the institutions that depend on their capacity to lead clearly and calmly under conditions that show no immediate sign of becoming easier. The argument of this paper is that while the larger work continues, the municipal engineering manager standing inside the chaos today cannot afford to wait for the system to heal before beginning to tend to themselves.

Small steps, taken consistently, with honest self-awareness, genuine accountability, and the courage to stop carrying the weight alone, are not a retreat from leadership responsibility. They are, in the conditions of South African local government right now, the most serious and consequential act of leadership available (Leaf 2025: 40-44; Yekani et al. 2024: e7-e8).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the severity and complexity of the pressures documented in this paper, the following recommendations are offered as practical, executable priorities. At the individual level, senior municipal engineering managers are strongly encouraged to ensure that they have a consistent professional support structure built into their working life before the pressure cooker reaches its limit (Leaf 2025: 40-44).

In practice, this could take the form of a confidential coaching or mentoring relationship external to the municipality, participation in a facilitated peer-support group of engineering managers from different municipalities, or structured supervision of the kind long used in professions such as psychology and social work, where practitioners routinely process the emotional weight of their work with someone outside their reporting line. What matters is not the specific model, but that it is consistent, confidential, and independent of the political and organisational structures that generate the pressure in the first place.

At the institutional level, municipalities and the organisations that govern and support them, including SALGA, IMESA, and CoGTA are urged to formally acknowledge the psychological and professional toll of senior engineering management roles and to develop structured wellbeing and peer support frameworks that are specific to this population, rather than generic wellness offerings that bear no relationship to the realities of the role (Whitaker & Siegelaar 2025; Yekani et al. 2024: e7-e8).

At the systemic level, the persistent governance failures that place unqualified individuals in technical leadership positions, enable political interference in engineering and administrative decisions, and leave critical posts vacant for months and years at a time must be addressed as a matter of urgent national priority, because they undermine service delivery, and they impose an unsustainable and ultimately inhumane burden on the qualified professionals who remain (Thusi & Mamokhere 2024: 244; Rust et al. 2021, Art. #1030; Wall 2024, Art. #1310).

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