November 2026 | Issue #4

Vitality

An EFAP Article for Human Resource and Occupational Health Professionals, Program Administrators, Supervisors, and Key Personnel



Trauma-Informed Leadership: Building Trust, Safety, and Support in the Workplace

Leadership influences how employees experience work every day. Communication styles, workplace expectations, decision-making processes, and team dynamics all contribute to workplace culture and employee well-being.

Employees also bring a wide range of experiences into the workplace. Some may be navigating grief, caregiving responsibilities, illness, financial strain, discrimination, major life transitions, or other personal challenges.

Alongside these life challenges, some employees may also be coping with the effects of trauma, which can have a significant impact on their emotional well-being, sense of safety, and ability to engage at work. Trauma can take different forms, and people may be affected by a wide range of experiences. "Big T" trauma refers to experiences such as serious accidents or injuries, violence, natural disasters, or the sudden loss of a loved one, while "little t" trauma can include events that involve emotional or physical harm and still leave a lasting impact. In the workplace, "little t" trauma may show up through bullying, chronic conflict, discrimination, harassment, unfair treatment, unrealistic demands, constant criticism, prolonged uncertainty, or unpredictable leadership. These terms are used only to describe different types of experiences and don't reflect the severity of their impact. Experiences sometimes categorized as "little t" trauma can have profound and lasting effects on well-being, functioning, and mental health.

Trauma-informed leadership recognizes that past and present experiences can shape how people respond to stress, change, feedback, conflict, and uncertainty. Rather than focusing on individual experiences, trauma-informed leadership emphasizes workplace practices that encourage trust, consistency, transparency, and respect.

In this article, we'll explore what trauma-informed leadership means in practice and how leaders can build stronger workplace relationships while supporting both employee well-being and organizational success.

Why employee experiences affect workplace interactions

Many influences on workplace behaviour are not immediately visible. Personal circumstances and life experiences can affect how employees engage, communicate, and respond to workplace challenges. These experiences can affect concentration, communication, energy levels, confidence, and responses to workplace demands. An employee who appears withdrawn may be managing a difficult personal situation. Someone who becomes frustrated or anxious during a period of organizational change may be responding not only to the uncertainty of the present situation, but also to childhood or previous life experiences in which change or instability felt unsafe or overwhelming. Another employee may be balancing caregiving responsibilities that leave little time for rest and recovery.

Leaders are not expected to know all the details of an employee's circumstances. However, recognizing that employees may be carrying challenges can influence how leaders approach conversations, provide feedback, and respond to concerns.

This perspective can be particularly valuable during periods of increased stress. Organizational restructuring, staffing shortages, economic uncertainty, competing priorities, and rapid workplace change can place pressure on both employees and leaders. Workplace experiences such as ongoing conflict, excessive workloads, unclear expectations, or persistent uncertainty can also affect employee well-being and workplace interactions. When workplace challenges are viewed solely through the lens of productivity or performance, opportunities to understand potential barriers may be missed.

A trauma-informed approach encourages leaders to consider the broader context in which employees are working. This awareness can help leaders respond thoughtfully while maintaining professional expectations and accountability.

What trauma-informed leadership means in practice

Trauma-informed leadership is often associated with supporting employees who have experienced trauma. While this is part of the approach, trauma-informed leadership is ultimately about creating workplace environments where people feel respected, informed, and able to contribute effectively.

The approach is commonly grounded in principles such as trustworthiness, transparency, collaboration, empowerment, inclusion, and psychological safety. These principles influence how leaders communicate, make decisions, manage conflict, and support their teams.

For example, consider a leader preparing to implement a significant operational change. Employees may have questions about workloads, job security, responsibilities, or timelines. A trauma-informed approach would involve sharing information early, explaining the rationale behind decisions, creating opportunities for questions, and acknowledging concerns. Employees may not agree with every decision, but they are more likely to trust the process when communication is transparent and respectful.

Similarly, when introducing a new workflow or technology, including AI tools, leaders can invite employee feedback and identify potential challenges before implementation. Employees are often more receptive to change when they understand why it is occurring and feel that their perspectives have been considered.

