By
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Shadows of the Past: Navigating Unresolved Trauma in Organisations

The invisible influence of past experiences on leadership in the workplace

Nearly 1 billion people globally struggle with mental health issues, significantly impacting cognition, emotions and behaviour. These challenges have major consequences for workplace productivity and health. Mental disorders, notably anxiety and depression, cost the global economy $1 trillion annually in lost productivity, with these figures expected to rise (WHO and Deloitte, 2022). This highlights the need to understand the factors behind this trend.

Leadership and management are affected by unrecalled past experiences influencing current behaviour. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study links early trauma with long-term effects on psychological and behavioural aspects crucial for decision-making and problem-solving in professional settings (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention).

However, the way these experiences, *especially those not consciously remembered*, shape the actions of leaders and managers remains underexplored. This article illustrates how past traumas affect workplace behaviour. It aims to offer insights into the complex link between personal history and professional conduct, enhancing our understanding of workplace dynamics and leadership effectiveness.

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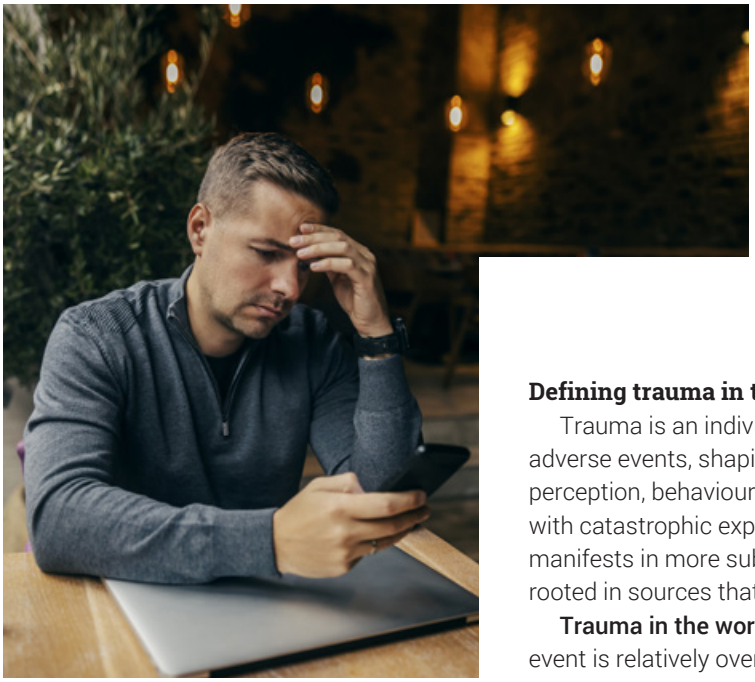

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Defining trauma in the context of leadership and management

Trauma is an individual's emotional and psychological response to adverse events, shaping their inner world and potentially altering their perception, behaviour, and well-being. Trauma is commonly associated with catastrophic experiences, but its presence in the workplace often manifests in more subtle, yet profoundly impactful ways and can be rooted in sources that stem from outside or within the workplace.

Trauma in the workplace: While physical trauma from injury or an event is relatively overt, repetitive psychological situations also carry traumatic effects, that are less visible. Ongoing stressors - such as demanding expectations, high-stakes decision-making, or constant organisational change - can also be deeply traumatic and chronic in nature. These experiences might not only undermine an individual's sense of safety and well-being but can also have a damaging impact on their capacity within their professional role. It is important to note that responses to trauma are highly individualised. This varies due to a range of factors including personal history, resilience, environmental factors and support received.

Trauma and the leadership psyche: For leaders, the effects of trauma can be particularly insidious. Modelling behaviour, inspiring action and driving pivotal decisions can exacerbate the pressure experienced by, and the hidden undercurrents of unaddressed traumas. This could generate consequences that affect not just individuals, but ripple across teams, networks and organisations as a whole.

