



LEADERS IN DISGUISE: THE TRUTH BEHIND THE MASK

A Leadership Wellbeing Report



Prepared by
Gary Parsons

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Introduction



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WITH THANKS TO
**east
midlands
chamber**
Derbyshire | Leicestershire | Nottinghamshire

"Leaders are the lifeblood of our economy – and right now, far too many are suffering in silence."

In 2024, I stepped down as CEO of the multi-award-winning business I co-founded and ran for 15 years. Despite the public success, with clients in multiple countries, I had spent years silently battling depression. That decision to step back wasn't just personal. It was the beginning of a mission.

In May 2024, I launched Leaders in Disguise, a podcast created to break the stigma of mental health and wellbeing in leadership. One year on, the movement has grown. Leaders from every corner of business have come forward to share their experiences, both painful and powerful. But stories aren't enough. We need data.

So, in partnership with East Midlands Chamber of Commerce, we embedded four bespoke wellbeing questions into the Q1 2025 Quarterly Economic Survey (QES), targeting business owners and senior leaders. 338 leaders responded. Their answers shine a light on a crisis happening in plain sight.

Gary Parsons
Leadership Mental Advocate,
Speaker & Consultant

Executive Summary



A Mental Health Crisis in Leadership?

The findings reveal a striking disconnect between how leaders are really coping – and how their mental health and wellbeing are supported. We found:

- Only 26.92% of leaders feel very comfortable seeking mental health support
- 75% said mental health impacts their decision-making – yet only 4.76% make it a top priority
- 59.15% cite work-life balance as their biggest wellbeing challenge
- 53.35% report financial stress as a key issue
- Nearly 1 in 5 (18.9%) admit to feelings of isolation and loneliness

This is not a leadership issue. This is a system issue. If those at the top are silently burning out, the organisations they lead will suffer too.



Respondents

338

Senior leaders and business owners took part in the survey.



Data

Q1, 2025

Run in partnership with East Midlands Chamber; a leading regional business network.



Region

East Mids, UK

One of the UK's most entrepreneurial and economically significant regions.

Insights & Analysis



1. Leadership Stigma Remains Strong

Over one-third of leaders feel either neutral or uncomfortable seeking support for their mental health. While conversations around employee wellbeing have progressed, the idea of a leader asking for help remains taboo.

2. Overwhelm and Burnout

The top three challenges reported by leaders are work-life balance, financial stress, and growth pressures. These findings reflect what we hear daily on the podcast: leaders feel stretched thin, and the emotional cost is mounting.

3. Mental Health Impacts Decision-Making

Three-quarters of leaders say their mental health affects how they make decisions – from how they manage teams to how they handle risk. Yet most do not treat it as a business priority.

4. The Priority Gap

Although many acknowledge the importance of wellbeing, only a small minority actually place it at the top of their list. This is a cultural gap – one that must be closed if we want sustainable leadership in the UK.



FOR A DEEPER LOOK INTO EACH SURVEY RESPONSE AND RECOMMENDATIONS, SEE DETAILED INSIGHTS & FINDINGS.

Exploring The Data



To complement the personal stories in this report, we asked leaders a series of questions to better understand their attitudes, behaviours, and experiences related to mental health and wellbeing. The responses provide a deeper insight into the current state of leadership culture – from how comfortable leaders feel seeking support, to the barriers they face in prioritising their own wellbeing.

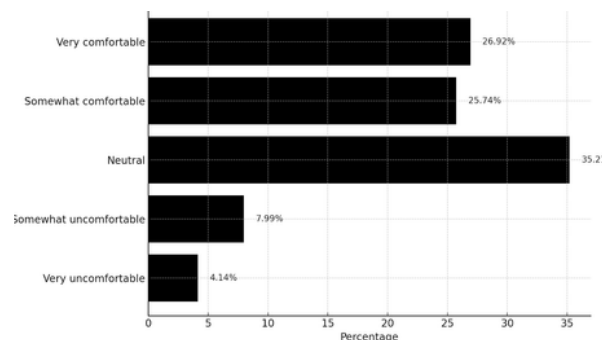
This section explores each of those questions in detail, unpacking what the numbers tell us and where we go from here.



