Episode #020: Characteristics of a Trauma-Informed Leader

Show Notes: https://hercareerdoctor.com/characteristics-of-a-trauma-informed-leader/

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Over 70% of the American adult population has experienced at least one traumatic event. And the research that trauma can and does change the brain is clear, meaning that the physiological changes people experience after a traumatic event, shapes how people react and respond at work corporate leaders who want to retain top talent while improving productivity and retention absolutely must be trauma-informed. So, in today's episode, I share what trauma is, why a trauma-informed leadership lens matters and five characteristics of a trauma-informed leader.

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Welcome to the fulfilling career podcast, a show for the professional woman, who's ready to work in an aligned career that allows her to thrive in her zone of genius, live on purpose and get paid a value aligned salary. I share quick insights and strategies to help you reach your career goals. Whether you're trying to find your fulfilling career grow your current career or successfully job search. I'm your host, Dr. Tega Edwin a career counselor and coach who was able to turn my own frustration from being in an unfulfilling career into the framework. I now used to help other women find their fulfilling career and job search with confidence. Let's dive in.

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So, whenever I have, I'm having conversations around trauma-informed leadership, I always like to start with definitions because I think that words are super important. And I think that term trauma is often misused misconstrued has just been bastardized, so, to speak. So, let's first start with trauma and what it means. Okay. So, trauma results from an event or a set of circumstances that are experienced by an individual as being physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening, and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual wellbeing. Yes, it's a mouthful. <laugh> so, feel free to rewind and listen again, but here are some things that I want to kind of highlight from that definition. It starts with trauma results from an event. This I think is absolutely the most critical part of the definition in that a lot of people often think of trauma as the event, as the accident, the death, the earthquake, the shooting, the, uh, uh, microaggressions.

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And while those things are stressful, they are not in it. And of themselves. Trauma trauma is what happens. It's what results, when our systems have been overwhelmed, trauma is what happens when our normal stress response system has been overwhelmed. So, trauma is the result of the event. It's not the event in itself. The other part of the definition that I think is important to highlight is, um, set of circumstances experienced by an individual. So, it's also, important to recognize that when we're having conversations about trauma, it is super, super subjective. So, we can all experience the exact same event and all respond differently. And this I think is important in corporate context because leaders will often see a situation and try to judge everyone's response either by how they personally respond or how they're seeing people respond. And they assume, oh, because one employee or one team member is fine, then we're all fine, but that's not the case.

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Each person is responding differently and so, must be interacted with and treated differently. Um, and it's also, based on trauma responses also, based on perception. Okay. I always like to point out ultimately, that trauma is a normal reaction to an abnormal event. People are not abnormal because they have trauma responses or experiencing, um, events as being traumatic. The event is what is abnormal. And the trauma response is their body's natural response to toxic stress. The trauma response is their body's way of trying to stay safe, trying to stay, um, healthy, trying to be aware of danger around them. So, the events are not trauma, physiological responses, trauma and trauma is very much driven by individual experience, belief, thoughts, and feelings around that event. Okay? So, that being said, research shows that, or at least a study has shown that over 70% of the American adult population has experienced at least one traumatic event.

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Why am I sharing that? I'm sharing because I want you to recognize that trauma is prevalent. It is everywhere. It is more common that we than we think it is, and we need to be having more conversations around it. Um, trauma, I always say you, well, I mean professionals in this space, we say, think of it as an emotional or psychological or physiological scar. It's an emotional scar that you can't see, but re because there's a, so, if you think about a scar, it's a mark on your body that you can see physically. So, emotional scars, we can't see them, but they inherently change our brain and how we interact and respond with people. Okay? The way, the same way your skin changes when you have a bruise and it's scars and some scars go away, some don't trauma changes the brain and that scar, that emotional scar shapes, how people perceive words, how people perceive situations, how people interact, how people respond and how people behave.

