

**TRAUMA-INFORMED LEADERSHIP:
STOP HAVING EMPATHY
(AND HAVE THIS INSTEAD)**

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ABOUT ME

- HR Consultant & Director of Talent and Career Development at Career Management Associates (CMA)
 - Employee Relations
 - Performance Management
- ICF-Certified Professional & Executive Coach
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 - Study trauma in the workplace – how it shows up, how we heal from it, and how we lead others through a trauma-informed lens
 - Personal experience with workplace-specific trauma

WHY
TRAUMA-
INFORMED
LEADERSHIP?

Being a people leader/HR means holding space for employee **emotions** while still driving **performance** — and doing both simultaneously is one of the hardest parts of the job.

You're expected to **stay calm** when someone else is melting down, give grace while also **giving feedback**, and make sure the work gets done without losing sight of the human in front of you.

HR PROFESSIONALS ARE CONSTANTLY WALKING A TIGHTROPE

On one side is **empathy** — the human part of their role that wants to support, protect, and nurture people through difficult situations.

On the other side is **compliance** — the policies, legal frameworks, and organizational responsibilities that require consistency, documentation, and tough decisions.

YOU ARE EXPECTED TO:

- **Be a safe person for employees to confide in**
 - And also be the one who investigates complaints
- **Show empathy for someone's personal struggle**
 - While also enforcing the attendance policy
- **Support mental health and psychological safety**
 - While also managing performance and potential liability

This dual role creates **emotional whiplash** — and it's often invisible to others.

And because many HR leaders *care deeply*, they default to **empathy** — often at the expense of their own well-being and effectiveness.

Sympathy: Acknowledging someone's hardship from a distance, often paired with pity.

- **Example:** "I feel bad for you."

Empathy: Understanding and sharing another's feelings by putting yourself in their shoes.

- **Example:** "I can imagine how overwhelming that must feel."

EMPATHY VS SYMPATHY

EMPATHY IS THE STANDARD

Leaders are typically taught to avoid sympathy, as it can create distance, reinforce power imbalances, or come across as patronizing. Instead, they're encouraged to practice empathy — to understand and emotionally connect with what others are experiencing.

But what's often missing is **how** to apply that empathy in a leadership context, especially when hard decisions, boundaries, or accountability are involved.

This often results in **Empathy Fatigue**.

WHAT IS EMPATHY FATIGUE?

- **Empathy fatigue** is a form of **emotional exhaustion** that occurs when someone constantly absorbs and mirrors the emotions of others, especially in high-stress or emotionally intense environments. It's commonly experienced by leaders, HR professionals, healthcare workers, coaches, and others in helping roles who regularly engage with people in distress.
- **Key Characteristics:**
 - **Emotional depletion:** Feeling drained after interactions, even if the situations aren't personally distressing
 - **Over-identification:** Taking on other people's emotions as your own, blurring emotional boundaries
 - **Avoidance:** Becoming numb, distant, or avoidant as a protective mechanism
 - **Loss of effectiveness:** Difficulty making decisions, setting boundaries, or following through with accountability due to emotional overwhelm

DO YOU HAVE EMPATHY FATIGUE?

- ☐ You feel responsible for fixing everyone's problems
- ☐ You struggle to set or maintain emotional boundaries
- ☐ You feel resentful toward people you're supposed to help
- ☐ You zone out or emotionally check out during conversations
- ☐ You experience frequent headaches, tension, or fatigue with no clear cause
- ☐ You snap at people unexpectedly or feel on edge all the time
- ☐ You feel guilty when you try to prioritize your own needs
- ☐ You avoid conflict because you're too emotionally worn down to deal with it
- ☐ You constantly replay conversations in your head, wondering if you said the right thing
- ☐ You start to feel cynical or hopeless about whether people can actually change
- ☐ You feel like you have to perform emotional support even when you're struggling yourself
- ☐ You dread being asked for help — even when it's part of your job
- ☐ You notice a loss of compassion or care, even for people you typically want to support

WHY DOES EMPATHY FATIGUE HAPPEN?

- **Empathy is emotional labor — and it builds up.**
- Empathy means *feeling what someone else feels*. If you're constantly tuning in to others' grief, stress, frustration, or trauma, your nervous system starts treating their pain as *your* pain.
 - You carry it home.
 - You ruminate.
 - You feel responsible for fixing it.

