

Respond: Incorporating Trauma-Responsive Practices into Supervision

Effective supervisors balance strong interpersonal skills with management techniques that motivate and support employees while fulfilling job responsibilities. Such supervisors recognize that workers' wellbeing is essential for their success. We bring our whole selves to work, as such, experiences of violence and trauma inevitably impact worker wellbeing and overall workplace productivity. Supervisors can play a critical role in supporting the safety and wellness of worker who have experienced violence and trauma.

Trauma-responsive supervision centers worker safety, values **transparency and trust-building**, promotes **collaboration** to reach consensus, fosters **peer support**, and empowers through **voice and choice**. Incorporating these principles into supervisory practices helps create a workplace culture where workers thrive and contribute to the team's collective success.

Trauma-responsive supervision first requires an acknowledgement of the inherent power of the supervisory role, and the imbalance of power between supervisors and those they supervise. Supervisors hold significant power and control over those they supervise through scheduling, work assignments, access to resources, and advancement opportunities that influence the earnings and future career opportunities of those they supervise. For workers who have experienced domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, or sexual harassment (DVSASSH) – which is rooted in [power and control](#) – even benign interactions with supervisors may induce fear and anxiety. Workers who have experienced violence and trauma may also feel fearful and anxious while their supervisor discharges common supervisory practices. For example: employee evaluations are a great source of fear and anxiety for most. For survivors of psychological and verbal abuse, evaluations can resurface traumatic experiences of abusive tactics.

By incorporating the following practices, supervisors will be better able to perform their job responsibilities in a trauma-responsive manner that centers the needs and wellness of not only survivors of violence and trauma, but also promotes a safer and more supportive workplace for all.

Leadership

- ✓ **Clearly communicate your role and responsibilities as supervisor from day one.** If your responsibilities include being a mandatory reporter under workplace policies pertaining to violence and harassment in the workplace, ensure that those you supervise are aware of this responsibility and the obligation you have to report any disclosures of – or witnessing of – acts of harassment or abuse. While mandatory reporting can reduce a survivors' privacy, autonomy, and choice over what happens next, supervisors can reduce harm by being transparent about the process, collaborating with the survivor to explore options, maintaining trust by sharing with others only what is required, and offering to connect survivors to peer support from others with lived experience.
- ✓ **Recognize the power you have** due to the nature of your position. These inherent power differences can make it difficult for those you supervise to feel safe to provide honest feedback and seek or admit needing help. They may also perceive criticism and feedback differently or as more threatening because of the power supervisors have over their employment and economic well-being. Collaboration and communication help disperse power among a team and build trust. Also, collaborate with other workplace leaders on trauma-responsive practices. The ability to reach out to leaders of many backgrounds and identities encourages employees who have experienced violence and trauma to access alternative pathways to support from leaders whom they perceive as likely allies.
- ✓ **Clearly establish roles, responsibilities, and expectations for those you supervise or participate within your team.** Make clear who is responsible for what tasks, how each person's role intersects, and how their role is vital to the overall success of the organization. Revisit this whenever roles change or new individuals join the team.

- ✓ **Provide consistency, but be flexible when possible.** Establish routine check-ins on the status of assigned tasks in a manner that builds safety, trust, and positive collaborative relationships. Recognize that these routines and processes may need to change in response to internal or external challenges impacting your team. When such changes are necessary, ask those you supervise what support they need to thrive during the implementation of any changes.
- ✓ **Work to adapt your supervision style to reflect the needs and preferences of the individuals on your team** by fostering an environment in which those with various work styles can thrive. For example: Have you considered how employees prefer information be shared (e.g., written in an email or printed memo or verbally via conference call or a meeting, or a combination)? Considering your team's information sharing preferences helps individuals with different learning styles or cultural norms better engage and succeed.
- ✓ **Create a working environment in which all employees and their contributions are valued.** Give credit where credit is due. Highlight effort in addition to success. For example: At a team meeting following a successful conference, a supervisor could acknowledge the critical assistance of the receptionist who quickly answered any questions of attendees and ensured all last-minute issues were addressed.
- ✓ **Model a culture of respect.** Acknowledge your mistakes and seek to rectify any harm caused. Hold others accountable when they engage in harmful behavior. For example: If you learn that an employee has made derogatory comments about another employee's appearance or dress, confront the situation not only in the context of the harm done to the individual targeted, but also to all in the workplace.

Project Management

- ✓ **Provide employees with meaningful opportunities to inform planning processes.** Collaborate on setting goals, developing strategies, identifying required resources, and setting deadlines. Create multiple pathways for team members to contribute ideas and suggestions. For example: consider the needs of employees who

may not be comfortable sharing their views during group meetings by providing opportunities to enhance the group's effort via one-on-one or written communication.

- ✓ **Create opportunities for critical feedback, and maintain openness to all feedback offered**, so that employees feel safe in expressing themselves. For example: when developing a task plan for a new effort, provide information to those impacted by the plan early on, and ask for their thoughts on the plan's feasibility, challenges, and areas for improvement. Acknowledge all feedback received and keep employees updated as to how the feedback was incorporated, or why certain suggestions were not incorporated.
- ✓ **Give employees ownership over their own assigned tasks.** Provide space for them to make decisions and develop approaches, while offering support and guidance in a manner that does not micromanage. Ownership fosters mutual trust and opportunity for growth.
- ✓ **Establish frequent check-ins to not only monitor progress toward goals, but to also assess what employees need to succeed.** Check-ins should provide opportunities for employees to share potential obstacles and collaborate with their supervisor on addressing identified obstacles.
- ✓ **Communicate administrative changes in a timely manner and share the underlying reasons.** For example: employees may need time to prepare for a change to hours of operation, which impacts commuting times and caretaking responsibilities. Recognizing that some changes may create substantial burdens and striving to accommodate impacted employees reduces stress, promotes transparency, and facilitates success at work.