Unearthing the influence of past trauma on leadership

The literature on the psychological impact of trauma is growing, and there is increased curiosity about and awareness of the connections between past experiences and behaviours in the present. At a collective level, the recent pandemic is prompting an important examination of the opportunities and risks associated with this more talked about phenomenon.

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study by the CDC revealed a strong link between childhood trauma and later physical and mental health issues. Trauma, particularly during formative years, can erode self-esteem, stimulating adult leadership behaviours like hesitancy and self-doubt (Rosenberg, 1965).

A leader's decision-making abilities are closely tied to their confidence. Low self-esteem, often stemming from unresolved trauma, can lead to patterns like indecision, attention seeking and risk avoidance, which are detrimental to effective and ethical leadership (Bandura, 1988).

The impact of trauma reaches beyond individual leaders, influencing organisational culture and employee experience. Leaders with unaddressed trauma may create stressful or toxic environments, harming well-being as well as business outcomes (Manfred Kets de Vries, 2013).

Early research and the aftermath of the pandemic are provoking questions about the relevance of trauma in a leadership development context. Interventions like executive coaching and trauma-informed education can mitigate the effects of trauma and expand leadership skills.

The following sections will delve deeper into these themes, linking empirical evidence representing real-life leadership challenges in today's organisations.

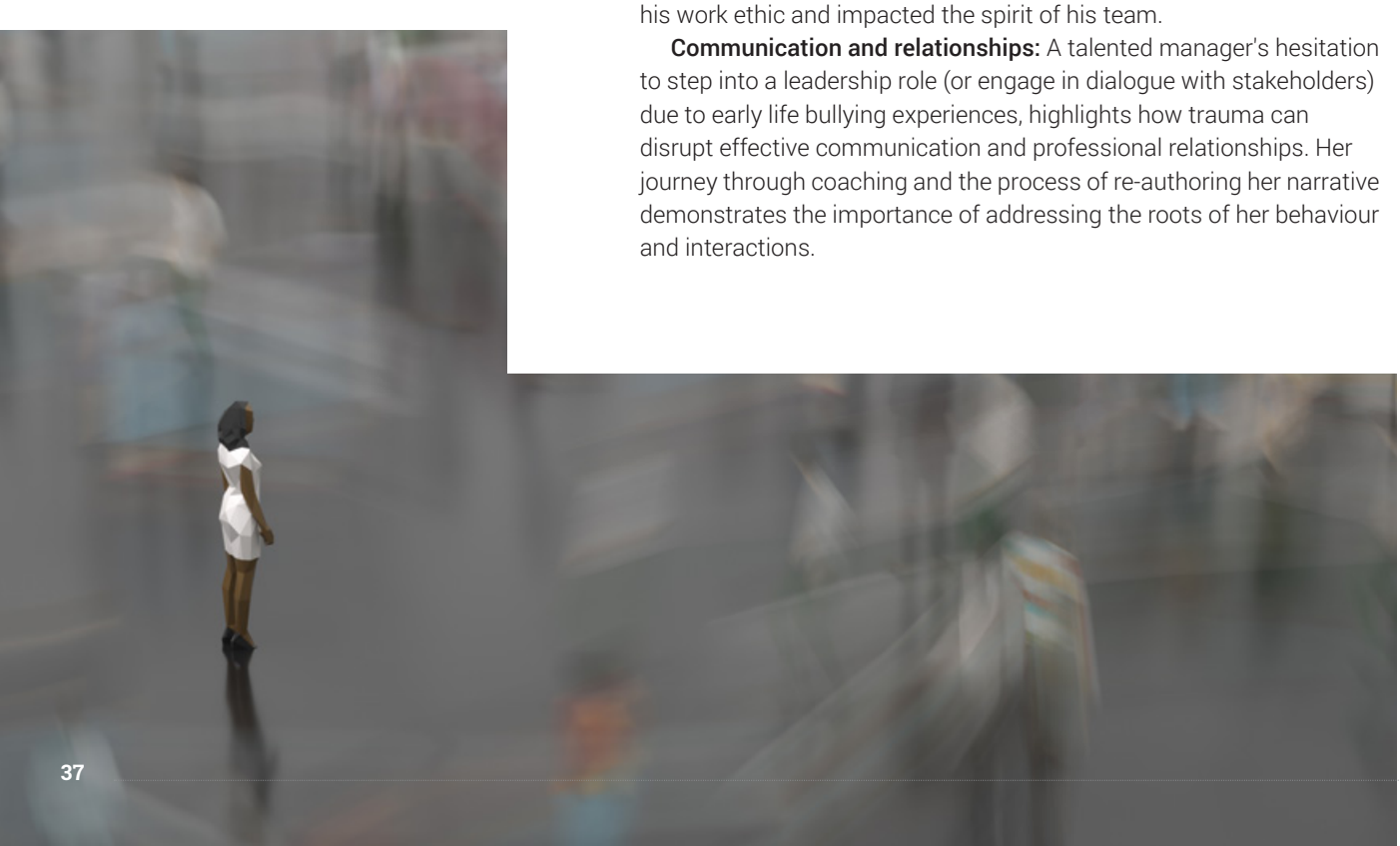
The ripple effect of trauma on workplace dynamics

