



# DEFENSE BASE ACT

DBA WHITE PAPER FOR ALLIED WORLD POLICYHOLDERS

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## MITIGATING THE RISK OF WORKPLACE TRAUMA

*Trauma poses a significant risk to an employee's performance impacting safety, quality and production. This paper draws on the literature, case studies and research while offering the appropriate ingredients to establish a culture that helps mitigate the risk of workplace trauma.*

### A PERSPECTIVE ON TRAUMA

Psychological trauma impacts an individual's psyche resulting from his or her involvement in or witnessing a seriously distressing event. There are a range of residual effects, such as changed behaviors, family problems and job performance. Fortunately, some seek help from professionals, family members, friends or coworkers. Unfortunately, others take refuge with drugs, alcohol or even suicide.

In this paper, we will focus on the impact that trauma has on job performance by providing specific examples, along with solutions to address this issue. The subject of trauma is complex, but supervisors with the help of professionals can assist in addressing the risks that can lead to catastrophic results. Trauma knows no boundaries. There are no industries immune to the traumatic impact resulting from horrific injuries or death. Consider the following:

- Those providing logistical support in a war zone have a high exposure to trauma complicated by the continuous risk of danger. First responders face similar challenges.
- The exposure to trauma exists in other organizations where a construction worker may fall from a steel beam during the construction of a high-rise building or an assembly worker may be electrocuted because of faulty wiring.
- While nurses may be in danger from a crazed or intoxicated patient, it's been demonstrated that the consistent exposure to wrangled bodies and traumatized friends and family of the patient takes its toll.
- Even in the most seemingly safe and quiet environment, workplace violence rears its ugly head and an individual may be killed by a spurned lover while on the job.

- Who can deny the heartbreak suffered by the parents, teachers and staff, and indeed the rest of the world, in the face of the horrific act of terrorism at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut.

The risk management professional is under constant pressure to minimize the likelihood of these types of occurrences. They require construction workers to be “tied off”; electrical equipment to be maintained; and the implementation of security practices and devices to protect the workplace. This paper goes beyond the traditional risk management interventions and addresses the compounding impact of trauma around two critical questions:

- 1) How do we minimize the impact of the external influences of trauma?
- 2) What are the essential attributes required of the supervisor as the first line of defense to establish a *Trauma Sensitive Culture*?

Don't expect a “one and done” training session as a solution. Rather, we will propose a process that prepares the supervisor to be a change agent. This process includes pre-training assessments; applied training where participants craft action plans using learned skills; classroom and on the job coaching; and follow-up as the basis for continuous improvement.

Let's start by addressing the two questions posed above.

## **1) HOW DO WE MINIMIZE THE IMPACT OF THE EXTERNAL INFLUENCES OF TRAUMA?**

Firefighters respond to a call anticipating how they might employ strategy and tactics to compromise the dangers of an incident whether it's a fire, a hazardous spill or extricating a broken body from a traffic accident. There is also the recognition that they themselves are probably going to be in some level of danger. These are the thoughts that run through their minds as they grab their equipment and race to their assigned locations.

This constant wear and tear takes its toll. It's not unlike a member of the Armed Forces in a combat zone or even civilians deployed to some remote part of the world. These individuals brace themselves and develop the mental toughness necessary to handle the pressure. But things can go wrong, often, very quickly.

Consider the case of Rob (the name is fictitious but the circumstances are real), a Philadelphia firefighter, a former Marine who was married and came from a firefighting family. One day, tragedy struck, not to him but to his lieutenant who was attempting to rescue Rob who got trapped in a burning building. His lieutenant was killed in the rescue effort.

After the incident, family and friends began to notice a change in Rob's behavior. He distanced himself from those who tried to help and, in time, he found himself divorced. The situation began to worsen until one day his family was notified that Rob had taken his own life. He was in the street with a bottle of vodka at his feet and a revolver in his hand.

Clearly, family and friends were devastated. Sometime after his death, a family friend and retired firefighter visited Rob's home to begin the cleanup process. In his basement, they found an “altar” with pictures of his fallen lieutenant, and the call sheet from the incident, along with some of the equipment used when his lieutenant was killed. It was then that the pieces of the puzzle began to take on new light. Rob killed himself on the anniversary of the death of his lieutenant and the same place where his lieutenant lost his life.

Leaders in the fire department in retrospect came to the realization of how critical it is to reach out to someone who is in crisis resulting from a trauma.

In the workplace or in the firehouse, it falls to the supervisor to be the first line of defense to mitigate the consequences of trauma. It's not enough to demonstrate a sense of rugged individualism or machismo. Instead, one must act in a nontraditional way to mitigate the impact of trauma. Trauma strikes in remarkably different ways. Today's challenges require a supervisor to be more attuned to the complex and challenging environment within which we live and further create a sustainable *Trauma Sensitive Culture*.