In practice, trauma-informed leadership may involve:

- Communicating expectations clearly
- Following through on commitments
- Providing opportunities for employee input
- Explaining decisions whenever possible
- Addressing concerns respectfully
- Encouraging participation and collaboration
- Creating opportunities for growth and development

These practices support all employees and contribute to healthier workplace cultures.

Building psychological safety through consistency

Psychological safety refers to an environment where employees feel comfortable asking questions, sharing concerns, offering ideas, and acknowledging mistakes without fear of embarrassment, punishment, or retaliation. Research has linked psychological safety to stronger team performance, innovation, learning, and employee engagement. Leaders play an important role in creating these conditions.

One of the strongest contributors to psychological safety is consistency. Trust grows when leaders set clear expectations, treat employees fairly, and communicate respectfully, especially during difficult situations. For example, an employee who identifies a problem that could affect a project timeline is more likely to raise the concern early when they trust their manager will focus on solutions rather than blame.

Meeting practices can also influence psychological safety. Some employees may be comfortable speaking spontaneously during team meetings, while others may prefer time to reflect before contributing. Leaders can encourage participation by sharing agendas in advance, providing multiple ways to contribute, and creating opportunities for employees to engage in ways that reflect different communication styles and comfort levels.

Psychological safety doesn't eliminate accountability or difficult conversations. Instead, it helps create an environment where employees feel comfortable discussing challenges, identifying problems early, and contributing ideas that support team success.

Communicating during uncertainty and change

Change is a constant feature of workplaces. Organizations may restructure teams, adjust priorities, implement new policies, or respond to changing business needs. Even positive changes can create uncertainty. During periods of transition, employees often look to leaders for information and direction. Communication plays a critical role in shaping how change is experienced.

One common leadership challenge is communicating when information is incomplete. Leaders may hesitate to discuss change until every detail is finalized. However, prolonged silence can create confusion, speculation, and anxiety.

Consider a department undergoing restructuring. Employees may be wondering how responsibilities will change, whether reporting relationships will be affected, or how the changes may influence future opportunities. While leaders may not have every answer, regular updates and honest communication can help reduce uncertainty and maintain trust.

Effective communication during change often includes:

- Sharing information as early as possible
- Explaining the rationale behind decisions
- Providing opportunities for questions
- Offering regular updates
- Acknowledging uncertainty when it exists

Transparency can help employees feel more informed and engaged, even when outcomes are not ideal.

Leaders should also recognize that employees may respond to change differently. Some may embrace new opportunities, while others may require additional time and support to adjust. Understanding these differences can help leaders tailor their communication while maintaining clear expectations.

Responding to performance concerns with curiosity

Addressing performance concerns remains an important part of leadership. Trauma-informed leadership emphasizes how those conversations take place, not whether they take place. Instead, it encourages leaders to approach concerns with curiosity before making assumptions.

For example, a leader may notice that an employee who was previously engaged and reliable has begun missing deadlines or withdrawing from team discussions. It may be tempting to assume a lack of motivation or commitment. However, there may be factors contributing to the change that are not immediately visible.

Leaders may also notice more subtle changes in behaviour, communication, or work patterns. An employee who typically participates in meetings may become quieter. Someone who consistently meets deadlines may begin to struggle. While leaders should avoid making assumptions about the cause, changes such as these can create opportunities for supportive conversations and early problem-solving.

A curiosity-based approach focuses on gathering information and understanding potential barriers.

Questions may include:

- "I've noticed some changes recently. How are things going?"
- "Is there anything affecting your ability to complete this work?"
- "What support would be helpful right now?"

This approach does not require employees to disclose personal information. Rather, it provides an opportunity to identify workplace barriers, clarify expectations, and explore potential solutions.

For instance, an employee may be struggling with an increased workload following staffing changes. Another may require additional training to adapt to a new process. In some cases, an employee may be experiencing challenges outside of work that are affecting their performance.

By approaching conversations with curiosity and respect, leaders can gain a better understanding of the situation while preserving trust and maintaining accountability.

Supporting employees while maintaining accountability

Some people view compassion and accountability as opposites, but effective leadership often requires both. Employees need clear expectations and honest feedback, as well as leaders who approach challenges with respect and understanding.

