Reflection toolkit for emergency managers

"Everything is both" a powerful guiding principle and strategic communication principle for (L)EMs

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A modular reflection toolkit for (local) emergency managers is not just a methodological gimmick, but an important system-relevant instrument that deeply addresses the requirements of modern emergency and crisis management.

Systemic thinking meets psychological safety

This reflection toolkit is not a magic formula, but it can serve as a necessary mirror in which experiences are outlined and become tangible (a kind of space for shared learning without losing face).

(Local) emergency managers often work as "all-rounders in a lonely corridor," i.e., they are the point of contact, planners, networkers, decision-makers, communicators and implementers, in other words, they are everything in one person. They often bear the complex tensions alone, and it is precisely for these "one-person specialist units" that a reflection toolkit is particularly essential.

You may be wondering why. The answer is simple ...

Social resilience is not a soft component on the fringes of emergency management. It is a fundamental and very important structure. Whether it's self-clarification, collegial reflection, or ambivalence work, everything ultimately aims at building social capital, which is so important. It promotes ambivalence, strengthens team culture, and makes complex decisions easier to grasp in retrospect.

1. Ambivalence: Navigating uncertainty

And why do we need it?

- Local crisis managers constantly navigate areas of conflict (e.g. security vs. participation, speed vs. accuracy, proximity vs. distance).

- Traditional post-incident debriefings often reduce complexity to "worked/didn't work."

- Ambivalence is the ability to tolerate and integrate contradictory truths simultaneously, i.e., the opposite of black-and-white thinking.

What this reflection toolkit can achieve

- It makes contradictions discussable without having to resolve them.

- It strengthens mental resilience in the face of the constant ambiguity of decisions.

- It prevents cynical "tunnel thinking" after highly stressful assignments.

2. Team culture: trust, language, and collective learning

Why do we need it?

- Emergency management teams work under intense pressure, often in shifts, with few opportunities for collective self-reflection.

- Much remains unsaid — feelings, uncertainties, internal conflicts.

- Over time, this leads to mistrust, exhaustion or isolation.

What this reflection toolkit can achieve:

- It creates structured spaces for honest debriefings that go beyond assigning blame.

- It gives everyone a voice, regardless of hierarchy or experience.

- It strengthens team cohesion and enables cultural learning rather than just procedural learning.

3. Making decisions tangible: From impulse to understanding

Why do we need it?

- Decisions in emergencies are often made under considerable pressure and with incomplete information – in retrospect, they seem "wrong," misleading or even incomprehensible.

- Without clarifying reflection, rational and emotional motives usually remain hidden.

- This makes learning difficult, both individually and institutionally.

What this reflection toolkit can achieve:

- It makes decision-making processes transparent and humanly comprehensible.

- It documents not only "What did we do?", but also "Why? With what internal struggles?"

- It promotes self-efficacy because we understand how we ourselves, but also others, have remained capable of acting in complex situations.

This reflection toolkit is designed to help "translate" the attitude of (L)EMs from local to local, with a sense of reality, humanity and reflective power and translate it into a practical method.

It should help you to make the unspeakable speakable without lecturing.

It recognizes that in an emergency, EVERYTHING can be BOTH: right and inadequate, strong and vulnerable.

This requires a practice-oriented clustering of the "both at the same time" statements from the Ambivalence Mirror module, specifically for emergency, crisis and disaster management.

The goal here should be to focus reflection specifically on the central areas of tension and tailor it to the real-life work situations in the EM/emergency context.

Cluster 1: Leadership & self-doubt – between taking responsibility and human doubt

For executives, team leaders, and managers — to reflect on internal tensions between their responsibilities and their uncertainties.

- "I led, but I didn't feel heard."

- "I gave clear instructions, but at the same time I improvised."

- "I took responsibility, but I still felt powerless."

- "I wanted to motivate, but I felt exhausted myself."

- "I made decisions and questioned them at the same time."

- "I acted professionally, but felt helpless inside."

- "I was part of the system, but still felt outside it."

- "I appeared confident, but was trembling inside."

- "I was visible as a leader, but felt alone."

- "I motivated others, but dragged myself through."

- "I held the microphone, but searched for my voice."

- "I took a clear stand, but wavered internally."

- "I was perceived as a decision-maker, but felt driven."