Over time, that creates emotional fatigue and chronic stress — key ingredients for burnout.

EMPATHY ACTIVATES YOUR STRESS RESPONSE

When you witness someone in distress, your brain and body respond. Mirror neurons light up. Cortisol increases. Your nervous system may enter fight, flight, or freeze — especially if you've experienced similar pain.

- You might shut down, get irritable, or over-function.
- You're no longer grounded — you're dysregulated, too.
- Leaders in this state struggle to make clear decisions or hold boundaries.

As a result:

- **Accountability feels like cruelty.**
 - They avoid tough conversations because they don't want to "add to the person's stress."
- **Leaders sacrifice team standards to protect someone's feelings.**
 - This turns into *over-functioning*, *rescuing*, or *letting things slide*.
- **Leaders want to be seen as supportive.**
 - Leaders with high empathy often **fear being seen as cold, harsh, or unsupportive.**

THE THING IS...



Empathy alone doesn't give you tools — just feelings.



Empathy helps you *feel* for someone, but it doesn't always help you *help* them.



You may see the pain but feel helpless.



You may try to fix the wrong thing.



You may spiral with them, instead of guiding them out.

LEADERSHIP THROUGH A TRAUMA-INFORMED LENS

- Trauma is what happens when a person experiences a distressing experience that is difficult to cope with, leaving **a wound** in the nervous system.
- At its core, trauma is not what happened to someone. It's about **the impact of what happened** on their nervous system.
- Most leadership training focuses on communication and strategy — but trauma-informed leadership starts with understanding what's happening **under the surface**, especially when someone is emotionally overwhelmed, reactive, or shut down.

TRAUMA 101: NEUROCEPTION AND TRIGGERS

Neuroception is your body's **unconscious ability to detect safety or danger** in the environment — even without a logical reason. It's constantly scanning for cues:

- Tone of voice
- Facial expressions
- Body language
- Power dynamics

When someone senses danger (even subtle or social), their nervous system reacts automatically — before their thinking brain has time to catch up. This is why people “snap,” “shut down,” or “freeze” without knowing why. This is called a **trigger**.

It's important to remember: you cannot fully control whether someone feels triggered. Each person's nervous system has its own history, and what sets off one employee may not affect another at all. A tone of voice, a certain phrase, or even a harmless gesture might unconsciously signal “danger” to them because of past experiences you can't see.

THE VAGUS NERVE: THE MIND-BODY CONNECTOR

- The **vagus nerve** acts like a messenger between the body and the brain. It constantly carries information up from the heart, lungs, and gut about whether things feel safe or unsafe.
- When a person is triggered, it sends a rapid “danger” signal through the nervous system to put the body into **survival mode**.
- The body experiences **physiological changes** and the thinking brain is pushed aside, so our limbic system/amygdala can take over.
- When this happens, **we do not have access to our pre-frontal cortex**, which is the part of our brain that controls judgment, problem-solving, and critical thinking.
- This is why **you can't coach or correct someone who feels unsafe**. Their body isn't available for logic — it's trying to protect them.





THE THREE STATES OF THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

According to **Polyvagal Theory**, the nervous system moves through three main states in response to safety or threat:

Regulated (Ventral Vagal State) = GREEN

- Calm, connected, grounded
- Able to think clearly, listen, and collaborate
- This is where real leadership and learning happen

Fight or Flight (Sympathetic State) = YELLOW

- Anxious, angry, restless, defensive
- Behavior may look like over-talking, interrupting, arguing, micromanaging, or fleeing responsibilities
- The body is preparing to defend or escape

Shut Down (Dorsal Vagal State) = RED

- Withdrawn, numb, checked out, low energy
- May look like disengagement, avoidance, or “not caring”
- The body feels hopeless or powerless, and is trying to conserve energy

People can move between these states **within seconds** — and leaders often miss the signs. Trauma-informed leadership means recognizing these patterns and learning how to **respond with presence, not pressure**.

WHY IT MATTERS IN LEADERSHIP

You can't coach, correct, or connect with someone who's dysregulated in the same way you would with someone who's regulated.

