The Importance of a Trauma-Informed Approach to Workplace Investigations

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Human Resources and Labour Relations professionals are typically not clinicians, physicians, or social workers. So why has the vast and complicated area of “trauma”, more commonly relevant for those in medical or emergency services, become so crucial for us to understand? And more than that, what does being “trauma-informed” mean and how does it relate to workplace investigations?

To answer these questions, we must first begin with our raison d’être as a workplace investigator – that of being a fact-finder. Employing procedural fairness, our job is to piece together a workplace incident based on multiple perspectives and determine if wrongdoing has transpired. By interviewing all parties involved, we seek detailed information and assess credibility. We use our people skills to build rapport, we practice active listening and we avoid making assumptions about the outcome. How we conduct ourselves with all parties to an investigation has a direct impact on the quality of the information received (i.e., finding all the facts). This, in turn, affects the accuracy of the investigation’s outcome and the suitability of follow-up recommendations. Moreover, a well (or poorly) conducted investigation can have an impact on organizational trust (i.e., the employees’ trust in supervisors and the organization), which can lead to favourable (or detrimental) influence on overall organizational performance.

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) defines trauma as “…the lasting emotional response that often results from living through a distressing event.” One such context that is an exception to this rule is generational trauma, whereby a group of people with shared characteristics experiences trauma from systemic abuse, discrimination/racism, war, etc., and subsequent generations experience indirect suffering from those events.

CAMH continues to state that “Experiencing a traumatic event can harm a person’s sense of safety, sense of self, and ability to regulate emotions and navigate relationships. Long after the traumatic event occurs, people with trauma can often feel shame, helplessness, powerlessness and intense fear.” From this, we surmise that trauma can have long-lasting and wide-ranging adverse impacts on the individual beyond the immediate aftermath of a traumatic incident. It would then be fair to expect that such trauma is not left at home when employees come to the workplace.

Further, trauma need not only occur in employees’ personal lives but can also arise in the workplace itself, e.g. sexual assault, workplace violence or bullying, or even major
organizational decisions such as job cuts or reassignments that may significantly impact employees’ lives. We must also be cognizant that in today’s, and likely future, paradigm of remote work, this means an employee could experience a workplace trauma even from their home office.

Returning to trauma’s relevance vis-à-vis workplace investigations and our pursuit of the truth, we must recognize that one of our brain’s primary functions is to protect us from danger. In the aftermath of a traumatic event, neurological changes can occur in the brain (the housing unit for information) that impact how one remembers the traumatic event. These events can impact our authority over memory (i.e., the capacity to recall a trauma experience as a cohesive narrative), perception, and the ability to recount details of events.

By asking questions, we effectively ask - can you please enter your conventional memory storage unit and retrieve this piece of information? We know though for some, the impact of trauma may have altered the location of the memory housing unit and thus, the conventional (i.e., chronological) line of questioning may not be the best path to seek answers. Asking “what else happened?” may be better than “what happened next?”

Additionally, traumatic impact may cause a range of emotions that can influence the information sought, as emotional experiences/distresses can have significant impact on an individual’s response (or lack thereof) in the context of investigations. For example, an interviewee’s fear, shame, or anger may lead to outbursts which can derail an interview, curtail the individual’s cooperation, and prevent obtaining all the necessary and pertinent facts.

Because individuals respond differently to trauma, an investigator must be equipped to handle the process accordingly. However, the training, knowledge base, and skill set required to be trauma-informed does not mean we are now taking on the role of a psychologist (or the like) in carrying out a workplace investigation. A trauma-informed approach is an enhanced version of the skills and techniques we already employ as an investigator, and can be applied to widely-accepted successful interviewing approaches such as the PEACE method. It means first recognizing trauma, then understanding how, what, where, and when to ask questions, and then employing techniques and strategies that support a process for mitigating or reducing the possibility of re-traumatization.
Trauma-informed training offers skills and tools to help interviewees feel present, grounded, refocused, and safe. For example, it can help investigators de-escalate a flashback reaction, or keep an open mind when interpreting what some will find to be difficult behaviours like depression, anxiety, irritability, impatience, agitation, or anger. Even a panic attack can be misinterpreted, and possibly interpreted as a manifestation of guilt. It is important to recognize that an individual’s mastery of trauma-induced symptoms do not necessarily reflect a lack of credibility, such as a lack of eye contact, slumping posture, and/or reddening of the face and neck – all traditionally associated with shame and guilt.

If a trauma-informed approach is not employed correctly or at all, detrimental effects could include re-traumatizing the interviewee, which may result in an already distressed party going off on (longer) medical leave, or a lengthier investigation. Consequences could also include incomplete information and possibly insufficiently supported (or worse, erroneous) investigation outcomes. Further, if the investigation is perceived by employees as having been improperly conducted, there could be broader implications as organizational trust and reputation may suffer, and indirectly, so too could organizational performance.

However, by correctly employing a trauma-informed approach such that the interviewee feels safe in the interview, including exercising empathy, establishing rapport, and building trust, as well as giving the interviewee a sense of control (e.g. choice of returning to unanswered or difficult questions later in the interview), it should be expected that the interviewee will likely be more forthcoming with information and even willing to participate in a follow-up interview if necessary. Having obtained all pertinent information due to the “informed” approach, yielding the correct investigational outcome results in employees’ being more trusting of the investigation process, contributing towards organizational trust. With improved organizational trust, a culture of underreporting incidents might be positively shifted as employees gain faith that procedural fairness will consistently transpire and justice will be done.

To summarize, workplace investigators don’t need to be experts in neuro-psychology, they just have to have a basic level of trauma-informed training. This will help them create an environment of safety, remain neutral, and validate the psychological struggles interviewees may experience during an interview. As the saying goes, “one does not have to be a therapist to be therapeutic.”
Tips for Trauma-Informed Interviews

- Ensure the interview is conducted in a safe, private place and in an unhurried manner
- Exercise empathy, but do not say “I understand” or “I know how you feel”; use neutral language
- Plan your questions but be flexible - do not lead with the hardest questions first
- Maintain open-ended and non-suggestive questions
- Afford interviewees a sense of control by potentially returning to unanswered questions later, or seeking their permission before showing graphical evidence
- Minimize interruptions
- Permit a support person in the interview (though set guidelines as to the degree of their involvement)

Benefits of a Trauma-Informed Approach

- Avoid re-traumatization
- Higher yield of information
- More accurate investigation findings
- Indirect enhancement of organizational trust
- Reduce potential underreporting of incidents

About the Author

Tova Bar-Dayan, MIR, CHRL, WFA, is an independent HR/LR consultant and workplace investigator with progressive roles in both public and private sectors, in unionized and non-unionized environments. She takes great pride in conducting workplace investigations, assessments and restorations that are thorough, impartial, trauma-informed and, above all else, put people first. During her time in corporate roles as well as with her consulting firm, Tova has investigated claims of harassment, sexual harassment, workplace bullying, racism/anti-black racism, theft, improper conduct, and more, including those which could have resulted in significant litigation and/or reputational risk. This experience is bolstered by her status as a licensed private investigator (Ontario).