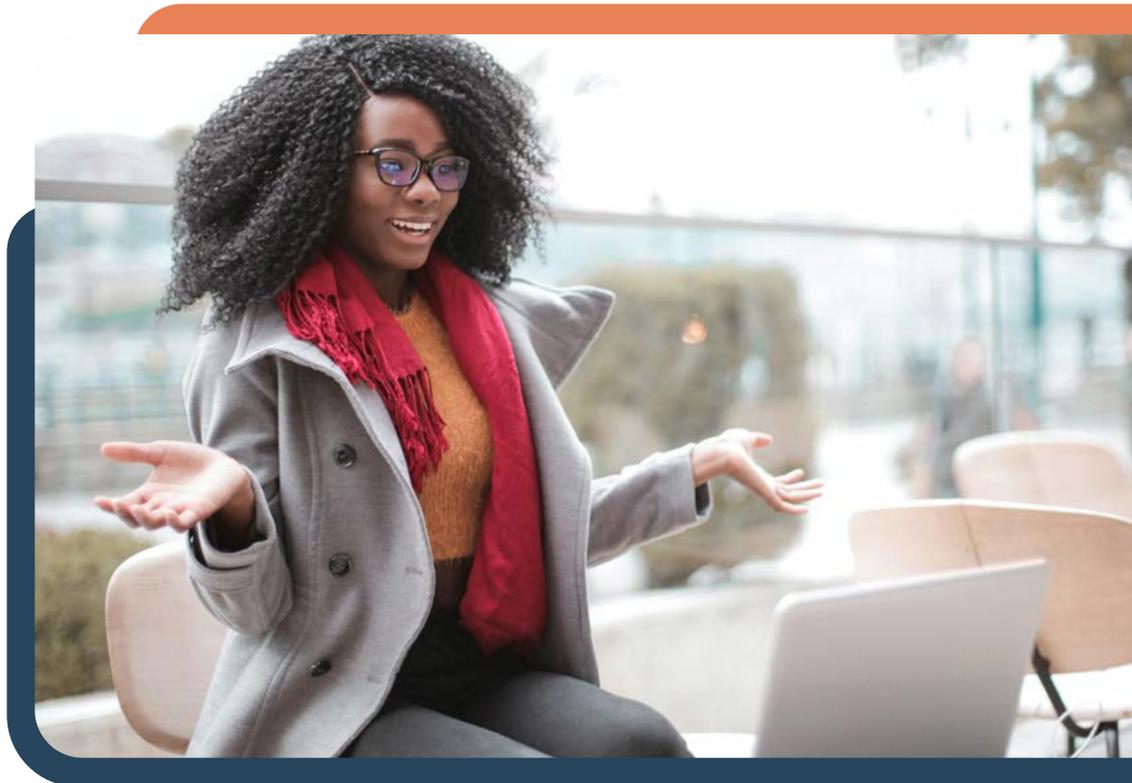


**Silver Linings International**  
Facilitating Positive Change

# **Top 5 Effective Ways Trauma-Informed Supervisors Retain Their Staff**

A White Paper for Supervisors in Health  
and Human Services Organizations



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# Introduction / Executive Summary

For supervisors in Health and Human Services organizations, it can be tough to know whether what you're doing is making a positive difference to help your employees and teams.

You got into the field to help people. Not just the people your organization serves, but also the people you work with and who work for you. All of you felt a calling to help others.

But there is no question jobs in the human services sector carry with them some downsides: lower pay, heavier careloads, overburdensome paperwork, and higher stress environments, just to name a few. Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) is a common job hazard for those directly serving vulnerable populations, like physicians, psychotherapists, human service workers, and first responders.

“Some of the documented negative organizational effects that can result from STS are increased absenteeism, impaired judgment, low productivity, poorer quality of work, higher staff turnover, and greater staff friction.”<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1<sup>3</sup>: Dissatisfied employees impact everyone in the workplace

That's why it's essential to be connected to your employees and have their pulse, to be able to support them when and where they need it, and create pathways to success. Valued and supported employees create happier workplaces, happier clients, and a more fulfilled supervisor – you!

The flip side is likely to cost you, your employees, your organization... and your clients.

According to Chron. Magazine<sup>2</sup>, dissatisfied employees are more likely to be tardy, call in sick, take longer breaks, have lower work quality, receive more complaints from co-workers and clients, complain more themselves – often about small things, and quit their jobs, leaving everyone else to pick up the slack.

But for every dissatisfying aspect of their job, your staff will stay if they are valued, respected, and feel like they are making a difference.