Employee Support

- ✓ When receiving reports of violence, harassment, or abuse, **listen empathically and suspend judgement.** Recognize that questions asked to better understand a situation may be heard by the person reporting as not believing or judging them. For example: instead of asking "If your partner keeps hitting you, why don't you just leave?,"

ask, “What do you need from me to support you as you decide what to do?” Offer support, emphasize that their experience is not their fault, share available workplace resources, and ask what they need in order to feel safe and supported while at work. [See [Recognize: How Trauma Responses Can Show Up in the Workplace](#) for more guidance.]

- ✓ **Ask employees what skills they would like to develop and how they would like to advance.** Facilitate opportunities for their learning and professional growth. Help to clarify career pathways and foster connections with mentors motivated to help others grow. For example: provide information about skills sets and experience required for various positions and identify employees who are willing to provide career advice specific to certain skills and pathways. Take care to create connections among individuals with similar lived experiences.
- ✓ **Help build a sense of community by providing opportunities for mentorship** and encouraging the creation of—and fostering participation in—peer support structures among employees. Building community reduces the potential for isolation, lifts up those experiencing professional or personal adversity, and promotes a sense of belonging and teamwork.
- ✓ **Advocate for the supports and resources that employees have determined necessary for their safety, wellbeing, and ability to succeed.** For example: the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped the workplace, with many workers finding themselves working from home while others were deemed essential. Many employers responded to their remote workers’ needs for technological support or scheduling flexibility to care for children, while many essential workplaces provided personal protective equipment and enforced social distancing. [See “[Six Supportive Ways to Address Trauma](#)” for more.]

Personnel Management

- ✓ **Ensure all employees have received internal training and have the tools and resources necessary to execute their job duties.** Provide ongoing support by highlighting strengths and successes and offering mentorship opportunities.

- ✓ **Provide consistent and constructive feedback related to work performance and create opportunities to strengthen and enhance skills.** If improvement is needed, work collaboratively to establish reasonable goals and timeframes. No employee should be surprised during a performance evaluation.
- ✓ **Recognize that violence, trauma, and other hardships significantly impact an employee's job performance.** [See [Recognize](#) for background.] Conversations between a supervisor and an employee who is not meeting expectations should be predicated upon concern for the employee's challenges and how the supervisor can help. As an employee may be hesitant to disclose personal information due to fear or shame, be sure to share a variety of resources, such as an Employee Assistance Program, if applicable, and emphasize your role as an ally who is willing to help navigate potential accommodations.
- ✓ **Approach investigations of workplace incidents of violence or harassment with a recognition and understanding of trauma and resilience.** Everyone reacts to trauma in their own way. Some normal responses to trauma may not always make sense from your point of view. Some survivors many have stronger memories of tangential details such as the color of clothing or certain objects in a room rather than central details such as what time the incident occurred.
- ✓ **If someone you supervise uses violence or harassment within the workplace, advocate for the agency and choice of the individual harmed.** Strive to facilitate a mutually-agreed upon resolution that centers safety, healing, and the accountability of the person who caused harm. For example: depending on the nature of an incident, an employee who caused harm may need to be moved to a different location or assigned to a different shift in order to eliminate contact with survivors. However, severe harm that threatens the long-term safety of others may necessitate termination.
- ✓ **If someone you supervise uses violence or harassment outside of the workplace, recognize that such actions have a negative and harmful impact on the workplace's safety and wellbeing.** Approach the employee who used violence or harassment with care and non-judgment. Seek to connect them with support from local anti-violence organizations that offer intervention programs. Recognize

that actions perceived as a threat to their control are likely to escalate their violent or harassing conduct, not only at home but also within the workplace.

- ✓ When addressing circumstances involving an employee, **offer support while not making promises** you are unable to keep because of the limits of your role, the lack resources to follow through, or other barriers. For example: refrain from promising to have someone fired for harm they caused, as you may not have the power to guarantee such an outcome. Instead, while an investigation is pending, commit to working collaboratively with the employee harmed to identify and advocate for accommodations that will allow them to feel safe and be successful in the workplace.

Leading a Culture of Change

As workplace leaders, supervisors have the ability to foster an environment in which employees feel empowered, heard, and valued. Good supervisors create systems that encourage collaboration and build trust. They are flexible and responsive to changing conditions, whether internal or external. Supervisors who recognize that employees do not work in a vacuum and are impacted by a variety of circumstances beyond their control, work to reduce those impacts so that all employees can succeed. Further, supervisors recognize and realize the impact of organizational policies and structures that maintain harmful power dynamics and work to advocate for trauma-responsive systems throughout the organization. Practicing trauma-responsive supervision can be challenging so take small steps and recognize your own humanity, but those you support will see those efforts. By supervising with a trauma-response framework, supervisors can take an important step to help create a workplace culture in which employees feel safe, are able to succeed, contribute more effectively to teams, and advance the well-being of the workplaces as a whole.

Workplaces Respond provides technical assistance to workplace stakeholders seeking to better prevent and respond to domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and harassment impacting the workplace. Scan this QR code to access the Resource Center.



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