Q1 – Comfort in Seeking Mental Health Support

When asked about their comfort in seeking mental health support, leaders shared a range of perspectives – revealing a nuanced picture of modern leadership and vulnerability.

- **35.21% selected 'Neutral'** – indicating many leaders are unsure whether seeking help is acceptable, necessary, or even available. This ambiguity may reflect cultural stigma, internalised pressure to appear strong, or simply unfamiliarity with support options.
- Encouragingly, **over half (52.66%) felt comfortable seeking support** – with 25.74% feeling somewhat comfortable and 26.92% very comfortable. This shows that attitudes are beginning to shift and wellbeing is becoming a more accepted part of the leadership conversation.
- However, **12.13% still felt uncomfortable**, including 7.99% somewhat uncomfortable and 4.14% very uncomfortable. For this group, mental health support remains a challenge – whether due to fear of judgement, lack of trust, or organisational culture.



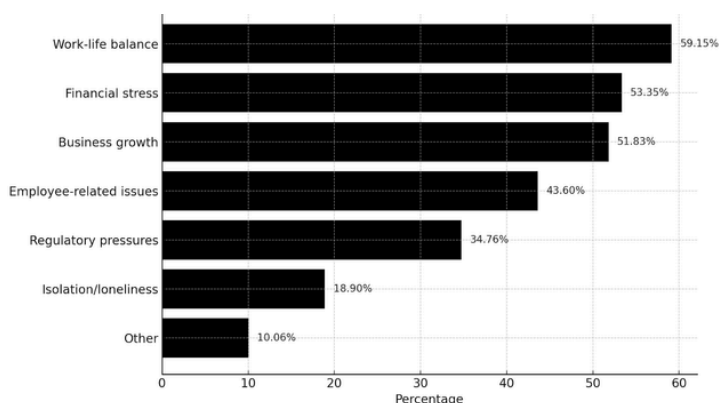
Why This Matters

Leaders often sit at the top when it comes to responsibility, but at the bottom when it comes to accessing support. The high level of neutrality in these results suggests many are neither resisting nor embracing support – they're stuck in uncertainty.

This matters because unresolved stress and isolation can build silently over time. Too often, help is only sought in moments of crisis – not because it wasn't available, but because leaders didn't feel they had permission to need it.



Q2 – Challenges Affecting Leadership Wellbeing



When asked about the primary challenges affecting their mental health and wellbeing, respondents were clear: **work-life balance** remains the biggest pressure point. With **59.15% citing it as their top concern**, this finding reinforces a familiar theme – that leaders are often the last to switch off, even when their own capacity is depleted.

- Close behind was **financial stress** (53.35%), reflecting the ongoing tension many leaders feel between short-term survival and long-term sustainability. **Business growth** followed closely (51.83%), highlighting that the very ambition driving success can also become a source of strain.
- Interestingly, **employee-related issues** (43.60%) and **regulatory pressures** (34.76%) ranked above **isolation and loneliness** (18.90%). While isolation is often discussed in leadership circles, this result may suggest that more immediate operational concerns are taking precedence – or that leaders have become desensitised to isolation as part of the role.
- Only **10.06% selected 'Other'**, indicating the predefined categories captured the core stressors well. These insights show that leaders aren't just carrying emotional weight – they're grappling with strategic, financial, and relational pressures all at once.