And when you retain happy, productive staff, everyone wins.

If you knew making a few adjustments in your supervisory approach would help you retain and support your staff, would you?

Silver Linings International (SLI) recently asked successful agency supervisors around the U.S. to help us understand what they've done to increase their employee's performance and feelings of psychological safety to offset the current, tough reality of working in the health and human services sector.

We also asked some of their employees what they wanted and needed to feel safe, happy, and supported in their jobs. They shared some tips on what works and what hurts.

## What You'll Get by Reading This Paper

In this paper, we'll share what supervisors have done to transform their workplace environments into safe and brave spaces where employees thrive by easily applying trauma-informed principles into everyday supervisory practices.

First, we'll dig into some of the current trends that are putting such a strain on human services organizations and making your job just that much more difficult.

When you're done reading this paper, you'll have information to help you be the supervisor everyone in your organization wants to work for, with happier employees and happier clients... and you'll be happier in your job.

## Why We Need Trauma-Informed Workplaces

We've all been going through a lot over the last few years – COVID, isolation, political upheaval, increased acts of aggression against minorities, increased acts of violence...

### According to a March 2022 article in the Harvard Business Review:

"...six in 10 men and five in 10 women experience at least one trauma, and approximately 6% of the population will experience PTSD at some point in their lives. Trauma and distress can arise from a wide array of causes, including domestic violence, sexual assault, racism, bias, harassment, economic uncertainty, political division, and more. New challenges arise every day, and conflict and strife anywhere in our globally connected world affect us all.<sup>4</sup>"

That means, in your workplace, there are likely to be employees who have experienced trauma that has impacted them. When you layer on top of that isolation due to pandemic measures and the new remote work environment many of us are still in, stress-inducing news headlines, and a constant barrage of those headlines across our devices, all of our employees are dealing with a lot.

This is especially noticeable in social services agencies and other health and human services organizations, where we intentionally hire staff with lived experiences who have faced challenges and previous trauma from the systems that served them. Multiply this with the added stressors of high demand, lower rates of pay, less room for advancement, heavily regulated environments with lots of red tape, clients often in crisis, and heavy careloads.

Managing the demands of such jobs calls for empathy and compassion, for sure. But if we stop there, we fail our employees. We need a very deliberate and systematic approach to creating a safe and healthy work environment. We need to improve the way we supervise by incorporating trauma-informed principles.

According to SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach guide<sup>5</sup>, there are six key principles of a trauma-informed approach:

- 1 Safety
- 2 Trustworthiness and Transparency
- 3 Peer Support
- 4 Collaboration and Mutuality
- 5 Empowerment, Voice, and Choice
- 6 Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues

The nuances of how you apply those principles to your supervisory practices, and the support in your organization for a trauma-informed approach will lead to a more satisfied workforce.

Even in the corporate world, many of these principles apply to teams in general. Google's Project Aristotle<sup>6</sup>, which ran from 2012 to 2014, resulted in findings that the strongest teams, with the most satisfied team members, had several traits in common... and you'll recognize many of those six principles of a trauma-informed approach.

#### Google's Project Aristotle Findings:

- 1 Psychological Safety
- 2 Dependability  
*Each team member trusting the others to do their part and know how all the parts fit together*
- 3 Structure and Clarity  
*Everyone on the team knowing what the goals are and what the expectations are to accomplish those goals*
- 4 Meaning  
*The work team members do must have meaning - employees need to understand the why behind what they're doing*
- 5 Leadership  
*The leader sets the tone for the team*

Research shows people are almost 35% more likely to stay in their jobs when they perceive they are supported by their supervisor.<sup>7</sup>

**So let's get into what supervisors are doing to transform their workplaces...**

# Top 5 Effective Ways Trauma-Informed Supervisors Retain Their Staff

## 1 Create psychologically safe spaces for more productive, more engaged employees

Staff we spoke to told us they need their supervisors to create safe spaces where they can share their challenges without interruption, judgment, or retribution.

Supervisors must be able to identify the 16 ways trauma shows up in the workplace,<sup>8</sup> which are natural defense mechanisms we all have when faced with stress or triggers. Instead of reacting to the defensive behavior, supervisors can allow themselves to become curious about what's going on and inquire about the behavior whether it be anger, absenteeism, etc. with a non-judgmental approach.

It's important to note that supervisors do not want to delve into past traumas. Rather, they should focus on the behavior they are witnessing and help the employee find more effective ways to better respond to what's going on for them. Holding staff accountable for their work and their behaviors, with kindness, will help employees feel safe and want to work harder and do better.

