



HR Leader Guide

Supporting Your People During Conflict & Crisis

A practical resource for HR professionals and people leaders navigating team wellbeing in uncertain times

Why This Matters to HR

When conflict, regional instability, or humanitarian crises unfold, HR professionals are often the first to feel the weight of it - even before a formal response is in place. You're fielding quiet messages from managers who don't know what to say, employees who can't focus, and leaders looking for a framework that doesn't quite exist yet.

This guide is not a policy document. It's a practical resource for HR teams and people leaders who want to show up well for their people during these moments - and who understand that the quality of a human response matters as much as the process behind it.

The most important thing HR can do in a crisis is not build a policy. It is to make sure that every person in the organisation feels seen, safe, and supported.

Conflicts affect people differently. Some employees will be in the immediate geographic area. Others will have family or loved ones in affected regions. Many will simply be carrying the weight of what they're consuming in the news. All of these experiences are valid, and all of them are your business as an HR professional.

The Role of HR During a Crisis

During periods of sustained conflict or regional instability, the HR function typically serves several roles simultaneously:

Role	What It Looks Like in Practice
Sense-maker	Translating the organisation's response into clear, human language that employees can actually act on. Avoiding corporate jargon. Being honest about what is known and what isn't.
Enabler	Removing barriers - policy, logistics, approval chains - so that managers can do the right thing quickly and employees can access what they need without friction.
Signal-reader	Paying attention to what isn't being said. Noticing withdrawal, overwork, or emotional volatility, and creating conditions where people feel safe enough to speak up.
Anchor	Providing consistency and calm when the external environment is unpredictable. Being someone people can reach. Following through when you say you will.
Bridge	Connecting employees to the right support - whether that's an EAP, a mental health resource, or simply the right conversation with the right leader.

Equipping Your Managers

Most managers want to do the right thing. They simply don't always know what that looks like in practice. Your job as an HR professional is to give them enough structure to feel confident, without over-scripting them in a way that strips out humanity.

The Basics of a Good Check-In

Encourage managers to reach out to each team member individually. Not a group Slack message. Not a company-wide email. A personal, private conversation - by phone, video, or quiet 1:1 - where the sole purpose is to ask how someone is doing.

The conversation does not need to be long. It does not need to solve anything. A simple and genuine opening is often the most powerful approach:

"I just wanted to check in as a person first, before anything work-related. How are you doing with everything that's happening?"

If managers ask for more structure, suggest they cover three things - and in this order:

- How are you doing? (And take the time to genuinely listen.)
- Is your family safe and okay?
- Is there anything you need from me or from the organisation right now?

When the Conversation Becomes Emotional

Managers often worry most about this moment: what to do when a team member becomes upset. The honest answer is that there is nothing specific they need to do. They simply need to stay present.

Remind them of the following:

- Do not rush past the moment or pivot quickly to solutions.
- Do not change the subject or offer unsolicited reassurance.
- Silence is okay. Sometimes sitting with someone through a difficult moment is the most supportive thing you can do.

A few phrases that can help:

"You don't have to be okay right now. What do you need from me today?"

"Take your time. I'm not going anywhere."

"You don't need to explain everything. Just tell me what would help."

When Someone Doesn't Want to Talk

Respect that too. Some people process privately. The important thing is that managers don't disappear after the first check-in. Consistent, low-pressure follow-through is what builds trust over time.

"No worries at all. Just know that I'm here if anything changes. I'll check in again in a few days."

Warning Signs to Watch For

Most employees will say they are fine. Many of them will mean it. But HR professionals and managers should be attuned to signs that suggest someone may be struggling beneath the surface:

Behaviour	What It May Signal
Previously engaged employee becomes quiet or withdrawn	Social withdrawal is one of the earliest indicators of distress. Don't assume it is a workload issue.
Mentions of poor sleep, disrupted nights, or alertness to sounds	A sign of hypervigilance - the nervous system in a sustained state of alert. Requires gentle follow-up.
Out-of-character irritability or mood changes	Stress responses that are being managed internally but leaking out. This person may not have words for what they're experiencing.
"I'm not okay, but it will pass"	This is a person reaching out while simultaneously trying not to be a burden. Always follow up.
Humour that feels heavier than usual	Dark humour can be a coping mechanism. Context matters - pay attention to the tone underneath.
Overworking or refusing to step away	Constant busyness can be avoidance. It may look productive but is often a sign that rest feels unsafe or impossible.

If you are concerned about someone but they are not opening up, you do not need to solve it alone. That's exactly what your EAP, your mental health partner, and your HR team are for.

Leave, Flexibility, and Practical Support

One of the most concrete things HR can do during a crisis is remove the friction between an employee's need and the support available to them. The more we make people work to access support, the less likely they are to ask for it.

If a team member needs to be with their family, they should be able to go. No unnecessary approvals. No guilt.

