Call It What It Is: Organizational Trauma Isn’t Burnout



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One night a client attacks another client at the nonprofit where you work. You don’t hear about it for days—and then only through office gossip.

Your nonprofit’s leaders brush off frontline employees’ demands for paid leave. A constant low boil of anger simmers in the break room.

Your boss says you must complete a massive grant application in two days. You both know the workload is not reasonable.

These represent just a few of the scenarios that can lead to organizational trauma. Any workplace may experience it, but nonprofits, with their focus on mission, can be especially vulnerable to it. Organizational trauma harms both individuals and the collective. Daily tasks to achieve the mission begin to feel like an impossible slog. Risks to the organization, staff, volunteers, and clients mount: an employee could be injured if safety protocols aren’t followed, a large group of frustrated employees could leave.

Nonprofits can unwind and address the patterns of organizational trauma. It may require a change from the approach that brought the organization this far. That change might be painful. But nonprofits already know how to provide care and healing to people in vulnerable circumstances. The principles mission-driven organizations bring to that work can help them address harmful patterns that develop in their workplaces.

Organizational trauma can stem from a single event, like a workplace violence incident or the sudden death or departure of a longtime leader. It can stem from long-term exposure to an intense stressor like the COVID pandemic or secondary traumatization from working with trauma survivors. Or it can emerge from a buildup of damaging patterns in how management and leadership relate to each other.

Organizational trauma is inseparable from equity. Employees with the least privilege—frontline staff, people of color, people with disabilities—feel the effects of organizational trauma most. Consider: Whose boundaries do people in your workplace treat as gospel? Whose boundaries do colleagues step in to defend? Whose get ignored or trampled? Who gets asked to compromise their boundaries for duties that aren’t in their job description? Who gets measured by the job description and who gets leeway?

The realization of how organizational trauma harmed you, or how you've inflicted it on others, can hit hard. HmntyCntrd and dscout have an insightful new report on the missteps workplaces make in response to organizational trauma and how to do better. The report includes built-in breaks to breathe and reflect, with suggested phrases for your in-breaths like "Critique is a sign of hope" and "Hope is not a scarcity" for your out-breath.

You can't go back in time and undo organizational trauma that already happened. But as the dscout/HmntyCntrd report finds, organizations can do a lot to heal and repair the patterns that push the burden of responsibility for organizational trauma onto individual employees. The report recommends workplaces invest in guidance from professionals experienced in trauma and equity.

Workplaces push for "efficient" responses to problems, but that's the wrong way to respond to organizational trauma, according to research by Equity in the Center, an initiative funded by foundations like Annie E. Casey and W.K. Kellogg.

"By simply stopping to ask the question "Is healing needed here?" and offering healing wherever that answer comes, you can move forward into other areas of your work," the team at Equity in the Center writes.

Experts say it's essential to name organizational trauma when it appears. "Identification of organizational patterns helps to normalize workers' experiences and reduces their individual sense of failure and isolation," Pat Vivian and Shana Hormann write in "Trauma and Healing in Organizations."

Nonprofits can tap into the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's six principles of a trauma-informed care approach. Many nonprofits that work with trauma survivors, such as sexual assault counselors or addiction therapy providers, use these principles in service delivery. But the principles' organizational insights can also apply to nonprofits whose missions don't involve serving trauma survivors. The principles address safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice and choice; and cultural, historical and gender issues.

Trauma complicates a person's ability to make meaning from their experiences and to create long-term relationships. SAMHSA points out that traumatic events create a power differential. In any workplace, a person, group, or organization has power over others, a dynamic that puts individuals and the collective at risk of re-enacting previous responses to trauma. A trauma-informed organization creates strategies to reduce the sense of power imbalances among staff and finds ways to share power and decision-making across levels of authority. This dovetails with the risk principle that a resilient organization should centralize coordination of work and distribute control, not centralize control and distribute coordination.

Workplaces often misidentify organizational trauma as individual burnout, Arabella Pérez, founder of THRIVE, a nonprofit technical assistance center for trauma-informed care, says in a video interview for Up With Community. "We're working with communities that are also impacted by their own trauma and toxic stress narratives, we're going to parallel that, we're going to experience that," she says. "As we recognize that, really taking an opportunity to sit and begin to see our role in what I call trauma reenactment … How do we begin to identify how these roles served us and how they no longer serve us?"

Workplaces in recovery from organizational trauma often need to rethink performance evaluations. Transforming performance management from a punitive process to an open conversation can be a key element of healing.

In a trauma-informed workplace, leaders learn to identify organizational trauma. The organization addresses harm that has taken place and begins the work to heal. With commitment, care and hard work, the organization can create a workplace where team members can see and hear themselves and each other, and recognize the essential role they all play in the mission.

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