Weâ??ve Moved from Stress to Trauma. Hereâ??s What That Means for You.

Description

So many leaders, employees, and entire organizations are struggling these days. And when one considers all the chaos swirling around in the external environment, it makes sense. Weâ??re dealing with COVID-19 and all the changes and economic pressures it has causedâ??and at the same time, weâ??re navigating other upheavals like massive advances in the use of artificial intelligence, political divisiveness, an increased focus on racial justice and diversity, and so forth.

Alone each one of these is stressful. Combined, they go way beyond stressful. The intensity, frequency, and duration of the changes weâ??re facing are moving us past the usual â??whitewaterâ?• businesses have always had to navigate and into something much more serious. In fact, what if we as individuals and organizations have crossed from *stress* into *trauma*?

In my most recent podcast, I spoke with trauma expert Diana Hendel on this subject. (Click here to listen.) She talks about a workplace shooting that took place at the hospital where she used to serve as CEO. After this happened, she became a student of organizational trauma. She observed it firsthand in her own hospital and also studied other organizations that had experienced trauma. What she found was there are lots of common patterns that show up.

Trauma is fundamentally different from stress. While stress upsets our balance in the moment, we can get through it and move on with our lives. Trauma sends us into survival mode. It makes us feel that our life, or at least our livelihood, is threatened, and it changes how we look at the world.

One thing she said thatâ??s really interesting is that weâ??re all experiencing collective trauma as a nation, due to COVID and the undercurrent of fear and uncertainty it continues to create. Most of us think of trauma as a single horrific event, but it can also happen gradually, like the frog in the pot of water thatâ??s slowly turned up to the boiling point. One day, we find ourselves in a world thatâ??s very different from how it used to be, and we wonder, *Will we get through this?*

So hearing Diana talk about this in terms of trauma was like a lightbulb coming on. When we address stress with actions like communication, mindfulness, eating better, exercising, etc., it does also help with trauma. These are very good ways to deal with stress. However, they are not enough.

Trauma happens when people are unsure of the future. We can feel hopeless. We can have new roles, new job duties, and a new way of doing things. With stress, there is a belief that things can get back to or close to normal. With trauma, there is the realization that it may never get back to what it was.

For example, my oldest grandson was severely burned five years ago and spent a month in a burn unit. He has skin scarring that, while fading, will always be there. Today his scars remind him of the incident. He is also reminded anytime he sees fire. He will never be exactly the way he was.

The same is true with traumatized organizations. Today many employees wonder, *Will it get back to the way it was? Will I have a job? Will my role change?*

I work quite a bit with universities. Faculty have to use new technology; students have to access the learning in different ways. Itâ??s a whole different college experience. These changes are so pronounced that they, too, may result in trauma.

For years, I have shared that a skill every leader needs is the ability to lead change. Today I feel every leader needs training in managing individual stress as well as individual and organizational trauma. It is vital for the health of the individual, the company, and the community that trauma is identified and action taken. If unprocessed and untreated, trauma can be extremely harmful to all.

Diana has a book coming out soon about organizational trauma, and she will also speak on the subject at EntreCon. (Click here to learn more.) In the meantime, here are a few of her insights for leaders:

Trauma and stress are different. We need to treat them differently. Resilience training can help us deal with stress. And while that kind of training is important, itâ??s not enough. We need a road map, starting with a rapid response team, so we can intervene early. A rapid response team is a group prepared to assess and handle crises. And we need a long-term plan for moving people through trauma in a healthy way.

The first step is to name trauma. This is hard for a lot of people because weâ??re used to thinking in terms of stress. Also, many of us tend to have a stiff-upper-lip mentality. We believe we should â??just move onâ?• or â??just get over it.â?• But being willing to label a crisis as trauma sets us up to address the impact on individuals and the organization.

We need to get familiar with the predictable signs of trauma. For example, people go into *fight, flight, or freeze* mode. This can manifest in different ways. People may cling to their competence zone, even though the old ways of doing things no longer work. Employees might come across as aggressive, belligerent, or â??difficultâ?• in other ways. Also, Diana points out that often in trauma, people speak of life in terms of â??beforeâ?• and â??after.â?• (Most of us are probably hearing that a lot with COVID.)

Untreated trauma can cause the organization to polarize. In the aftermath of trauma, there is a brief period of camaraderie, but it is often followed up by a lot blame and finger-pointing. People may divide into factions. Eventually, deep polarization can occur. It is incredibly important that the leader get in there right away and serve as a unifier to prevent this division from happening and deepening.

Strong, highly visible leaders matter in a crisis. During a traumatic event, it is so important that leaders stand front and center and very intentionally message â??unity.â?• Without this visibility, and without leader unity, it will be very hard for an organization to survive, much less have any hope of

thriving.

It is so important to diagnose trauma. Once we recognize that this is whatâ??s happening, we will be able to move forward with a treatment plan. Every organization needs to do this, whether or not we feel that we are currently impacted by trauma.

If it hasnâ??t happened yet, it will. We need to be ready for it. In the â??new normal,â?• there will be ongoing change and upheaval. When we get a system in place for moving through trauma, it will serve us well in the tough times that lie ahead but also in the (relatively) normal spaces in between.

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