- "I was a rock for others, but a question mark for myself."

Reflection prompts

What doubts do I show and where do I hide them?

Where is it acceptable for leaders to "not know" or to "search"?

What decisions have I made without standing behind them, and why?

How visible should my uncertainty be in my leadership role?

When do I rely on my knowledge, and when do I rely on my intuition?

Where was my attitude clear, but my emotions strongly contradicted it?

What leadership models shape my actions, and do they help or hinder me (actually)?

Which inner voice guided me in the situation and which did I ignore?

At what moments was I present and at what moments was I merely functional?

How did I communicate my responsibility and what was left unsaid?

What do I need to feel more confident in my leadership role, regardless of the situation?

What mistakes did I avoid out of fear of reactions rather than out of conviction?

Cluster 2: Organization & Humanity – Between System Logic and Human Closeness

For anyone who balances structural logic and human closeness, e.g., in communication, in a team or with those affected.

- "We were structured but unapproachable to our counterparts."

- "I coordinated efficiently but distanced myself emotionally."

- "Our communication was clear but emotionally disconnected."

- "I helped people and unintentionally disadvantaged others in the process."

- "I supported my colleagues and crossed my own boundaries in the process."

- "I argued with facts and yet felt emotions that I couldn't name."

- "We followed the procedure and yet overlooked an open door."

- "I acted according to plan and yet felt the unplanned."

- "I followed a rule and felt bad about it."

- "I was 'loyal to the system' but ignored my personal doubts."

- "I made sure things ran smoothly but didn't feel connected to the people involved."

- "I had conversations but couldn't build relationships."

- "I defended a process and hurt someone's dignity in the process."

Reflection points

Where does structure protect us and where does it (perhaps) separate us from our humanity?

How can the two be consciously combined?

Where does the system protect us and where should humanity take precedence?

Which rules provide support and which hinder smart decisions?

When is it worth disagreeing? And how can this be done on an equal footing?

Where has the balance between professionalism and compassion been achieved and where has it not?

What experiences have I had when I put people before function?

When was the system stronger than my own intuition, and how did I experience that?

What human needs became apparent in the process but were ignored?

How can I make systemic requirements more people-friendly in the future?

Which encounter during my assignment touched me emotionally, and why?

What is more important to me: conformity or relationships, and how do I deal with this tension?

Cluster 3: Speed & depth – between reaction and reflection and the question of the right balance.

For situations and decisions where speed meets significance.

- "I was required to act quickly and knew that taking my time would have been smarter."

- "I felt well prepared and yet completely surprised at the same time."

- "We worked efficiently but felt disconnected from the situation outside."

- "I improvised while maintaining control."

- "I implemented clear guidelines and ignored my own intuition."

- "I made quick decisions and didn't grasp the context until it was too late."

- "I acted on my first impulse and later had doubts."

- "I was on track but didn't have a feel for what was important."

- "I reacted but didn't lead."

- "I addressed the obvious and overlooked the hidden issues."

- "I acted clearly but came to a decision too early."

- "I was the first in the room but not the 'clearest'."

Reflection prompts

When does time pressure dominate, and how can you really leave room for depth in your actions?

Which decisions would have benefited from depth but were overwhelmed by the pace?

Where was my reaction just a reflex, and when did it become a genuine response?

What would have changed if I had hesitated a moment longer?

How can I tell the difference between action and hectic activity?

What dimensions of depth are often "decided away" in everyday life?

When would I have liked to have pressed "pause" and why was that (not) possible?

What information would I have needed to make more sustainable decisions?

What was not said because there was no time and would have helped later?

How do I distinguish between efficient and hasty action?

What was lost in the fast pace and how can I protect that next time?

Cluster 4: Security & Doubt - Between Professional Conduct and Inner Struggle

For moments when external control and internal uncertainty collide.

- "I radiated calmness, but inside I was struggling with fear."

- "The situation was under control, but not really under trust."

- "I trusted the situation but distrusted the information."

- "I took responsibility and felt overwhelmed at the same time."

- "I did a lot of things right and still felt guilty."

- "I controlled processes but lost trust."

- "I activated routines but felt instability."

- "I demonstrated expertise but did not feel inner security."

- "I communicated confidence but still hesitated internally."

- "I reassured others but did not find peace myself."

- "I was confident in my view of others but not in myself."

