

Organizational Trauma and Resilience

Adapted from Organizational Trauma and Healing by Pat Vivian and Shana Hormann (2013)

Trauma can affect organizations just as it affects individuals, families, and communities. And just as silence and lack of understanding about trauma hurts individuals, so too does it hurt organizations. Looking at trauma from an organizational perspective helps in a few ways. It complements individual experience by exposing the systems and structures that influence individuals. Organizational self-care enhances individual self-care, by creating a healthy environment for individuals. Organizational self-knowledge helps with survival in tough times, as we can draw on knowledge of our strengths, resources, and patterns, to assess and strategize.

Organizations are simply groups of people organized for a common purpose. As we form organizations, we form unique culture and habits that shape—and is shaped by—the emotional experience of each member. Organizational culture is made of our stated values (like the mission statement), mental models (the habits and assumptions we make about our work, communication, and each other), and artifacts (such as the policy and procedure manual). All organizations form habits, and habits greatly influence the organizational culture. If we don't intentionally create good habits, bad habits will naturally form. Organizational culture is reinforced when newcomers learn and adopt the prevailing values, beliefs, and language of the culture. Organizational culture gives us:

- Core character and uniqueness
- Collective identity and home for members
- Shared knowledge and language
- Norms, values and standards
- Personality and spirit
- Creation story and rationale for organization's existence
- Relationship of the organization to society
- Guidance on the way the work is done

Organizational culture is bigger than any one person, and the culture (and trauma) lives on through agency transitions and staff changes. In all organizations, there are lifecycles, crises, and potential for trauma. Lifecycles are normal developmental stages of organizational growth and change, such as expansion of staff or transition from a membership-based to community-based board of directors. Crises are disruptive occurrences that create anxiety, uncertainty, and opportunity, like the departure of a long-term executive director or loss of a funding stream. Traumas debilitate an organization, temporarily or long term. Organizational trauma may come from one of four sources:

- *Single catastrophic event*: Sudden events like a natural disaster that damages the office, financial embezzlement, or the unexpected death of a colleague can destabilize the organizational culture and its coping strategies.
- *Ongoing wounding*: When there is racism or other oppression happening within the organization, some employees are harmed on a daily basis. A hostile relationship with the community can leave an organization feeling hyper-vigilant and constantly under attack.
- *Redemptive nature of the work*: this work is about changing society and ending sexual violence. This can often feel overwhelming and can become demoralizing.
- *Empathic nature of the work*: our work demands that we open up our hearts to the pain of sexual violence survivors. The cumulative experience of vicarious trauma can affect organizational culture and aggravate both personal and organizational trauma.

What might be a normal life cycle for one agency can become a trauma for another, particularly if there is unaddressed trauma or other stressors present.

Anti-violence organizations like coalitions are at particular risk for organizational trauma caused by the redemptive and empathic nature of our work. Our daily work activities create an intense environment, and the fact that passionate advocates are drawn to coalition work or tends to heighten that intensity. Often, the organizational culture adds to the intensity, through the demands of our workload and the way we communicate with one another. The intensity of our organizational culture is part of our strength, but it also creates risk for organizational trauma.

Much like the trauma that individuals suffer, organizational trauma is emotionally and cognitively overwhelming. Trauma can fracture our self-protective structures, making us feel vulnerable and helpless. Trauma has lasting psychic and cultural impact, especially if left unaddressed. Symptoms of a traumatized organization include:

- *Closed boundaries*: similar to individual survival strategies, organizations that are traumatized or frightened often close boundaries. These constricting boundaries give rise to the over-reliance on insider relationships or an “us vs. them” mentality. This can happen between the organization and the community, or between groups within the agency.
- *Stress and anxiety contagion*: without constructive avenues for conversation, staff members can turn to each other in unproductive or even destructive ways, spreading stress, anxiety, and fear.