Trauma acts as an invisible undercurrent in the professional lives of leaders and managers, with far-reaching consequences in the broader organisational landscape, and to follow are real-life examples:

Leadership and performance: Leaders carrying unaddressed trauma can exhibit behaviours such as indecisiveness, over-cautiousness, and hesitance. A project manager, grappling with personal loss, after giving birth to a stillborn baby, returns to work and faces the instability of her role due to organisational restructuring. She suffers a severe dip in confidence, finds it hard to adapt to the unexpected changes and claim her legitimate authority as a leader and team member. Her situation demonstrates how trauma can undermine her ability to reintegrate and hold a sense of personal power needed to lead and interact at work.

Team dynamics and culture: Leaders who are unable to manage their stress responses may create a work environment fraught with tension, inadvertently propagating a toxic culture. A senior strategy director who became relentlessly driven (even though this was not an innate characteristic of his, and over time, with coaching support, this pattern faded) enforced unrealistic expectations of his team, damaging its fabric of trust and impacting personal well-being. Rooted in his being haunted by a previous job loss, unresolved trauma permeated his work ethic and impacted the spirit of his team.

Communication and relationships: A talented manager's hesitation to step into a leadership role (or engage in dialogue with stakeholders) due to early life bullying experiences, highlights how trauma can disrupt effective communication and professional relationships. Her journey through coaching and the process of re-authoring her narrative demonstrates the importance of addressing the roots of her behaviour and interactions.



> *A transformative journey through coaching illustrates the potential for targeted interventions to address underlying self-doubt and unlock professional growth when the effects of trauma hold professionals back*

Imposter syndrome and career progression: The same manager's experience with imposter syndrome shows how trauma can impact self-perception and career advancement. A transformative journey through coaching illustrates the potential for targeted interventions to address underlying self-doubt and unlock professional growth when the effects of trauma hold professionals back.

Financial and operational impact: The economic implications of these stories are considerable. The experiences of these leaders and managers reveal how stress and trauma-related effects can lead to increased absenteeism, reduced productivity, and higher turnover rates, reflecting a significant financial toll on organisations. They highlight the need for trauma-informed support and interventions, which not only mitigate the negative impacts of trauma but also enhance individual and organisational well-being and performance.

2,000

Of 2,000 people asked to rate their organisation , a universally lowest reported score was 'my organisation allows me time to reflect'

Creating conscious spaces for reflection and connection

The impact of unrecalled trauma on leadership and workplace dynamics is growing in clarity. The path to healthier organisations and more effective leadership runs deeper than mere productivity metrics and financial outcomes.