- "I upheld clear rules but did not understand them all."

Reflection prompts

How do we deal with inner uncertainty when the outer façade demands stability?

When have I glossed over doubts, and did it really help me?

Where are my personal "alarm zones," regardless of the current situation?

What does security really mean to me? Professionally, emotionally, but also socially?

What kind of uncertainty is acceptable, and what kind do we suppress?

Who gives me security and what do I do when that is lacking?

What uncertainties could I share with the team and which ones could I not?

How did I perceive my own vulnerability and how did it affect me?

Where was my security deceptive or my doubts unnecessary?

What strengthens my confidence in myself – beyond the facts?

Which doubts helped me move forward and which ones paralyzed me?

Cluster 5: Cooperation & differentiation – between openness to others and protecting one's own integrity

For situations where cooperation, loyalty and inner conflicts collide.

- "I wanted to cooperate, but I distanced myself internally."
- "I was loyal to the organization, but I disagreed with the decision."
- "I invested trust and exercised control at the same time."
- "I coordinated, but I wasn't really connected."
- "I was communicative, but somehow absent internally."
- "I collaborated and saw boundaries being crossed."
- "I was open to help but suspicious when it came to access."
- "I used networks but didn't feel any connection to the people behind them."
- "I coordinated but didn't feel involved."
- "I acted together but didn't share the reasons why."
- "I shared responsibility but didn't really feel like I was carrying it."
- "I created connections but didn't experience any real closeness."

Reflection prompts

What makes cooperation credible, and when does self-protection take its place?

When was cooperation genuine and when was it just a facade?

What happens when I say "yes" but actually mean 'no'?

How do we protect our "own" boundaries in cooperation mode?

Who is allowed to get close to me, and who is not?

What experiences have I had with solidarity — in both directions?

When was cooperation honest, and when was it merely strategic?

Where did I adjust my position even though it wasn't right and why?

Who did I expect to be close to, and who signaled that they wanted distance?

How do loyalty and allegiance differ and where have I confused the two?

Which relationships were resilient and which were merely functional?

An ambivalence mirror (BOTH at the same time) can be used as an expandable reflection module, as it provides greater depth with different methods, example sentences, areas of application and transfer options.

The goal remains the same: not only to perceive internal and external contradictions, but to take them very seriously as an inevitable part of complexity. In pairs or small groups, participants describe experiences in which they perceived two conflicting emotions or evaluations at the same time.

Method Variants

Ambivalence Gallery (visual): Participants write their "both" statements on cards and hang them up around the room. This is followed by silent observation and selection: What resonates with me? What surprises me?

Ambivalence Ball (activating): A ball is tossed around the circle. Whoever catches it shares a "both-at-once" moment from the last situation or deployment. A group reflection follows: What patterns emerge?

Silent Line: Everyone positions themselves along an imaginary line between two poles (e.g. "secure" and "insecure") and briefly explains their stance. The focus here is on making the in-between visible.

Ambivalence Tandems with Role Switching: One person shares a complex situation, the other responds with a "both" summary – then the roles are reversed.

All these questions can be integrated individually or modularly into various reflection units, e.g., as an introduction to group discussions, for self-reflection after table-top exercises/board games/AR scenario training and much more or as part of a collegial consultation.

Why this reflection is particularly important for individuals with sole responsibility

1. Because no one else asks, "How did you really feel in that situation?"

Without team discussions, there is no social mirror. The reflection toolkit does not replace colleagues, but it gives you a structure to sort your own thoughts, process experiences and gain clarity from internal pressure.

2. Because loneliness can quickly turn into uncertainty.

People who make decisions alone doubt themselves more intensely. This is human and completely understandable. BUT reflection stabilizes: "I made a decision despite my ambivalence and that was professional."

3. Because self-clarification is a prerequisite for sustainable networks

Only those who know their own position can clearly represent it to the administration, politicians, emergency services, volunteers, citizens or the press. The toolkit is designed to help you translate your inner clarity into external communication.

We all know that time is one of the scarcest resources in emergency management.

But: The argument here is not "*we don't have time for reflection*," but rather: We cannot afford not to find time for it.

1. Why 45 – 60 minutes is realistic despite the limited resource of "time" – if you consciously prioritize it

- These units are not intended for acute use, but rather for training sessions, debriefings, retreats, learning circles, or shift change formats.

