Organizational Trauma and Healing

Domestic Violence Symposium 2016

Shana Hormann, PhD, MSW

What is organizational culture?

- Organization’s personality
- “The way we do things around here.”
- Taken-for-granted norms and ways of behaving
- Seeds of the culture were planted in the beginning: Creation story of an organization

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Creation Story: Dyads

1. How did your organization begin?

2. Name two strengths of your organization.

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SAMPLE

**Shadows**

- Commitment
- Strong Team
- Mission Driven

**Strengths**

- Overwork/Over functioning
- Poor boundaries
- Conflict avoidant?
- Not open to new ideas
- Push back
- Exclusive
- Judgmental

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Using the S&S Model: Growing our strengths / Addressing our shadows

Growing Our Strengths

Choose one Strength. Describe one or two examples of the strength.

Questions:
1. How is this strength benefitting our organization? (Parts of the organization?)
2. How is this strength benefitting our community? (Parts of the community?)
Addressing Our Shadows

- Choose one Shadow. Describe one or two examples of the shadow.

Questions:
1. How is this shadow hurting our organization? (Parts of the organization?)
2. How is this shadow benefitting our organization? (Entire culture? Subcultures?)

Organizational Trauma
“Trauma is contagious.”*

- Individuals, families, units, organizations, communities, and nations may experience trauma. We can “catch” it from others.

- Not everyone or every group that experiences trauma becomes traumatized.

- Traumatization or a traumatized system needs time and attention to recover.

*Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*

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Organizational Trauma Definition

An injury to an organization resulting from a single event or the impact of an accumulation of events.
Organizational Trauma Impact on Organizations

- Emotionally and cognitively overwhelming
- Self-protective structures penetrated
- Vulnerable and temporarily helpless
- Lasting psychic and cultural impact

Sources of Organizational Trauma

- Single catastrophic event
- Ongoing wounding
- Redemptive nature of the work
- Empathic nature of the work
## Characteristics of a Traumatized System

| **Closed boundaries between the organization and environment** | Environment is perceived to be hostile with little outside information or feedback accepted. Organization becomes isolated. |
| **Centrality of insider relationships** | There is an over-reliance on internal relationships for safety and support and suspicion towards outsiders. |
| **Stress and anxiety contagion** | Stress becomes a central lens through which the work is experienced. Anxiety spreads among members. |
| **Inadequate worldview and identity erosion** | The organizational identity begins to unravel. A constricted worldview distorts interpretation of events. |
| **Depression expressed through fear or anger** | Recurring conversations trigger helplessness and anxiety. Productivity and effectiveness decrease. |
| **Despair and loss of hope** | Spirit and optimism are exhausted. The organization is left with insufficient energy to keep going. |

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Thank you!

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Leading and Intervening in a Traumatized System

Seattle DV Symposium
2016

Shana Hormann, PhD, MSW
Organizational Perspective

- Organizational view complements individual focus
- Organizational self-care enhances individual self-care
- Organizational self-knowledge helps with survival in tough times

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Complexity of Traumatization

- Healed and unhealed traumas
- Historical and current events
- Widespread and confined
- Deeply hidden and just below the surface
- Cumulative from long-standing patterns and the nature of the work
Persistent Traumatization: Trauma-inured culture

- Regularity of re-traumatizing triggers
- Inadequate emotional containment
- Ongoing instability
- Anxiety-based conversations and decisions

- Cumulative discouragement
- Cyclical burnout of staff and leaders
- Continuing lack of trust
- Inadequate and/or unsafe organizational processes
- Rabbit hole/Muddy hole analogies
Mitigating Factors

- Strong core identity
- Organizational esteem
- Facilitating structures and processes
- Hopeful and energetic leadership
- Positive connection to peer agencies

Specific Actions

- Champion organizational strengths
- Keep boundaries open/Break isolation
- Explore organizational culture and identify desired changes
- Address secondary trauma
- Engage with hope/spirit/ceremony

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Addressing Persistent Traumatization

- Make help accessible and nonthreatening
  - Non-anxious presence

- Ensure and reinforce containment, safety, and stability

- Collectively acknowledge, name, and talk about the trauma(s)

- Normalize!

- Make sense of what has happened

- Identify priority actions

  - Create strong and safe organizational processes

  - Rabbit hole/Muddy hole analogies: Ask for help!
Leadership Skills

- Learn about organizational trauma
- Be aware of own strengths and blind spots
- Develop dialogue skills
- Learn about organizational dynamics
- Become skilled in a strengths-based approach
- Know when to ask for help

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Resources

- Vivian, P., & Hormann, S. (2013). *Organizational Trauma and Healing*. CreateSpace
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