Psychological safety means the employee feels safe to share their struggles and concerns – and trusts those concerns will be heard and acknowledged. Organizational behavioral scientist Amy Edmondson of Harvard first introduced the construct of “team psychological safety” and defined it as “a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking.”<sup>9</sup>

Measuring the psychological safety of employees is a way to create a feedback loop and to see you've been successful. Adding a psychological safety assessment to your annual or biannual surveys can help measure progress and identify opportunities to strengthen the support you are providing.

One staff member shared with us that she was having trouble with a co-worker who wasn't doing her part of the team's work, causing the rest of the team to have to cover for her or to not be able to complete their own work.

Though she said her supervisor was nice, he had not created the environment for the team that made them feel comfortable sharing their concerns with him.

The result? Resentment, anger, and disengagement. When a supervisor doesn't hold staff accountable, coworkers either start complaining behind her back, some isolating from the co-worker, while others try to step into the supervisory role by telling the co-worker they need to start performing. In this scenario, the team is not functioning well, and passive aggressive or aggressive behaviors and conflicts begin to arise.

If the supervisor had established an environment with psychological safety for their employees, they would have brought the situation to the attention of the supervisor who could have decided to address the behavior with the individual one on one, avoiding the creation of this toxic team environment. Conversely, if the supervisor was paying attention to the behavior of the non-performing employee early on and helped them to create a plan to improve or take time off, the team would not have suffered. They would all feel safer and more supported.

Contrast that with a supervisory success story we heard.

Another supervisor, M, shared with us how she was able to reach an employee who was really struggling to do her job, for over a year. An employee who had been difficult for her co-workers and previous supervisors to engage with. An employee no one else had held accountable.

M followed the steps taught to her through a [Trauma-Informed Supervisors course](#) she took. First, she purposefully reached out to create a relationship with the employee by showing interest in her and forging a connection that showed her she respected her and wanted her to succeed. That led to discussions about how M could help her employee meet the requirements of her job.

M used tools she learned from the course to build a relationship full of clarity and mutual respect. The employee even thanked M for trusting her with high expectations and giving her the space and opportunity to succeed.

And the rest of M's team can trust that all team members are doing their share of the work and supporting each other to succeed.

In both scenarios, an employee is struggling to meet job expectations. However, the supervisor who consciously seeks to create a psychologically safe environment for all her employees ends up with a team that's higher functioning, collaborative, and has higher job satisfaction.

Measuring the psychological safety of employees is a critical feedback loop to assure you've been successful.

## 2 Create trust and role model transparency

A team won't model behavior if their leaders don't lead by example. When you try to hide all your faults and vulnerabilities, your team knows you're not being straight with them. And will likely hide things from you too.

This doesn't mean you share every detail about your life: that would be lacking an appropriate boundary. But, if you're having a bad day because you had to put your cat down, it's okay to let them know you need some space that day. This is important for two reasons.

- 1) You are modeling how to set boundaries and take care of yourself AND
- 2) Your staff won't assume they've done something wrong or that the shift in your energy is because they did something wrong.

This action will create mutual trust and transparency. That sets a precedent for them to do the same when they are struggling with something or need space.

One example of setting effective boundaries we heard about was from a supervisor at a social services agency was with respect to her work role.

She not only had supervisory responsibilities, but also had clients she needed to see. On the days when she had clients, she let her team know those clients were her priority. If they needed her, they could text her, and she would reply when she had breaks or at the end of the day.

She set the expectation that her staff would look to each other for support on days when she was unavailable.

As a result, her team helped each other get through the days when she was in the field, and she was able to juggle both roles without dropping any balls.

This sets the stage for an employee who may be having an issue at home to share that issue with you, so you have an understanding of why they might be late one day or have to leave early another.

You can then work together with that employee to ensure their work gets done instead of disciplining them for tardiness or causing them to hide their situation from you to the point that they engage in more defensive trauma-related behaviors, from calling in sick to resigning.

### **3 Work with the team to define acceptable communication standards to create psychological safety for everyone and keep team goals on track**

This one, we heard from every single person we spoke to... communication is critical for the healthy functioning of a team and the supervisor sets the tone for what is and is not acceptable communication.

Supervisors can also work with the members of their team to find out what works for each of them and put together a communication plan that works for all team members.

Good communication standards create safe spaces for every member of your team. They ensure everyone feels heard, respected, and supported.