- They can be carried out in a modular fashion, e.g., in clusters on consecutive weeks, divided into 2 × 30 minutes or as part of a collegial reflection day.

- Many LEMs report that they often spend significantly more time on inefficient coordination or "lost situations" – here, time is invested in reflection, not wasted.

- The suggested questions are so in-depth that even 15 minutes of structured exchange can achieve more than hours of operational debriefings without any real discussion.

How can you convince your team of this necessity, and why should you, as an emergency manager, invest 45 to 60 minutes in reflection?

1. Because you are not indulging in a luxury, but gaining clarity. An open, honest exchange about ambivalence in your own actions ...

- ... prevents unnecessary repeat mistakes that arise from things left unsaid, ...

- resolves hidden tensions within the team before they lead to a loss of trust, ...

- and saves you marathon coordination meetings, queries, conflict resolution and inner self-doubt in the long run, all of which cost energy but are rarely addressed.

2. Please don't say "psychological reflection," but rather: *"Gain clarity, learn from patterns, and strengthen our security." Make it a genuine* invitation – without any sense of obligation.

- Instead of "You need to reflect," say: *"If you want, we can create a space where you can show yourself without having to function."*

- Instead of "mandatory debriefing," please say: "You are invited to contribute your experience to make others stronger."

- Instead of "psycho stuff," say: "This isn't coaching, it's strategic self-clarification in a confusing world."

Make it clear to the team that "Good follow-up saves time, trust and effectiveness in the next situation."

Communicate the benefits in your own words:

- "This 45-minute block prevents us from making the same mistakes next time."

- "Anyone managing complex situations needs not only situation maps but also clarity of thought."

- "Reflection is not a luxury, but an invaluable management tool."

Invitation instead of obligation: Local emergency managers work in an environment characterized by reliability, clear roles, and a reactive culture. Reflection formats, especially those that allow for emotional or personal input, are often unfamiliar or even associated with uncertainty. That is why there is no need for orders here — instead, a convincing invitation is required.

Just be free, according to the motto: **"If you spend 60 minutes being honest with yourself and others, you'll save yourself 600 minutes of follow-up conflicts, misunderstandings and stress."**

For me, this is not just rhetoric, but a very realistic calculation. For example, if you can clearly identify where, how, and why something went wrong within 45 minutes of a job, you often save yourself:

- ✓ Countless emails requesting adjustments
- ✓ Three phone calls to clarify responsibilities
- ✓ Weeks of silence within the team due to unspoken frustration
- ✓ Psychological stress caused by a "strange feeling that lingered."

Cluster 1: Leadership & Self-Doubt

Recommended time frame: 45 – 60 minutes

Group size: 3 to 12 participants (ideally 4 to 8); a mix of hierarchical levels is encouraged

Objective: Reflection on the tensions between external responsibility and internal

uncertainty (Possible) opening sentences for facilitation:

• "Leadership doesn't always mean certainty, but often means having to act within uncertainty."

• "Today we want to talk about what it's like to lead while simultaneously having doubts."

• "What stories do we know where our leadership role and our inner voice didn't quite align?"

Process (an example structure):

1. **Introduction (5 – 10 min)** Welcome, clarify objectives, establish group agreements (confidentiality, appreciation, no pressure to speak)

2. **Impulse Round (10 min)** Each participant briefly shares a recent experience that relates to the topic.

3. **Ambivalence Mirror (20 – 25 min) In pairs**: select or create a "both" sentence from the cluster, then explore:

- o What does this sentence mean to you?

- o In what situation did you experience this tension?

4. **Group Reflection (10 – 15 min) Feedback from the pairs**: What patterns, feelings, or surprises emerged?

5. **Closing Reflection (5 – 10 min)**

- o What am I taking with me?

- o What will I continue thinking about – even after today?

Cluster 2: Organization & Humanity

Recommended time frame: 45 – 60 minutes

Group size: 4 to 10 participants; a mix of roles and levels of experience is encouraged (e.g. field personnel and leadership)

Objective: To strengthen awareness in navigating the tension between systemic rationality and personal empathy. To explore how human needs can and should be acknowledged within the operational system.

(Possible) opening sentences for facilitation:

• "Helping people and following plans – often both are possible, but sometimes they get in each other's way."