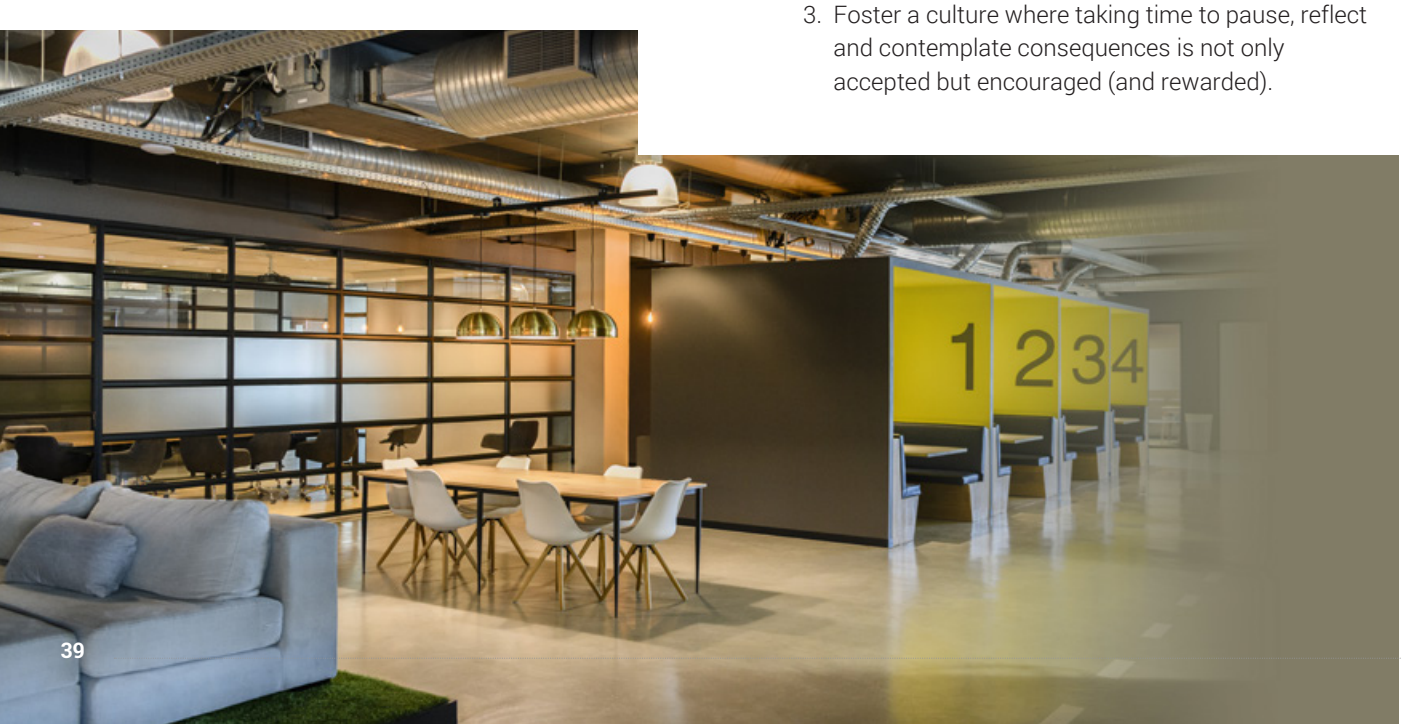
For organisations: The imperative is to consciously carve out space and time to recognise and address the undercurrents of trauma affecting their people. The Forward Institute's report highlights a critical deficiency in organisations:

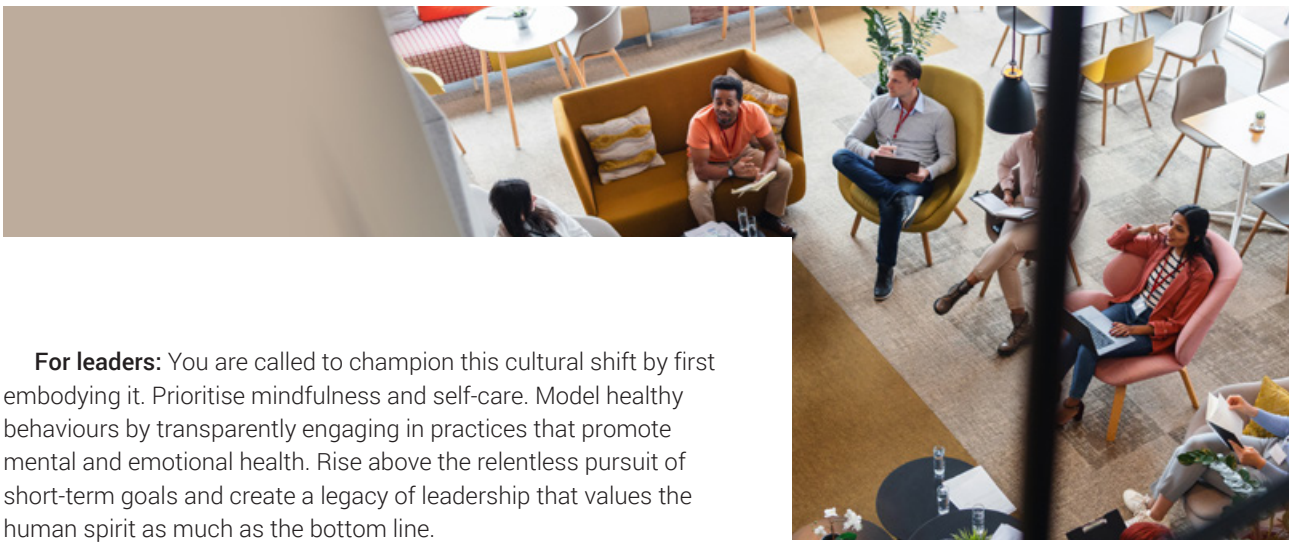
"When 2,000 people were asked to rate their organisation on nine dimensions, a universally lowest reported score was 'my organisation allows me time to reflect'. Without time to think, and marinated in the status quo, we cannot make sense of our experiences … We are too busy to actually 'lead'."

There is a fundamental lack of space for people to reflect. It's not enough to simply acknowledge the existence of these hidden traumatic realities; organisations must actively facilitate environments where employees can process their experiences and reconcile them with their actions.

Practical steps you can take:

1. Ensure those leaders who have a disproportionate impact on your organisation are getting support (i.e., executive coaching or education) to do critical introspective work to know themselves and what shapes their actions.
2. Provide access to mental health resources.
3. Foster a culture where taking time to pause, reflect and contemplate consequences is not only accepted but encouraged (and rewarded).





For leaders: You are called to champion this cultural shift by first embodying it. Prioritise mindfulness and self-care. Model healthy behaviours by transparently engaging in practices that promote mental and emotional health. Rise above the relentless pursuit of short-term goals and create a legacy of leadership that values the human spirit as much as the bottom line.

Practical steps leaders can take:

1. Schedule 'reflection time' in your calendar (make this visible to your team).
2. Share your reflections as well as your thinking about what needs to be achieved.
3. Advocate for policies that support introspection and wellness.

For employees: This is a personal invitation to you to pause amid the busyness to contemplate the undercurrents shaping your interactions, especially those that prompt a disproportionate reaction. Cultivate curiosity about those around you and embrace the discomfort that comes with self-discovery. Make the effort to understand the unique stories that quietly colour how you and your peers interact in the workplace.

Practical steps you can take

1. Reflect: Notice repetitive behavioural reactions of being defensive, resistant or unwilling to change. Reflect on struggles you face in relationships. Identify situations when you feel stuck or powerless.
2. Explore: Can you see a connection between your resulting behaviours in the present and a story from your past?
3. Listen to others: Give yourself permission to listen to a peer or stakeholder and trade judgment with curiosity and compassion.

Imagine an organisation where such practices are the norm, where the richness of human experience is acknowledged, and the wisdom gleaned from reflection is woven into the fabric of daily work life.

Let us not be "too busy to actually 'lead'" and make space for the kind of leadership that transcends the immediate and the visible, reaching into the depths of our felt human experience.

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