Difficult conversations are sometimes necessary. A trauma-informed approach encourages leaders to have those conversations in a way that is respectful, solution-focused, and grounded in the belief that employees can learn, adapt, and grow.

For example, a leader might work collaboratively with an employee to identify barriers, establish priorities, adjust timelines where appropriate, or connect them with available resources. At the same time, expectations regarding performance and responsibilities remain clear.

This balanced approach can strengthen trust while helping employees remain accountable for their work.

It can also contribute to a workplace culture where employees feel comfortable raising concerns before problems escalate. Early conversations often create more opportunities for problem-solving than waiting until challenges become more significant.

Leaders who consistently combine support with accountability help create workplaces where employees understand what is expected of them and feel comfortable seeking assistance when needed.

Developing trauma-informed leadership skills

Trauma-informed leadership is not a single skill or one-time initiative. It reflects a collection of leadership practices that contribute to healthier workplace cultures and stronger employee relationships.

Many of these skills overlap with broader leadership competencies, including communication, emotional intelligence, inclusion, conflict resolution, psychological safety, and change management.

Leaders interested in strengthening these capabilities may benefit from ongoing professional development, coaching, and leadership training opportunities. Regular self-reflection can also support growth.

Questions leaders may consider include:

- How do I respond when employees raise concerns?
- Are expectations communicated clearly?
- Do employees feel comfortable asking questions?
- How do I communicate during periods of uncertainty?
- Are workplace policies applied consistently and fairly?
- Do employees have opportunities to contribute their perspectives?

Reflecting on these questions can help leaders identify strengths as well as opportunities for development.

Leadership development is not limited to formal training. Seeking feedback, learning from experience, observing trusted mentors, and participating in peer discussions can all contribute to growth. Building awareness of how leadership practices affect workplace culture is often an important first step.

Strengthening leadership through learning and support

Creating a psychologically safer workplace is an ongoing process that requires attention, reflection, and continuous learning. Leadership practices that promote trust, consistency, respect, inclusion, and clear communication can help employees feel more supported during periods of challenge, uncertainty, and change.

Organizations looking to strengthen these capabilities can explore services, including workshops, leadership training, and consulting support focused on communication, workplace inclusion, psychological safety, change management, and employee well-being. These programs can help leaders build practical skills that support healthy workplace cultures and strong team performance. For more information about available services and supports, organizations can contact their Homewood Health representative.

Leaders can also encourage employees to access available support resources when needed. Your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) provides confidential counselling, coaching, and support for concerns that may affect well-being at work and at home. Digital resources, articles, self-directed learning tools, and other online supports can also help employees build coping skills, strengthen resilience, and access support when challenges arise.

While support resources play an important role, workplace culture is shaped through daily interactions. The conversations leaders have, the expectations they set, and the way they respond during difficult situations can all influence how employees experience work.

References:

Geffner C (18 April 2025) Understanding Trauma-Informed Leadership. Forbes. Accessed 19 June 2026 from https://www.forbes.com/councils/forbescoachescouncil/2025/04/18/understanding-trauma-informed-leadership/

Iglesias Snyder B (5 March 2023) What Is Trauma-Informed Leadership? And Why It Matters. Accessed 19 June 2026 from https://www.workplacepeaceinstitute.com/post/trauma-informed-leadership

Lee-Baggley D (24 August 2022) Workplace Trauma and Trauma-Informed Leadership. Psychology Today. Accessed 19 June 2026 from https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/the-psychology-of-weight-loss/202208/workplace-trauma-and-trauma-informed-leadership



Send us your questions, comments, and suggestions — vitality@homewoodhealth.com

For more information, please contact our Client Services Representatives available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in English or French. All calls are completely confidential.

Contact Us

1-800-663-1142 | 1-866-398-9505 **(Numéro sans frais - en français)**
1-888-384-1152 **(TTY)** | 604-689-1717: **International (Call Collect)**
Follow Us on Twitter @HomewoodHealth
HomewoodHealth.com

Homewood Health is accredited by the Council on Accreditation

140 years Homewood Health
Experience the power of care

© 2026 Homewood Health™ | The content within this newsletter can be reused by Homewood Health customers and business partners for the purposes of educating employees. No other use is permitted without written consent from Homewood Health.