• "Organizations regulate procedures. But what regulates our humanity and how does it find a voice?"

• "Today we'll explore the subtle tensions between systems logic and human closeness."

Process (possible example structure):

1. **Welcome & Context (5 – 10 min)** Brief introduction to the topic by the facilitator, including a personal example e.g. a moment when the system worked but a person affected was left out.

2. **Keyword Experience Round (5 – 10 min) Go around the group:** "Please share one word or short phrase describing a situation where structure either helped you or stood in your way."

3. **Ambivalence Mirror in Small Groups (20 min)**

• Present a selection of relevant "both" statements on cards (or digitally)

• Each participant selects a sentence that speaks to them

In pairs or triads, discussion based on the questions:

- o What real situation do you associate with this?

- o How did you experience the tension between process and person?

- What mattered more to you in that moment and why?

4. **Group Reflection (15 min)** Short feedback from the small groups – focus on recurring patterns or moving insights.

5. **Closing (5 – 10 min) Facilitation impulse:** "What would change if our systems allowed more space for humanity and what would that require in our specific work environment?"

Optional: Each participant writes a personal sentence on a post-it or digitally, such as: "Next time, I'll make sure to …"

Cluster 3: Speed & Depth

Recommended time frame: 45 – 60 minutes

Group size: 3 to 8 participants Ideal: Individuals who were involved in a real or simulated scenario (e.g. exercise, deployment, table-top session)

Objective: To recognize and reflect on what was achieved or lost in the tension between speed and thoroughness. To strengthen decision-making maturity under dynamic conditions.

(Possible) opening sentences for facilitation:

• "In emergencies, every second counts, but sometimes the essential things get left behind."

• "Today we'll look at situations where we acted quickly and ask: What would have needed more depth?"

• "Between action and reflex – how consciously did we move through dynamic decisions?"

Process (possible example structure):

1. **Introduction & Thematic Anchor (5 – 10 min)** The facilitator describes a typical everyday situation, e.g.: "We enter a situation room. Pressure in the air. Three minutes to make a decision. What do we do – what do we overlook?" Then: "Let's reflect on where such moments have occurred for us and how we handled them."

2. **Ambivalence Gallery (10 min)** Participants select one sentence each from the cluster (printed or digital), e.g.:

   • "I improvised … and still held on to control."

   • "I addressed the obvious … and missed the hidden."

   Optional: Each participant marks on a scale (1–5): How often do you experience this tension? How strongly did it affect you recently?

3. **Small Group Reflection (20 – 25 min)** In pairs or triads, share and explore the following guiding questions:

   • What specific situation comes to mind?

   • What information did I have and what was missing?

• What was "overlooked" that might have been important?

• How was the tension between speed and depth managed – by the team or by myself?

4. **Shared Pattern Recognition (10 – 15 min) In the full group:** "What recurring experiences or insights emerged?" Use visualization on a flipchart or whiteboard (ideally structured in columns), such as: "fast & clear" / "fast & imprecise" / "slow & effective" – What stands out to us?

5. **Closing Reflection (5–10 min) Each participant completes a personal reflection:**

• "Next time I'm under time pressure, I want to…"

• "One thought I want to continue exploring at a slower pace…"

Optional: Write on a card to take with you or save it digitally.

Cluster 4: Security & Doubt – Between Professional Action and Inner Struggle

Recommended time frame: 45 – 60 minutes

Group size: 4 to 10 participants **Ideal:** A diverse mix of incident commanders, operational personnel and supporting roles

Objective: Reflection on the tension between external stability and inner uncertainty. Fostering a culture in which doubt is seen as a productive resource rather than a weakness.

(Possible) opening sentences for facilitation:

• "Not everything we control gives us true security and not everything that seems safe actually is."

• "Today we ask: When did we function professionally – yet struggle internally?"

• "Between clear plans and quiet doubt – how visible is uncertainty in the way we operate?"

Process (possible example structure):

1. **Introduction & Thematic Activation (5 – 10 min)** The facilitator symbolically shows a checklist or deployment matrix – then poses the question: "What in our system is well secured – and what remains in the gray zone?"

   Optional: Sticker or marking activity on a prepared grid: "Secure / Insecure / In Between"

2. **Selection Round: "Both at Once" Statements (10 – 15 min)** Participants choose a sentence from a provided selection (printed or displayed on screen) that resonates with them. Examples:

   • "I projected calm … while inwardly grappling with fear."

