

RESILIENCE AND TRAUMA INFORMED LEADERSHIP

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Embodied Leadership
Competencies for
Workplace Well-Being

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Every few years, the leadership development space is presented with new terminology to reflect the complexity of what leaders need to be facing into. These can include building 'Psychological Safety', Psychosocial Risk Management, Embracing and Leading 'Neurodiversity', and Driving Transformation at unprecedented speed. The seismic shifts in world leadership, technology, AI, political unrest and changing workforce needs, all have the potential to distract and fragment people, teams, and organisations.

Wooing and leading people's attention, performance, and focus, whilst navigating our own distraction, and stress, calls for a specific leadership language and skills set.

The chaotic external distractors offer an opportunity to foster greater workplace coherence, connection, community and care for psychosocial work well-being.

This poses the question, so how do leaders navigate the psychosocial levers to actively engineer a well workplace?



Engaging Sustained Energy - A language for building resilience, navigating the impact of trauma and keeping people “online”.

In recent times, our world has seen an explosion in literature and practices, bringing the concept of trauma from the realms of psychology, and closed-door therapy to the everyday person in the street. Horrific images of war and abuse, confront us every day as we try to digest, and process the impossible. The impact and scarring of events such as war, and childhood abuse have been documented and well known.

What is new however, is the language of everyday trauma, and how it plays out in our daily work lives. Illness, family and domestic violence, workplace bullying, job loss, financial stress, community marginalisation, sick loved ones, and fractured relationships affect the narratives of employees and how they can cope at work.

Gabor Mate in his book 'The Myth of Normal', suggests that no one is immune to trauma, and we need to normalise, and better understand how to support, and lead people out of distress (unconscious or conscious) into resilience, and coherence.

Trauma states may affect performance, work attendance, perceived psychological safety, and result in disruptive behaviour or incoherence. Leaders may witness the behaviour, but not yet know how to read for signs of trauma (unbalanced energy), and what to do to support and encourage attention, focus, and engagement of their people.



Understanding Trauma for Practical Application

Trauma can be described as any event/experience that overwhelms a person's ordinary human adaptations to life.

When an event is perceived to be more than the body, mind or emotions can cope with, this is identified as trauma.

Trauma (ongoing or single event) can impact the brain and body if unprocessed. It can cause "looping" which refers to anything in the current environment that triggers old unprocessed memories. An example could be a loud, blunt superior who is upset, and stressed that a task is late.

A person with unresolved trauma may unconsciously be reminded of an unsafe adult or incident in their past (or present), resulting in an extreme retreat or revolt reaction. These and many more, are just a handful of survival reactions to a perceived threat, and can look like a zoning out, shutting down, extreme agitation, and aggression or a panic to exit the space.

Why be Trauma and Resilience Informed?

When we understand the amazing resilience and adaptability of the human being to overwhelming circumstances, compassion, curiosity, and a deep respect for every employee can be fostered. Leaders can cultivate higher resilience, and well-being at work, as well as within themselves, by adding skills to engage nervous system safety and team coherence.

Trauma happens to almost all of us. We adopt helpful coping mechanisms at the time of distress. An example would be the executive who grew up in an unstable, volatile family where safety involved keeping quiet, scanning for the next upset, protecting and herding siblings, and being on high alert to cope with the unknown. This highly charged state, and emotional flatlining can be displayed during stress at work, when a situation is perceived to be threatening or emotionally triggering. Direct reports describe this leader's style as unpredictable, controlling, unempathetic, and lacking emotional flexibility. A 360 reveals the feedback, and the leader is devastated as this reactivity is not intentional or even known to them. The coping styles that were essential for survival, are now detrimental and contagious. How do leaders drive coherent behaviour, and better understand unconscious shadow behaviour?



What to do?

When the brain goes 'offline', as in the example above, one can identify changes in the body that are clues to the trauma.

We can look for signs of how 'online' or 'offline' a person is, by reading body cues. Remember Goldilocks and her porridge, and mattress? It was either too hot, too cold, or just right!

Imagine shaking a person's hand who is 'too hot'... it may be a little too firm, if too cold, the handshake would be weak. 'Just right' energy is seen when a person feels safe, seen, and able to interact in a constructive, emotionally intelligent way. They are not perceiving real or imagined threats. The person's brain receiver is reading present cues, and he or she is able to deliver, and articulate a message that is received well.

When a person is 'offline', difficulties with memory, focus, communication and interpersonal incoherence are some clues to look out for. A person can appear spaced out, distracted, agitated, and oppositional.

Bringing ourselves and others into "just right" states is an art and science, that astute and compassionate leaders know, is the only way to get the best out of the hearts and minds of their people.



Some Tips for Leading 'Just Right' States

My research for my Masters looked at the relationship between emotional intelligence (EQ), and transformational leadership. Transformational leaders are those who can facilitate 'state shifting' to engage their people's attention, and presence. Organisational performance is directly related to how engaged people are, which demonstrates support for leading in the 'just right' state.

Here are some tips that leaders I work with, find helpful.

1. Be the state - Check in on your own state first:

Ask yourself 'How present am I right now', and rate yourself (10 is super present). Then ground, and centre by taking 3 deep, long breaths in through the nose, and out through the mouth. Plant your feet firmly on the ground. Check your score again. If you are not around an 8 present, repeat the exercise. Presence is catchy, and there are many ways for leaders to show up and create coherence in their teams. Taking care of your own nervous system allows you to be a regulating presence and not feel so drained at the end of the day.

2. Lead the state - Notice when someone is too hot or cold:

Do the 'handshake test' or observe some of the body states outlined above. Call people's attention to the room by taking a moment to check in and have an impromptu 'group grounding'. Simply ask people to share their intention for a meeting, or to say how present they are (follow on with the breathing activity); or cracking a joke (this forces a big breath!), are some ways of shifting states to 'just right'.

Employing empathy is also a great way to name, and reflect emotion to allow it to move a state.

What to do?

Trauma informed leadership requires a new understanding of the basics of how the brain and body work, when traumatic life stories have not been processed or buried as a means of survival. Noticing 'offline' states is the first step to bringing ourselves into a coherent state, and then being able to invite those we lead into a 'just right' presence.

The journey of embodied leadership is foreign to many, but a deeply enriching, and rewarding way to make sense of people's needs, and influence their safety, one engagement at a time, starting with us.

Andrea offers Resilience and Trauma Informed Leadership Skills Development and coaching for Individuals and Teams.

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