

ENGINEERING PRACTICE • TEMPLATE

On-Call *Without* Burning Out the Team

KAANSYSTEMS.COM/LIBRARY/ON-CALL-WITHOUT-BURNOUT • JULY 29, 2026

ABOUT THIS TEMPLATE

Small teams run on-call badly: everyone always on, alerts that cry wolf, one hero who holds the pager. Four levers turn it into a system people can live with.

THE TEMPLATE

An on-call policy your team can actually run. Fill it in, publish it where everyone can find it, and revisit it quarterly.

Rotation

- Responders in the rotation: _____ (target: 4+)
- Shift length: _____ (default: 1 week)
- Schedule published _____ months ahead
- Handoff ritual: _____ (what the outgoing responder passes on)

What pages (the bar)

- A page requires BOTH: user-facing impact AND a clear action
- Everything else routes to: ☐ dashboard ☐ daily digest ☐ business-hours channel
- Target pages per person per week: _____ (alert if sustained above 2-3)

Severity ladder

- Sev1 — customer-facing outage: page immediately, escalate to all-hands if unresolved in ____ min
- Sev2 — degraded / at-risk: page in hours; next morning off-hours
- Sev3 — non-urgent: ticket, next business day

Escalation

- Primary responder SLO to acknowledge: _____ minutes
- Auto-escalate to SECONDARY after: _____ minutes unacknowledged
- Then escalate to: _____ (lead / manager)
- Secondary is a named person every shift: ☐ yes

Recovery

- Off-hours response is compensated by: ☐ time back ☐ late start ☐ _____
- Postmortems are blameless: ☐ yes, documented
- Every incident reviewed for an alert-tuning action: ☐ yes

— HOW TO USE IT

Watch two numbers, not one. Everyone tracks incident count. The number that predicts burnout is **off-hours pages per person** — the 2 a.m. wakeups, specifically. A team can absorb a lot of daytime pages and very few nighttime ones. If the nighttime number is climbing, fix it before someone quits, because by the time they quit it's too late to fix cheaply.

Rotate the boring work too. The person who always writes the runbooks and the person who always takes the ugly shift are accumulating invisible debt. Rotate runbook authorship, rotate the holiday coverage, rotate the secondary. On-call fairness is mostly about the parts nobody volunteers for.

If you can't staff a humane rotation yet, that's the signal — not that on-call is broken, but that too few people can safely hold production. The fix is spreading operational knowledge: pairing on incidents, writing the runbooks, doing the game-day drills. A rotation is the reward for having enough people who can respond. Building that bench is the actual work, and it's worth starting before the hero burns out.