   • "The situation was under control … but not under trust."

   Optional short personal note: "Why this sentence?"

3. **Small Group Discussion (20 min)** In pairs or triads, guided conversation using questions such as:

   • What situation do you associate with this ambivalence?

   • What would have helped you be more open about the doubt?

   • How did your environment or you yourself – deal with visible uncertainty?

   • Was there a moment when you were able to regulate your internal state or not?

   Optional prompt: "Who is allowed to express doubt in the team and who isn't?"

4. **Group Debrief (10 – 15 min)** Collective sharing of insights: "What helps us remain functional as a group, even in moments of inner uncertainty?" Visual collection of "anchors of safety" that are not based on technology (e.g. humor, eye contact, structure, silence, others thinking along)

5. **Closing (5–10 min)** Final reflection sentence or note on a card:

   • "A doubt that became clear to me today …"

   • "An inner point of safety I want to strengthen …"

   Encouragement: Doubt is not the opposite of professionalism, but its depth.

Cluster 5: Cooperation & Boundaries – Between Openness to Others and the Protection of One's Own Integrity

Recommended time frame: 45 – 60 minutes

Group size: 4 to 10 participants **Ideal:** Participants from different interfaces (e.g. incident command, administration, NGOs, volunteers, politics, external partners)

Objective: To raise awareness of inner boundary experiences and loyalty conflicts in collaboration. To foster a cooperative working atmosphere with healthy self-protection.

(Possible) opening sentences for facilitation:

• "Cooperation is essential, but sometimes we lose ourselves in it."

• "How can collaboration succeed without diluting identity and values?"

• "Today, we want to talk about tensions: between loyalty and critical distance, between closeness and protection."

Process (a possible example structure):

1. **Introduction & Opening Question (5 – 10 min)** Begin with an open check-in: "Name one quality that is important to you in good cooperation – and one that holds you back internally."

   Optional: Collect terms on a flipchart or digital board (trust, self-protection, openness, clarity ...)

2. **Selection Round: "Both at Once" Statements (10 min)** Present typical sentences from the cluster, e.g.:

   • "I was loyal to the organization and still in disagreement with the decision."

   • "I invested trust and simultaneously exercised control."

   • "I acted jointly but didn't share the 'why' behind it." Each participant selects a sentence or formulates their own ambivalence from everyday life.

3. **Small Group Discussion (20 – 25 min)** In pairs or triads, guided exchange using these questions:

   • What was the concrete situation behind this tension?

   • What held you back from fully engaging or setting boundaries?

   • Was there an imbalance between giving and holding back?

   • What unspoken loyalties influenced your actions?

   • What would have helped you be clearer – for yourself and for others?

4. **Plenary: Shared Perspective Gathering (10 – 15 min)** Open group discussion using these questions:

   • How do I recognize genuine cooperation and superficial collaboration?

   • What experience showed me: closeness needs boundaries, and distance can be respectful?

   • What role does inner clarity play in connecting meaningfully with others?

   Optional: The facilitator marks terms on a "Cooperation Compass" (axes: openness vs. protection, closeness vs. clarity)

5. **Closing & Personal Reflection (5 – 10 min)** Final impulse: "What do I want to consciously manage more in the future – my openness or my boundary?" Each participant writes a concrete sentence: "In my next complex collaboration, I'll pay special attention to …"

How the Toolkit Can Also Work "Solo"

1. **As a self-reflection journal:** All clusters can be explored in writing. Once a month, take 20 minutes at your desk, on the way back from a meeting or during a quiet moment.

2. **As a tandem format with colleagues from other districts/cities For example, online or by phone:** "Shall we reflect on Cluster 3 together today?" This creates collegial resonance without needing an on-site team.

3. **As a basis for small peer formats LEM networks/alliances could initiate mini-sessions** e.g., three people, 60 minutes, digital invitation, shared reflection on one cluster. Minimal effort, but high impact.

(L)EM Ambivalence Toolkit "Solo" Why it's especially meaningful – on your own:

• It offers you a structured framework for self-reflection without the need for external facilitation

• It strengthens your sense of agency as a leader and central node

• It allows you to name inner tensions before they wear you down

Create a mini-module (20 – 30 minutes): Your monthly reflection loop A possible sequence might be:

1. **Create calm (2 min):** Take a brief pause – digital silence, phone off. Perhaps: your favorite mug of tea or coffee or just a glass of water, pen, paper. Take one deep breath.