If everyone on your team knows how to communicate with each other in a way that's collaborative and safe, they're much more likely to support each other, even when they face challenges or barriers. It is especially true with remote or hybrid working... communication must be increased between supervisor and team. Find new ways to normalize connecting in the virtual world.

One strategy/technique you could use, for example, is to hold a 15-minute morning touchpoint meeting, where you all hop on a Zoom call for 15 minutes each morning (or whenever works for your team's schedule) and discuss any concerns anyone had from the previous day, any help they might need for the upcoming day, and any announcements or updates you want them to know about.

You know your team best, so design something that works for everyone, but don't ignore their need to feel connected. Check in with your staff every day in some way.

Another way to strengthen communication might be if the supervisor is able to advocate for communication standards between teams at an agency or organization.

**Here are some considerations as you're designing your team communication standards:**

- ✓ Frequency of communications
- ✓ How do you want them to check in?
- ✓ Understanding what's appropriate to communicate and how to express themselves
- ✓ Emergencies (what is an emergency)
- ✓ Honoring off duty hours and not sending emails or calls after hours (unless that is demanded by the job)
- ✓ When texting is ok, when an email is ok, when face to face must happen, etc.

Leave nothing unspoken or there will be disconnects and resentments... and you must hold everyone accountable for upholding the agreed upon acceptable methods of communication.

One supervisor shared with us (you can read her success story below) that she started trivia contests and holds regular update sessions with her teams, who are all geographically separated, to ensure they know what's going on across her teams and across the organization as a whole and that they stay connected with the organization.

Especially in human services where part of a staff member's job may be to work with different teams to get their clients the help they need, having a supervisor who is advocating on their behalf to ensure they have the information they need to support their clients is critical. Having access to a supervisor, and to safe communication methods with a supervisor, is critical for the day to day and when things get tough.

**4 Create a team environment where members feel free to help each other and support each other through cultural connections**

We've said it before, but it bears repeating in this context: Human services careers can be very stressful and difficult to stay committed to. That's why it's so important that everyone on the team has each other's back.

It starts with hiring – making sure you're hiring for attitude as much as skillset is important not just for that person's specific job responsibilities but also for the good of the entire team. Think about a "cultural add" as opposed to hiring the same skill set/similar backgrounds that already exist. Trauma-informed supervisors never hire just to fill an open spot because they know you will risk the health of the entire team. Including the team in identifying the skillset or different perspective needed for the team to improve its total performance can really help the team gel. The right people will lighten the load for everyone, including you.

Also, define everyone's job duties and make sure everyone knows what everyone else's job duties are. Hold everyone accountable for their job duties.

Engaging the team in making connections across cultural expanses will help them grow and respect each other's gifts. Whether it's a generational gap, ethnic, religious, gender identity, communication preferences, neurodiversity, etc. – feeling connected to each other is the foundation for supporting each other.

Finding team building activities that are geared towards:

- Celebrating successes
- Embracing differences
- Taking calculated risks
- Solving interpersonal conflicts
- Effective peer supports

## 5 Create structure and accountability – and set high expectations

You should hold high expectations for your team members because those high expectations signal trust and an understanding that each team member is capable of doing work at that level. It shows you believe in them even before they believe in themselves. Staff with lived experience or traumatic backgrounds sometimes don't believe in themselves and they don't need low expectations. They need high expectations and need your support to reach those attainable goals through growing in their skill sets.

In Carol Dweck's *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, she shows how a growth mindset... i.e. believing people are capable of growing beyond their current abilities... is a key ingredient to that person's success.

In Appreciative Inquiry, there is a principle called Anticipatory Principle<sup>10</sup> which tells us that when people expect a certain outcome, whether positive or negative, it happens.

Do you remember the one teacher from high school who always believed in you, no matter what? Whose class you couldn't wait to attend? Who pushed you to be your best self? If you did have one of those, you probably still remember them because that teacher did what really good leaders do... believe in their charges.

One of the winners of the NYS Teacher of the Year award was an AP History teacher who encouraged any student in his high school to take his course. Now, history and math are the two subjects most students graduating from high school will say were their least favorite subjects, usually because of either the required level of rote memorization or a lack of understanding for how that information will be useful to them in the future... or both. So kids don't generally voluntarily take hard history courses unless they love history.

Greg Alquist, Webster Thomas High School NYS teacher of the year in 2013, shared that his philosophy of teaching was “I believe you can.” He believed any student in that school could learn history, and enjoy the process, simply because he believed in them... and he was right. He had kids at all levels of achievement taking and passing his AP History course.