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And this change is not limited to our personal lives. It comes with us into work and into workspaces. So, if we think about corporate leaders who are trying to improve employee productivity, retention, and engagement, but are approaching employee interactions with a trauma blind lens, what we often find is that employees start being labeled based on their behavior because their leaders, their managers don't understand the behavior. Again, let me kind of go back and connect these dots for you. Remember I said, trauma is prevalent. We have all experienced at least one form. More people than not are still experiencing trauma response. They haven't fully healed from it. So, they have trauma responses that can get

triggered at anything at any moment. Then I shared with you that trauma doesn't just stay in our personal lives, right? If your brain has changed, your brain goes with you everywhere you go at home at work.

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It doesn't, it don't matter where you are. <laugh> the reactions are still the same. And so, there are interactions that can happen at work that can unintentionally or intentionally trigger a trauma response. And when that trauma response is triggered, your behavior changes the way you interact with people changes. And then when you are now faced with leaders or managers who don't understand what's going on, what often happens is the employee, the team member starts being labeled as difficult as inflexible, as resistant to feedback. And more often than not black and brown people are the ones being labeled these ways, black and brown people are the ones who are often encountering very unsafe situations at work that can result in trauma responses and then leaders or managers want to label those individuals as being difficult or, um, unsupportive. Okay. To give you just like a quick overview, cuz you know, when I say trauma at work, I know it can be hard to really understand that.

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But trauma at work can be triggered by things like microaggressions, isolation, uh, regular tight deadlines, discrimination, inconsistent feedback, lack of role clarity. Anything that leads to stress can be traumatic for someone. Okay. Again, we all interact with events differently. So, situations where stress is high can result in toxic stress that leads to a trauma response. Or retraumatizes an individual who is either healing from, or has recently been or experienced trauma. All of this is important because when, at least what the research shows is when managers and leaders interact with their teammates in a way that doesn't account for trauma, what you find is your staff, your team can go into trauma response. And when they do, you find that change becomes difficult. They're not as open and responsive to change. They're less creative, they're less innovative. They're less open to teamwork and your retention rates are super low.

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So, triggering employees, spaces that trigger employees, behaviors that trigger employees, um, can lead to employees going into this very rigid flight fight or freeze response that can really hinder their productivity, their engagement and their desire to stay in your organization. So, that's foundation, all that being said now, who is a trauma-informed leader, right? So, I've talked about how leaders need to be trauma-informed leaders in this day and age who really want to retain top talent while improving productivity and retention absolutely must be trauma-informed because it's everywhere. You can't throw a stone and not hit someone who has experienced some form of trauma in their lives. So, let's just assume like it's, it's safer to assume, especially now after COVID what I tell people is before 2020, when I would have these conversations, some people would say, oh, I haven't experienced trauma.

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I'm like, okay. Yeah. Maybe whatever I'll give you that. But post COVID yes you have. We have all experienced trauma. We are all experienced a collective, highly stressful situation that has been traumatic for a lot of us. We lost routines. We lost loved ones. We lost safety. All of that

can really stress your physiological system to the point where it's traumatic. And some people might recover, might come back down to regulate, but a lot of people have not recovered. So, that being said, who exactly is a trauma-informed leader. And so, what I wanna do in today's episode is share with you five characteristics of a trauma-informed leader to help you paint a picture of what that looks like. And just to preface, it's important to recognize that trauma-informed leadership is not clinical work. Trauma-informed leadership is not focused on healing trauma.

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I mean, unless you're trained to do that work, you can't do that work. So, that is not the goal or the point of, um, being a trauma-informed leader, trauma-informed leadership instead is, is an understanding that trauma is prevalent. Trauma leads to emotional scars that interact or shape employees, behaviors, and reactions in the workplace. Trauma from leadership is a shift from what is wrong with this person to what has happened to this person. It's approaching your staff, your team, your employees with empathy and compassion, really trying to understand where the behavior is coming from because that then shapes how you react. Okay. So, these five characteristics, I love my acronyms. <laugh> if you've been following my work for any length of time, you know, I love acronyms. So, ultimately trauma-informed leaders are brave and brave is an acronym. B R A V E.