## **2) WHAT ARE THE ESSENTIAL ATTRIBUTES REQUIRED OF THE SUPERVISOR AS THE FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE, TO ESTABLISH A TRAUMA SENSITIVE CULTURE?**

The definitions of culture vary widely. We propose that a practical description of culture is one where the behaviors are predictable. When such behaviors are positive, the safety director takes steps to reinforce the culture to sustain that culture. When the behaviors are negative, the safety director develops corrective action plans. In either of these cases, the strategy for the safety director is clear - reinforce the positive or correct the negative. The greater challenge occurs when the culture is not clear and the behaviors are erratic and unpredictable. These situations require a more precise understanding of the drivers of behavior.

A *Trauma Sensitive Culture* is characterized by candid and open communications that, in turn, drives behavior. Members feel free to challenge management and the supervisor's decisions knowing that there will be no retribution. In fact, the enlightened supervisor welcomes such input in the interest of the greater good. In other words, the members trust their supervisors. This is the foundation upon which the sharing of information of a more sensitive nature is established. In this culture, supervisors are not intrusive, seeking personal information. Rather, members know that the supervisor is a source of comfort during difficult times and that the information shared will be held in confidence. In other words, the supervisor is a source of support based on trust.

We can make reasonable generalizations with certain types of organizations and their influence on behavior, specifically their reaction to trauma. For example, those in the military are conditioned to react to death and the horrors of others with a sense of stoicism, a necessary reaction given the nature of their job. Unfortunately, they carry these invisible scars into their civilian life and are often reluctant to seek help.

Their reluctance to seek help is no different either on or off the job. They don't trust their peers or superiors with either their fears or admit that their circumstances are overwhelming. This contributes to poor job performance, unsafe behaviors, alcoholism, substance abuse, divorce, and in the extreme, suicide. Unfortunately, this type of thinking is deeply embedded in these types of organizations making the transition to a *Trauma Sensitive Culture* difficult, but not impossible.

Supervisors can be supportive when they have the trust of the employee. We administered a carefully structured instrument to the emergency room staff of a well-known local hospital to gauge support. The responses to several statements are revealing.

Statement	% Agree/Uncertain
1. My supervisor is supportive when I experience trauma.	77.1%
2. Management is supportive when members of our organization experience trauma.	68.6%
3. Members of our organization believe we should handle trauma without the help of others.	17.1%

The response to statement #1 is somewhat encouraging. The supervisor is the first level of contact and support from the supervisor is critical. On the other hand, however, approximately one quarter of the supervisors are not characterized as being supportive, which clearly demonstrates the need for improvement.

The other area of concern is that management and supervisors are thinking somewhat differently. The level of support for supervisors is 77.1% while the level for managers is lower at 68.6%. The difference could be a source of tension between management and supervisors.

Responses to statement #3 indicate that a minority, 17.1%, demonstrate a “go it alone” attitude. Further research with larger organizations may indicate if the minority of non-trusting supervisors are successfully and unfortunately encouraging their employees not to seek help resulting from trauma. There are aspects of any culture that are important to recognize:

- The attitudes and behaviors associated with a *Trauma Sensitive Culture* cannot be turned on or off depending upon circumstances. Rather, the culture is ingrained in the organizations, often with predictable behaviors.
- Changing culture takes time, especially when a new way of thinking runs contrary to current and well-established beliefs.
- Simply stated, management establishes a vision and empowers supervisors to drive change.

### **PRODUCT WARNING EXAMPLE**

Read the label on any prescription or over-the-counter medication and you will find a warning. Essentially, the unintended use of the product can have negative outcomes. Likewise, the failure to follow the instructions on the use of the product may also have unintended consequences, some of them quite dire.

We advocate that supervisors should be trusted and exercise caution in matters involving their employees that are, at times, very personal. Consider again the case of Rob. Most often, supervisors and employees interact with each other daily, more so with firefighters who live in community. As such, if the supervisor is paying attention to his/her employee and are engaged, they are in a position to know when behaviors are changing. Had the supervisor reached out to Rob or if Rob trusted his supervisor and felt that he could confide in him, the outcome might have been different.

Mishandling these types of situations not only erodes trust but may lead to violations of corporate policy or even harassment. Clearly, these are not the intended outcomes. We also have to recognize that even the trusting, competent supervisor may become involved in situations beyond his or her capability to deal effectively with the situation. By analogy, we recognize that a minor fire can be effectively neutralized with a handheld extinguisher. Likewise, the threat of potential conflagration requires the immediate call to 911.

Supervisors must understand their limits and when a call to their senior report, employee relations expert or to an in-house lawyer is in order. The recommended rule of thumb is: **when in doubt, make the call.**

### **THE SUPERVISOR AS A DRIVER OF CHANGE**

With management support, the supervisor is at the forefront to execute change but is hindered by time, the unrelenting pressure to produce, and for some, inadequate interpersonal skills.