2. **Choose a cluster (1 min):** Decide spontaneously: What has been particularly present for me recently? e.g., Leadership & Self-Doubt, Cooperation & Boundaries...

3. **Pick a sentence from the Ambivalence Mirror (1 min):** Choose intuitively, e.g.: "I communicated clearly and didn't feel heard."

4. **Free writing (7 – 10 min):** No censorship, by hand or digital (whatever you prefer):

   ▪ What was the situation?
   ▪ What was my inner conflict?
   ▪ How did I respond and what would I have needed?

5. **Formulate three guiding questions (10 min):**

   ▪ What was wise about my response, even if it felt uncertain?
   ▪ When did my intuition help me or when was it absent?
   ▪ What would I do differently next time or deliberately the same?

6. **Closing impulse (1 – 2 min):**

   ▪ A sentence I'm taking with me for tomorrow ...

Create Micro-Rituals for Your Workday

• "Reflection in Waiting Time"

Before a meeting, in line, while making coffee: What was my last moment of inner resistance? What was my part in it?

• "Shadow Note" in the Calendar

A weekly calendar entry: "What am I mentally carrying with me – what still needs to be said or sorted?"

• "Silent Check-Out" after Deployments or Meetings

Two minutes just for yourself: Was I truly present today or just in task mode?

Create a Collegial Version for Two or Three

Once a month a 45-minute call with one or two LEM colleagues from another location:

• Opening: "What was your last 'both' moment?"

• Each reflects on a cluster of their own

• No advice – just genuine listening

Reflection = Resilience = Social Capital

Why Reflection Is More Than Just "Debriefing"

Emergency and crisis management is more than situation reports, managing checklists and radio discipline.

It is genuine relationship work. Posture and responsibility. But above all, it is a deeply human field in which trust, working at eye level and ambiguity are not disturbances, but integral parts of the system.

That is why this kind of reflection is not a methodological add-on, but a strategic investment in what holds our society together in times of crisis: our social capital.

What do we mean by social capital:

• Trust in the integrity and agency of others

• Relationships that hold, even when things get tight

• Shared experiences that lead to collective learning, rather than individual burden

• The ability to speak about contradictions without needing to resolve them

Places with strong social capital make it through crises more effectively — because they are connected on the inside before help arrives from the outside.

Where (L)EMs Can Begin:

Through a reflective practice …

• … we strengthen self-confidence in individuals and teams

• … we promote impact over responsibility and across system boundaries

• … we make the invisible visible: emotions, loyalties, and tension fields

• … we create connection between people, not just between functions

Reflection is therefore not the opposite of action, but rather its most fundamental prerequisite.

Trust begins where we stop passing on responsibility — especially not to AI.

In the daily work of emergency briefings, strategic planning and crisis communication, decisions are often made under intense time pressure. This makes it all the more essential for emergency managers not just to process information but to critically examine its origin and substance. In an age where artificial intelligence can fabricate entire studies, what's needed is not distrust in technology, but a sharpened, unwavering commitment to truth.

1. Trust is good – scrutiny is leadership

"Has someone really verified this?" This question should become a core habit of leadership — especially when dealing with texts that appear logical and are professionally formatted. The plausibility of a statement is not proof of its accuracy.

2. Source hygiene = safety

Emergency management networks or alliances, such as LEMA could consider offering a simple checklist for source integrity, for example:

• Is the source verifiable and publicly accessible?

• Is the original correctly cited?

• Is it clear what is backed by evidence and what is "just" opinion? Just as situation reports are scrutinized, so too should publications be reviewed.

3. AI can assist, BUT it should never lead

Clear guiding principles should be established e.g.: *"AI may relieve, but never replace responsibility."* The use of AI is not the issue as long as transparency, source evaluation and human judgment remain intact.

Why digital support is only effective with analog discernment

Artificial intelligence can greatly ease our workload. It swiftly filters information, generates situational overviews, simulates scenarios and suggests wording. It saves time, reduces friction and can be a valuable sparring partner in day-to-day and professional contexts.