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Okay. So, let's start with the B. Um, and the B actually does stand for BRAVE. So, trauma-informed leaders really are brave. And that just means that a trauma-informed leader, courageously acts to improve organization culture, even in the face of fear. So trauma-informed leaders leverage their courage to shape policies, procedures, to try to create an environment that is trauma sensitive, that is trauma-informed. So, that productivity, retention and engagement is increased. So, through that bravery trauma from leaders communicate with clarity. They stay true to their personal values and they own their mistakes and use them as learning experiences, modeling this bravery then opens the door for team members and employees to trust you as a leader and learn from you. The R stands for reflective. So, a trauma-informed leader is highly reflective and is regularly reflecting on their own role as a leader in how they shape spaces and environment by nature of being in power regularly, reflect on their own behaviors and how their behaviors might be contributing to certain situations that could be triggering for teammates, for employee, for staff, um, regularly reflect on their skills and knowledge gaps, especially as it relates to this work, really recognizing where are their skills and knowledge gap around, uh, recognizing trauma, responding to trauma, creating policies and procedures that are sensitive.

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Um, leveraging information from this reflection then helps leaders improve on their culture. The A in BRAVE stands for advocate. So, a trauma-informed leader actively confronts cultural and historical issues to promote inclusive spaces. A trauma-informed leader is an active advocate that really works to remain equitable when interacting with staff is intentional about giving staff choice and voice, because those are critical for employees to feel safe. Um, trauma from leaders, ask whose voices isn't being heard in this room when they're in rooms, where decisions are being made and conversations are being had, they're constantly trying to assess whose voice is missing. And they also, value differences in respect staff's culture and

perspective. One thing I say, and I will always stand by is DEI work without a trauma-informed lens is absolutely pointless. Absolutely pointless because the goal of DEI work is to recruit and retain top talent.

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So, yes, you can put on all the show and the star and the-- you know, the fireworks and really put all these benefits to recruit, um, top talent that is diverse. But if you bring that talent into workplaces that are toxic and insensitive, they're going to leave, which means high attrition rates, and that your DEI efforts have failed because you can't retain that top talent. So, that's where being an advocate comes in. The V in BRAVE stands for vulnerable. So, a trauma from leader lean into the feelings that come in the face of uncertainty risk and emotional exposure. And this is directly pulled from Brene Brown's work on vulnerability. So, trauma-informed leaders absolutely are open to having and initiating, not just having, but starting difficult conversations, modeling self-compassion and grace, um, honoring and respecting other people's vulnerability when it's shared with them. And they remain constructive and compassionate when they're holding staff accountable for their actions.

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And finally, the E stands for empathic. So, a trauma-informed leader can engage in the ability to take the perspective of other people. They are able to value the whole employee, their life outside work and how life outside work influences their performance at work. And so, again, whether the employee experience the trauma outside work or at work point is that response is going to show up in work. And so, if you are a corporate leader who wants to improve your bottom line by increasing productivity, retention and engagement, you can't ignore parts and pieces of your employee, your staff, your teammates, you can't cut them into pieces and want them to show up as only one version of themselves, because then you are doing them a massive disservice, actually doing yourself a massive disservice also. Okay. So, there you have it. Trauma-informed leaders are brave, and I hope that was helpful for you in that you can take some of that to really reflect on your own work as a leader, as a manager, whether you're leading a whole organization or a small team, really leveraging this to reflect on the kind of leader you are or have been.

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And if you found this episode helpful, feel free to share it with other managers or leaders in your life. And if you are in an organization and you are looking for some more resources around bringing trauma in, from leadership training to your organization, to your team, to your staff, you can always visit hercareerdoctor.com/traumainformedleadership/, or just check out the show notes in this podcast episode for that link. Um, I would be happy to connect with you about ways that we can help you build and create a trauma sensitive and trauma-informed organization that improves employee retention, productivity, and engagement. If you enjoy today's podcast, there are a couple of things that I would love for you to do first, make sure you've subscribe, rate and review this podcast because I genuinely love hearing your thoughts. You can also, help us reach others by sharing this episode with one person. Thanks again for joining us on the fulfilling career podcast.