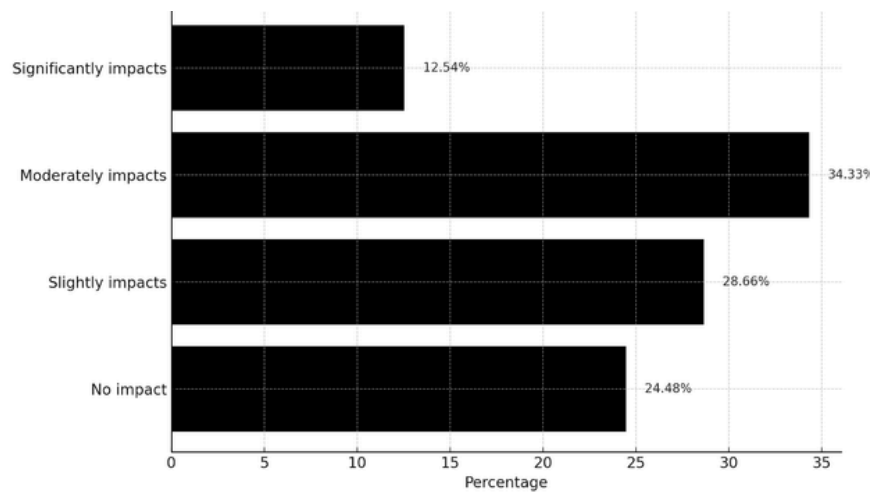
Why This Matters

We often assume wellbeing support should mirror that of wider employees, but leaders face a unique cocktail of stressors that require a more nuanced approach. Without targeted support, leaders may continue to function at high output – until something breaks. The breadth of pressure points highlighted here underlines the risk of ignoring early warning signs in favour of continued performance.

“Leaders aren't just carrying emotional weight - they're juggling strategy, survival, and self-preservation, often in silence.” - Gary Parsons



Q3 – The Impact of Mental Health on Leadership Decision-Making



When asked whether their mental health affects their decision-making, a striking **75.53%** of leaders acknowledged that it does – with **34.33%** saying it impacts them moderately, **28.66%** slightly, and **12.54%** significantly. Only **24.48%** of respondents said it has no impact at all.

This data challenges the often-unspoken belief that leaders can separate personal wellbeing from strategic decision-making. Instead, the majority are operating with a clear awareness that how they feel affects what they choose – from daily interactions to major business moves.

It also reveals a quiet honesty: leaders may not always talk about mental health publicly, but they are internally aware of its influence on their judgment, clarity, and confidence.

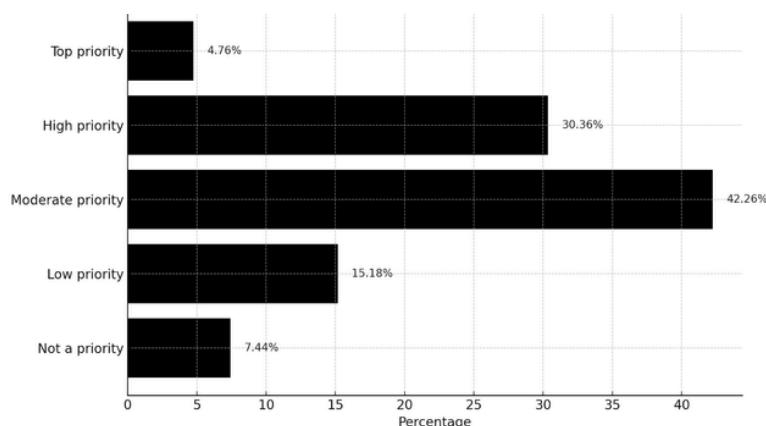
Why This Matters

In business, decision-making is often held up as the pinnacle of leadership – the ability to steer the ship under pressure. But if mental health is subtly distorting how decisions are made, then ignoring wellbeing becomes a risk to performance, not just a personal issue. These findings suggest that mental health doesn't just influence the person – it influences the direction of the entire organisation.





Q4 – Priority Given to Mental Health & Wellbeing



When asked how much of a personal priority they place on their own mental health and wellbeing, the response from leaders revealed a stark reality: only **4.76% said it was a top priority**.

This figure is particularly revealing when viewed alongside the **75% who admit their mental health impacts decision-making** – highlighting a critical gap between awareness and action.

- While an additional **30.36%** described it as a **high priority**, the majority (42.26%) placed it somewhere in the middle – marking it as a moderate concern. Alarming, 15.18% openly admitted it was a low priority, and 7.44% said it was not a priority at all.
- This spread shows that many leaders understand the importance of mental health in theory, but do not yet treat it as essential in practice. The disconnect suggests wellbeing is still widely perceived as optional – a luxury rather than a leadership necessity.
- The data also indicates that even among those who value wellbeing, few are translating that belief into behaviour. This could stem from cultural norms, internalised expectations of toughness, or structural limitations in the way leaders operate day to day.