BUT

- AI has no conscience.
- AI has no moral compass.
- AI has no sense of responsibility.
- It processes patterns, not meaning.
- It detects correlations, but not context.
- It delivers answers, without knowing the consequences.

For emergency managers, this means:

• Those who adopt AI uncritically give up not only control but also personal responsibility

• Those who trust AI without verification replace competence with convenience

• Those who distribute texts they haven't fully understood become the voice of foreign systems

That's why clear guiding principles are needed:

Principle 1: AI may relieve, but it must never lead.

Principle 2: You can delegate tasks, but not your judgment.

Principle 3: Whoever passes on information assumes responsibility, not the (AI) machine.

Principle 4: Fast answers are not automatically good answers. True trust, especially in a digital age, comes from those who examine, question and pause.

Principle 5: There is great responsibility between input and output. Good leadership means not forwarding everything that just looks well-written.

Principle 6: Transparency is true leadership quality, not an added burden. When it is clear how information was produced (e.g., through AI or human source evaluation), credibility increases, within one's own team, toward the media and in the eyes of society.

Principle 7: Especially when dealing with AI-generated information, we need courage: to accept gaps, to tolerate ambiguity and to make our own decisions, even without a ready-made truth.

And what is the (potential) concrete benefit for you as an emergency manager?

• **A gain in time without a loss of control**: AI may support you, but you set the direction

• **Better communication**: You remain connected because you understand the context yourself

• **Strengthening of trust**: Teams, authorities, and citizens trust *you*, NOT your chatbot

• **Error prevention**: You yourself recognize when (AI) systems exaggerate or sound misleading

• **Self-efficacy**: You remain a strong decision-maker, even in a complex, digitalized environment – *YOU* decide, NOT the algorithm

4. Reflection as a Safe Space Against Deception

When emergency managers regularly pause and ask themselves: "Do I believe this, or am I just repeating it?" — only then does reflection become a safeguard against systemic self-deception. This is precisely where this paper comes in: it aims to offer a quiet resistance against blind transference of trust, including toward AI-generated texts.

We all know very well that when things have to move quickly, automatisms often take over our actions. When pressure rises, the space for contradiction narrows. And when information sounds professional, is digitally well-formatted or even generated by AI, the temptation to simply adopt it increases.

And this is precisely where the danger of systemic self-deception begins. Not out of ill intent, but simply due to overload, lack of time and naturally also the desire for certainty.

That is why we need an internal space for reflection where the question is allowed: "Do I believe this, or am I just repeating it?" Reflection creates exactly this space and is a valuable protective factor, against deception from outside and oversimplification from within.

• Does this information truly fit our current situation?

• Is it genuinely comprehensible or just plausible?

• Do I know the source or only the format?

In our complex world full of quick answers, reflection becomes the slowest, but most effective, form of leadership intelligence. It protects against blind reliance on AI, without being "anti-technology" and guards against the loss of personal discernment, especially where decisions matter most.

Reflection Prompt – When in doubt, ALWAYS verify.

"Trust your judgment – not the format." Just because a text sounds logical, a quote looks professional or a source is neatly hyperlinked doesn't necessarily mean it's true.

Before you pass on any information, always ask yourself:

• Have I seen the original source or just a secondhand citation?

• Is it genuinely verifiable or merely plausible?

• Would I personally vouch for it in front of my team?

Everything is Both – Leading Between Clarity and Doubt

For all emergency and disaster managers who lead, feel and stay

I am calm and full of questions. I am strong and yet exhausted.

I give answers without clarity. I stand in front and hold myself up.

I am visible and also alone. I trust and stay alert.

I provide structure and see the chaos. I lead teams and carry myself along.

I decide and quietly doubt. I plan with lines and feel the circle.

I walk the path and see the abyss. I hold the position and hold the gaze.

I am the system and yet also a human being. I am insight and expectation.

I am administration and relationship. I am control and feeling.

I am BOTH. I am everything. I am here.

For my country, my city and my region. For my team.

For today, now and here. And for what remains.

(Birgit Bortoluzzi)

With this reflection toolkit in hand, I wish all emergency managers clarity, courage in the face of ambivalence and the deep conviction that reflective leadership does not cost time, but rather builds trust.

I wish you every success on this journey.

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This work has been created with care and a great deal of personal commitment for all emergency managers.