- *Organizational amnesia*: when we don't talk about the trauma—or the strengths of our agency—we might forget the incident. However, the effects of it live on in the organizational culture, now influencing the organization in ways that are not understood.
- *Unrecognized wounding from trauma*: organizations might recognize and remember the incidents, but deny that it has effects on individuals. This is particularly common and damaging when the trauma is caused by racism or other forms of oppression in the agency.
- *Unproductive relationships between organization and environment*: unaddressed trauma eventually colors the relationship with those outside the organization, which might become openly antagonistic, or completely withdrawn.
- *Limiting attitudes and worldview*: our attitudes and beliefs about the world influence how we interact with it. When a traumatized organization believes, for example, that nobody in the community can be trusted to treat sexual violence survivors well, they stop collaborating with community partners or perhaps even speaking to them. If we believe that our work is hopeless and that sexual violence will never end, we might lose energy for completing projects or have trouble retaining staff. These limiting attitudes and worldview can lead to an erosion of identity, where we forget who we are as an organization or lose faith in our abilities.
- *Depression, despair, and loss of hope*: when an organization becomes depressed, there is a real danger of the organization failing. Depression can manifest as rapid turnover of staff and board members, regularly missing grant deadlines, and something else probably.

There are things we can do to build our resilience against organizational trauma and cope with it when it occurs. A strong core identity, organizational esteem, facilitating structures and processes, hopeful and energetic leadership, and positive connection to peer agencies can all help to protect an organization. We can:

- *Recognize and acknowledge trauma*: trauma heals best when we name it and begin to talk about it. Give people time to grieve and process the trauma. Then we can work towards integrating the trauma in affirming and meaningful ways.
- *Ensure safety, contain anxiety, and normalize experience*: trust and safety are built on information and consistency. Transparency and communication can do much to contain anxiety. When organizational trauma is the result of cumulative vicarious trauma, providing education and structures to cope with vicarious trauma normalizes the experience and helps employees feel safe and supported.
- *Act as an example*: model kindness and compassion in interactions with staff members and others outside the organization.

- *Remember history and interrupt amnesia*: in traumatized systems, we often deny or forget the source of trauma, as well as our organizational history and identity.
- *Strengthen organizational identity and esteem*: help all employees reconnect to the good in the coalition and the mission. Celebrate victories, however small, and give positive reinforcement to productive communication and interpersonal exchanges.
- *Institute facilitating structures and processes*: set expectations for ethical and direct communication. Set time aside and institute systems for dealing with the trauma as a whole organization, such as focused staff meetings (clearly set aside from regular staff meetings), or making counseling available to employees. Ask for outside help when necessary, including perhaps hiring a consultant to help process the trauma.
- *Making meaning*: assist the staff in understanding the trauma and making sense out of it. This often can start with having discussions about what we each mean by terms relevant to the trauma and healing. For example, does everyone agree on what “transparent communication” is and what it connotes? Making meaning of the trauma also includes helping staff grieve and understand what the trauma means to them personally and organizationally.
- *Open system to new energy and information*: traumatized organizations typically close boundaries, thus blinding themselves to the trends in the outside community and limiting opportunities for learning. Connecting to sister coalitions, TA providers, and other systems in the state/territory can help us get new perspective and renewed energy.
- *Offer optimism, confidence, and energy*: champion organizational strengths and help employees reconnect to the mission of the coalition. In trauma, we can lose sight of our basic vision and skills. Part of the healing and confidence-building is remembering who we are.
- *Set priorities to move forward*: how we move forward will vary greatly based on the trauma experienced. It’s important to note that setting a plan for the future is the last step here. Many of the others will happen in various orders or simultaneously, but moving forward only happens successfully *after* we work to address the trauma itself.

Every organization faces some risk for trauma, and with the nature of our work, it is particularly important for us to be vigilant. But though we all face the risk of organizational trauma, we all also have resilience and great capacity to prevent organizational trauma and heal from it.

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