Recommended Principles

- Approve annual leave quickly and without requiring justification for travel to affected areas.
- For situations that don't fit neatly into existing leave categories, work it out on a case-by-case basis. The intent is to support people, not police categories.
- If an employee needs to travel but can still work, remote work from another location is usually fine - set clear expectations and check local compliance requirements.
- If an employee needs a few days fully away from work due to an emergency, approve it. Sort out the admin afterwards.

For HR Teams: How to Communicate This Internally

When communicating flexibility policies to managers, lead with the principle rather than the procedure. For example:

Our position is simple: if someone needs to go, they go. If you're not sure whether something is approved, default to yes and reach out to HR to confirm. We will not let logistics be the reason someone can't be with their family.

This kind of clear, plain-language direction removes the hesitation that often prevents managers from acting quickly. It also signals to employees - when word gets out, and it will - that the organisation means what it says.

What to Do With Workload

Acknowledge it honestly. When team members step away, the work does not disappear. Give managers explicit permission to:

- Reprioritise non-critical deliverables
- Push back on external deadlines where possible
- Communicate proactively to stakeholders that timelines may shift

- Escalate to HR or their own leader if they're stuck

What Managers Can Do With Their Teams

During prolonged periods of stress, one of the most powerful things a manager can do is simply create opportunities for their team to be together. Not to process the conflict. Not for structured wellness activities. Just to be around each other as human beings.

HR can offer the following as a menu of options - managers choose what feels right for their team, their location, and the current security situation.

In-Person Connection (When It Is Safe to Do So)

Activity	How It Works
Office or shared workspace day	Invite the team to work side by side. Keep it optional. Being in a shared space - especially after days of working at home alone - can be quietly grounding.
Team meal or iftar	A shared meal during this period carries a weight of solidarity that a team call cannot replicate. It doesn't need to be elaborate.
Café or outdoor meetup	A casual setting, ideally outdoors. No agenda, no deliverables. Just people being people together.

Staying Connected Remotely

Activity	How It Works
Optional morning check-in	A 10-minute team call at the start of the day. Not a standup. Not a status update. Just: how is everyone today? Some days it will run 2 minutes. Both are fine. Consistency is the point.
End-of-week close	15 minutes on Friday afternoon to close the week together as people. Share one small thing that went well, or simply acknowledge that it was a heavy week and you got through it together.
Breathing before meetings	Before a scheduled meeting, invite two minutes of quiet breathing - 4 counts in, hold 4, out 4. This is particularly useful when people have come straight from the news or from a difficult night.

Participation in all team activities should be genuinely optional. The best activity is the one that actually happens - and the one the team didn't have to ask for.

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

Even well-intentioned HR responses can inadvertently make things harder. Here are some of the most common mistakes to watch for in yourself and your managers:

Pitfall	Why It Matters
Sending a group message and calling it a check-in	Group messages provide cover but not connection. They signal awareness, not care. Individual conversations are irreplaceable.
Sharing news or government alerts	Many employees are deliberately limiting their news consumption to protect their mental health. Do not override that.
Making promises you can't keep	In a crisis, trust is fragile. "I don't know yet, but I will find out" is always better than an answer you're not sure of.
Waiting for someone to come to you	Most people in distress do not raise their hand. Proactive outreach from a manager or HR is the difference between catching something early and missing it entirely.
Debating the politics of the conflict	These conversations can become divisive very quickly and have no place in a professional support context. The focus must remain on the people in front of you.
Treating wellbeing as a programme	A webinar or wellness initiative is a useful complement, but it cannot substitute for a manager who actually picks up the phone. Don't let programming replace presence.

A Note for HR Professionals Themselves

HR teams often absorb a disproportionate amount of the emotional load during a crisis. You are fielding messages from employees, coaching managers, advising leaders, and often doing all of this while navigating the same uncertainty as everyone else.

You are also a person living through this situation. If you are based in or near an affected region, or if you have family or friends in conflict zones, the same care and support you are extending to your organisation applies to you.

You do not need to perform calmly. You are allowed to find this hard. The most sustainable version of your support will come from a place where you are also taking care of yourself.

Practical suggestions for HR teams:

- Check in with each other regularly - not just as colleagues but as people.
- Agree as a function on what is and isn't within your remit to take on, and create space to hand things off when needed.
- If your organisation has an EAP or mental health resource, you are entitled to use it too.
- Be honest with your senior leadership about the volume and weight of what your team is carrying. This is not a complaint - it is useful data.

Quick Reference: HR Crisis Checklist

Use this checklist to ensure your organisation's response is covering the key bases:

Action	Status / Notes
Manager check-in guide distributed	
All managers briefed on leave and flexibility position	
EAP or mental health resource re-promoted to all staff	
HR point of contact clearly communicated to managers	
Individual check-ins completed for employees in directly affected areas	
Leave and remote work requests being processed without delay	
Senior leadership aligned on messaging and tone	
HR team wellbeing check-in completed internally	
Follow-up check-ins scheduled (not left to chance)	