If they're in a survival state:

- **Accountability conversations won't land** — they may feel like an attack
- **Problem-solving won't work** — they can't think clearly or access creativity
- **Connection will feel unsafe** — they may misinterpret neutral feedback as criticism

**TRYING TO FIX IT
DOESN'T HELP**

Jumping into problem-solving often overwhelms the person further

It sends the message: *“You shouldn’t feel this way — let’s fix it”*

It bypasses the emotional experience and **doesn’t address the body’s need for safety first**

Even the most practical solution won’t land if the nervous system still feels under threat



When leaders avoid holding someone accountable because they're "going through something," it may feel like empathy — but it actually **reinforces the dysregulation**



It can unintentionally confirm: *"You're not safe, not capable, and can't handle hard things"*



It also removes the structure and clarity that **actually help the nervous system settle**

AVOIDING ACCOUNTABILITY DOESN'T HELP EITHER

SO WHAT DO WE DO INSTEAD?

WE NEED TO HAVE **COMPASSION**

Instead of empathy, we need to have compassion.

Compassion: The recognition of another person's suffering **combined with** a genuine desire to help relieve or alleviate that suffering.

While empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person, compassion includes the desire to help.

**YOU CAN'T FIX
SOMEONE ELSE'S
TRIGGER — BUT
YOU CAN HELP**

When someone is triggered, their nervous system is responding to a perceived threat — often based on past experiences, unconscious associations, or underlying trauma.

As a leader, **you don't control the trigger**, and you **can't reason them out of it**.

Trying to fix the problem, offer solutions, or convince them to feel differently usually doesn't work — because the nervous system is driving the reaction, not the thinking brain.

**WHAT YOU
CAN DO:
RECOGNIZE
AND
REGULATE**

While you can't eliminate someone's trigger, you **can recognize what's happening inside their body:**

- Their nervous system is in a **state of protection** (fight, flight, freeze, fawn).
- Their thinking brain (prefrontal cortex) is **partially or fully offline**.
- They may appear reactive, avoidant, shut down, or emotionally overwhelmed.
- Your role is not to solve their emotional state, but to **send signals of safety** that help their nervous system settle.

SIGNALS OF SAFETY

Safety signals are **nonverbal and verbal cues** that tell the nervous system: *“You’re not in danger right now.”*

They don’t erase the trigger, but they give the body permission to shift out of survival mode and back into regulation.

This creates the conditions for **listening, collaboration, and accountability.**

How leaders can send safety signals:

- **Voice:** Calm, steady, and slower-paced.
- **Body language:** Open stance, relaxed posture, appropriate eye contact.
- **Language:** Clear, simple, non-judgmental words. Avoid rapid-fire questions.
- **Pacing:** Allow space, pause for silence, slow the tempo of the conversation.
- **Acknowledgment:** Lightly name what’s happening: *“Let’s pause and take a breath together.”*
- **Consistency:** Follow through on what you say — predictability itself is a signal of safety.

You can’t remove the trigger — but you can become the safest thing in the room. This is called **co-regulation.**

**CO-REGULATING WITH
COMPASSION —
WITHOUT ABSORBING
EMOTIONAL ENERGY**

As a leader, your role in co-regulation is to **create a safe environment** where others can calm their nervous system — not to carry or resolve their emotional experience for them.



When someone is dysregulated, your steady presence, grounded tone, and nonjudgmental attention can help their nervous system feel safe enough to settle. This is compassion in action: offering support **without becoming entangled in their emotional state.**

Compassion means *“I care, and I want to help”* — but it does **not** mean:

- *“I have to feel what you’re feeling.”*
- *“I have to fix this for you.”*
- *“Your pain is now my responsibility.”*

Taking on someone else’s emotional energy — feeling their stress, panic, or sadness as your own — doesn’t help them. In fact, it can destabilize both of you.

Your job is to stay **anchored**. Their feelings are theirs to feel and work through. Your role is to hold space, not absorb.



COMPASSION
WITHOUT
ABSORPTION

KNOW WHAT'S YOURS TO CARRY

A trauma-informed leader understands the boundary between:

What you're responsible for:

Holding structure, offering support, creating psychological safety

What you're not responsible for:

Changing someone's emotional state, healing their past, controlling their reactions,
or rescuing them from discomfort

Trying to manage someone else's feelings will exhaust you and disempower them.

“I’ll support your regulation—I won’t carry your responsibilities.”

COMPASSION IS...

Holding boundaries with warmth

Creating safety without sacrificing standards

Strength not weakness

Empowering, not rescuing

Clarity with kindness

*“People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did,
but people will never forget how you made them feel.”*

- Maya Angelou

THANK YOU!