And you can do that for your employees. When you give them structure within which to work, accountability to accomplish their responsibilities, and demonstrate to them that you believe they’re capable of achieving great things, they respond just like Greg Alquist’s students did... with enthusiasm for doing the hard work necessary to achieve their goals.

Those are the biggies we heard from the people we surveyed. But there are a few other things they want you to know...

- *“Yes, I’m in this job for the impact I can make, but I still have to pay my rent and eat... advocate for pay raises for me when you can.”*
- *“Red tape and bureaucratic policies can take away the joy of helping my clients, and sometimes make it almost impossible to help them... be willing to listen to my ideas for how to remove barriers and advocate for needed policy changes.”*
- *“Be flexible where you can about scheduling and work hours – If I can get the job done in a non-traditional work arrangement, be willing to entertain the option.”*
- *“Engage with us, involve us, connect with us – especially with the field work most social workers do and tele-visits that are often the norm now, positive team interactions keep us tied to the team and willing to continue doing the work.”*

## Conclusion

Supervisors who engage in trauma-informed practices have staff and team members who are more engaged, turn over less frequently, hold themselves to a higher standard, accept accountability for their actions, and do a better job for their clients.

The key areas you want to work on with your team are:

- 1 Psychological safety
- 2 Trust and transparency
- 3 Setting clear communication standards
- 4 Creating a supportive team environment
- 5 Setting high expectations

When you give your employees a safe space to share their concerns and issues with you in a positive, supportive environment, it leads to more productivity, not less. It generates higher work quality because you have a more satisfied team willing to do their part for the success of their clients and the overall team.

We’ll leave you with one incredible example of what an engaged, trauma-informed supervisor can do for her team and her organization.

## Kathy's Story

Kathy Rogers, a supervisor in a social services agency, and some of her co-workers went through a trauma-informed supervisor's training program in 2021.

Kathy says, *“We loved the Trauma-Informed Supervisor's course and we got others to take it because we were so vocal within our agency with how good it was and got our agency to approve others to take the course.”*

What did Kathy love so much about it?

Her implementation of the principles she learned has built cohesion and it has built agency identity amongst the various teams they have.

One thing Kathy has taken from the multitude of tools she got from the course? Connecting her staff through Trivia Contests. She started a fun trivia contest for all her staff – a creative idea she learned in the course. She creates fun queries about the agency, about staff roles, anything she thinks will get staff to think about their role within the bigger picture of the agency and the work the agency does.

Kathy believes those fun contests and other tools she now uses on a regular basis have helped the various, geographically dispersed teams become more cohesive and connected, creating healthy competition and better awareness of how their roles fit in the overall agency's role in helping families.

She has used the many tools she learned about to connect staff to each other, the agency, and back to the many supervisors who work under her directly leading teams of direct care staff. She has shared handouts and activities she learned with supervisors, empowering them to lead positively and with a trauma-informed lens.

The agency, having sent many of their leadership through the Trauma-Informed Supervisor's course, is very invested in the well-being of their staff. Kathy uses the survey tool from the course to regularly conduct psychological safety surveys every month, they have an 80% satisfaction across the agency.

In Kathy's teams, just as an example of what an engaged and trauma-informed supervisor can do for the health of her team, she has had 2 people that were offered more money in another part of the agency or another agency, and both chose to stay with her because of how good they felt at their jobs. In fact, one of them left to take the higher paying job and called a few months later asking to come back.

# About Debra Cady, LCSW and Silver Linings International

Debra Cady is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and **CEO and Founder of Silver Linings International, LLC (SLI)**. SLI offers certified appreciative inquiry facilitation, coaching, consulting, and training on how to achieve strength-based, positive change for individuals and organizations.

Debra combines her 35+ year career in behavioral health, specifically her experience as a trauma-informed manager, with her Appreciative Inquiry certification to deliver virtual training courses that create positive outcomes for children, youth and young adults and the people who work with them. Her trainings have given hundreds of people the tools they need to create better engagement and healing-centered energy in their workplaces.

## The Mission and Vision of Silver Linings International

We believe every human with mental health challenges deserves access to trusted and quality mental health services and support. We also believe that every staff member deserves to be heard, understood, and supported in their jobs. When practitioners and leaders thrive in the organization, they can make sustained, positive changes to the service system resulting in excellent care for all.

If you'd like to talk to Debra about how to get your staff trained on trauma-informed principles, or any of the other programs she offers, please visit her website at <https://www.silverliningsinternational.org/contact>.

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