To demonstrate the last point, we conducted an assessment and separated responses between those who work for effective or ineffective supervisors and recorded performance scores around three key measures as recorded in the following table:

Measure	Effective	Ineffective	Comments
<b>Alignment</b>	<b>7.52</b>	<b>5.35</b>	Alignment is where everyone is on the same page. This measure is a well-recognized strength for an organization.
<b>Communication</b>	<b>7.53</b>	<b>5.75</b>	Respondents not only receive communications in a timely manner but feel free to question and disagree with their supervisor.
<b>Training</b>	<b>7.41</b>	<b>6.07</b>	Training extends beyond the formal and includes informal training either provided by the supervisor or peer training encouraged by the supervisor.

*Scores normalized to a 10 point scale, 10 is best*

The skills measured in the assessment include:

- **Maintaining Balance**  
The organization exerts pressure to perform. The situation lends itself to feelings by employees that management and the supervisors do not care about the employee. The skilled supervisor balances the pressures cascading from management above and the needs of employees below.
- **Engaging the Employee**  
Successful supervisors demonstrate a genuine interest in the personal development of the employee and recognize the strengths that the employee brings to the workplace.
- **Conducting Two-way Communications**  
This quality was recognized in research conducted by the American Institute of Chemical Engineers. They analyzed the series of high-profile disasters including Chernobyl, Three Mile Island and the first Space Shuttle Challenger. In the Challenger case, they found that an engineer warned of the potential catastrophe owing to the weather but his advice was ignored. The reasons one may not engage in this level of communication stems from:
  - Time, because, in fact it does takes time; or
  - Attitude, reflected in the statement “I as the supervisor knows what’s best”; or
  - Skills, for example, supervisors may not have the prerequisite effective listening talents that serve as the foundation of Two-way Communication.

## **EMPOWERING THE SUPERVISOR**

Training alone, as identified in item 2 below, is not enough. There are critical steps before and after training necessary to prepare the supervisor for an enhanced level of empowerment.

The components of this process include:

### **1. Pre-training Assessments**

Participants in the process must understand their individual strengths and weaknesses. Personal assessment instruments including the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and DiSC (measures of dominance, influence, steadiness and conscientiousness) are widely accepted and provide the individual valuable insights regarding their style and behaviors. The first priority is to select an instrument used in your organization. If there aren’t any currently used, we recommend the MBTI. Another valuable pre-training assessment is the 360° evaluation. This is a simple and easy to administer process. The subordinates and peers of the supervisor, along with his or her boss

complete a brief questionnaire. As a result, the supervisor receives an assessment of his/her skills, behaviors and values. Obviously this is done with assurances of confidentiality.

## 2. Applied Training

Participants interact with an instructor and learn the skills necessary to build trust. There is an emphasis on effective listening to achieve two-way communication that serves as the foundation to convey a sense of balance and a way to engage the employee in their personal development. The training session also presents ways to assess the organization so that the participant understands the internal and external influences on behaviors.

Understanding the environment and one's own strengths and weaknesses provides the opportunity to develop individual strategies and a detailed action plan so the participant can apply their findings and new found skills to the "back home environment".

## 3. Coaching

At times, participants will find difficulty accepting the feedback from the personal assessments. Others might become frustrated recognizing the necessity for change given the environment within which they work. In these cases, the training alone will be inadequate to prepare the supervisor to meet today's challenges. To address these situations, the process provides individual coaching during and after the session. For the process to be effective, the instructor must build the same sense of trust with the participant as the participant must build trust with their employees.

## 4. Follow-up

The detailed action plan is not just a classroom exercise. The participant must begin the process of executing the plan, under the guidance of the instructor, and be expected to adjust the plan as circumstances warrant. Ideally, the participant's manager becomes involved. Sometimes this works, sometimes it doesn't.

Usually, the process will take between six and to twelve months.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

We position trauma within the context of safety. However, one would quickly recognize that the benefits of a trusting relationship between the employee and the supervisor extends into a wide range of applications including morale, production, quality, customer service and those attributes that the organization deems essential to success.

Trauma is becoming increasingly more prevalent and at times difficult to understand. It tests the patience, skills and the imagination of the front line supervisor. Management must come to grips with current challenges and the recognition that yesterday's traditional solutions are insufficient to address today's complex problems. Management must have the self-confidence to take the lead and initiate the **steps necessary** to protect the organization and the health and welfare of their employees by considering empowering their supervisors as change agents.

We recommend **next steps** consistent with good risk assessment techniques:

### 1. Assess the vulnerabilities

Consider the influences beyond the obvious such as the potential for stress of relocations, among others.

2. **Look for the signals**

Examples include poor morale, absenteeism, poor attention to detail leading to accidents and injuries and a general malaise that's evident in the workplace.

3. **Get help**

Engage your peers, managers and select employees; talk to your AWAC Services loss control consultant who can provide perspective and may be available to facilitate a discussion within your organization.

4. **Be proactive**

There is a lot at stake.

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