Why This Matters

Leaders are often expected to model behaviour for their teams – yet if their own wellbeing is consistently sidelined, it sends a clear message: that mental health is secondary to performance.

This contradicts every piece of evidence we've seen throughout this report, where wellbeing shapes decision-making, stress levels, and long-term sustainability.

When mental health is only “moderately” prioritised – even by those who understand its value – we risk normalising burnout as part of leadership.



Recommendations



Turning Insight into Action

The data in this report paints a clear picture: leaders are under immense pressure, often without the support or permission to prioritise their own wellbeing. While awareness is growing, action remains limited. To address this, we must move beyond conversation and commit to structural change.

Below are four key recommendations drawn directly from the survey findings – practical, strategic actions that organisations, boards, and policymakers can take to support sustainable leadership and healthier business cultures.

Key Action

Strategic Recommendation

1) Make Wellbeing Strategic	Embed leadership wellbeing into business risk management, succession planning, and culture.
2) Fund Targeted Support	Invest in mental health programmes designed specifically for senior leaders.
3) Normalise Vulnerability	Build peer networks, mentoring, and storytelling spaces like Leaders in Disguise.
4) Close the Priority Gap	Measure wellbeing alongside financial and operational KPIs to ensure real accountability.

Change Starts at the Top.

If we want resilient teams, sustainable growth, and healthy business cultures, we must first support the people leading them.



Behind the Report: Stories of Leaders Lifting Their Masks

Over the past year, the Leaders in Disguise podcast has created space for leaders to share the parts of their stories often kept hidden. The following case studies highlight the emotional, physical, and psychological toll that leadership can take, and the resilience shown by those who've lived it. They show why we need to make a change.

Lee – Stroke as a Wake-Up Call

Co-founder of a thriving creative agency, Lee experienced a Transient Ischaemic Attack (TIA), a mini-stroke, during a particularly high-pressure period. The incident forced him to step back from work and re-evaluate the pace and intensity of his leadership. He faced a sudden shift in identity and had to prioritise recovery over performance. With better preventative support and awareness around stress triggers, Lee might have spotted the warning signs earlier. His story shows how sudden health crises can be avoided with a culture that encourages leaders to speak up and slow down before it's too late.

Marc – Burnout Shut Everything Down

An accomplished leader in the IT industry, Marc reached a state of complete physical and mental exhaustion, ultimately becoming bed bound. Burnout robbed him of the ability to function, both at work and at home. It was a stark reminder that overworking doesn't lead to success, it leads to collapse. Earlier intervention and recognition of stress signals could have prevented his health crisis. Marc's story highlights the urgent need for greater education on boundaries, rest, and sustainable expectations in high-pressure industries.

Richard – A Crisis That Couldn't Be Hidden

Overseeing a successful family-run business, Richard was sectioned under the Mental Health Act after silently battling inner turmoil. Despite a supportive family, the burden of responsibility and the stigma surrounding mental health in leadership pushed him to a breaking point. His story is one of survival and reflection. It reminds us of the need for proactive check-ins, stigma-free support networks, and stronger mental health literacy within leadership teams. Richard now champions these changes to help ensure others don't reach crisis before getting help.

Conclusion



Summary

This report reveals what many of us have felt for years: that leadership is becoming unsustainable without serious investment in mental health and wellbeing. Leaders are not invincible – they are human, often carrying hidden burdens while holding up teams, companies, and entire industries.

The time for surface-level support has passed. If we want sustainable business growth, resilient leadership, and stronger organisations, we must treat leadership wellbeing as a strategic imperative, not an afterthought.

Let this report be a catalyst for change.

Acknowledgements

With special thanks to East Midlands Chamber of Commerce for their collaboration on the Q1 2025 Quarterly Economic Survey, and to the 338 business leaders who courageously contributed to this data.

Additional thanks to the guests of Leaders in Disguise whose honesty continues to shift the narrative around leadership and mental health in the UK.

THIS REPORT FORMS PART OF AN ONGOING NATIONAL EFFORT – LED BY GARY PARSONS – TO BRING LEADERSHIP MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING TO THE FOREFRONT OF UK BUSINESS.

FOR MORE INSIGHTS OR COLLABORATION, CONTACT HELLO@GARYPARSONS.UK