

## A preview

This document is offered to you by Connecting books. You will get an introduction to the book *Stuck? Dealing with organizational trauma* by Philippe Bailleur, as well as a part of the book. Even though it's just a small part of the book, it will give you insights and solutions which will make your life better.

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Read more in the preview of *Stuck? Dealing with organizational trauma* written by Philippe Bailleur

## Organizations can get wounded too.

When it comes to organizational trauma, organizations often have the same attitude as individuals: they choose to deny what is difficult and painful. However, they'd actually benefit from paying attention to this phenomenon. Certain signs and symptoms, such as an increase in the number of burnout cases, a lack of creativity and entrepreneurship a growing feeling of rigidity in the daily functioning of the company,... are quickly attributed to individuals, instead of being seen as an expression of a suffering organization. But even when signs and symptoms present themselves through individuals, it's often the organization – as a living system – that is wounded and needs healing.

## Trauma, a systemic phenomenon

Because we're still used to link trauma to individuals, a definition will help in your further reading of this preview:

*Organizational trauma results from a major event, a series of drastic events or ongoing conditions, that are experienced as toxic or threatening to the survival, the coherence or the healthy functioning of a living system (team, department, group, organization etc.) because the ability to confine the intense, emotional charge that comes free, is overwhelmed. Often, this leads to an unhealthy dynamic that, suddenly or step by step, infiltrates the dynamics of that living system to the extent that its normal, resilient functioning is impaired. This exerts pressure upon the spiritual, mental, emotional and physical health of the employees who are part of that living system.*

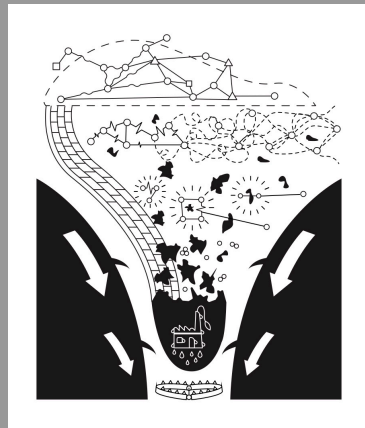
## Getting organizational trauma above the radar

In her TED talk, now viewed 2.5 million times, paediatrician Nadine Burke Harris talks about the impact of trauma incurred during childhood. According to her, unhealed trauma is the breeding ground for many problems that only surface in later life. They include health issues, depression, relationship problems and addiction.

At the beginning of her discourse, trauma appears to be rather exceptional, but as her story progresses, it becomes ever clearer that trauma actually branches out quite broadly into our society. We simply don't recognize it. Trauma is clearly

something we would prefer not to address—and that appears to have been the case for centuries. Probably because we used to feel relatively powerless. And that has consequences, because one of the keys to recovery or healing is to recognize and not deny the trauma. As such, in recent years—through research into the brain and more—such great progress has been made in the area of trauma that we are able to do something with it. It is therefore important that we pay attention to it. Trauma goes beyond the individual. Because we prefer not to associate ourselves with trauma – as if it’s a contagious disease – we try to trace it back to the individual. However, the assumption in that approach is incorrect. Trauma is always something that extends beyond the individual. In more group-oriented cultures, trauma – including the related healing rituals – is approached as something related to the group. This brings us to system trauma, a phenomenon that is particularly relevant to organizations.

Looking back on 20 years of experience as an organizational coach, Bailleur recognizes the same attitude as Nadine Burke Harris refers to. In organizations, people often choose to deny anything that is troublesome or painful, and they have an even greater tendency to trace certain symptoms back to individuals, rather than to see them as expressions of a suffering organization. As a result, an organization remains stuck in a kind of Trauma Trap (see Figure 1. And once again, this applies to far more organizations than we like to acknowledge.



Mind you, Bailleur is not talking about individual trauma, but about parts of organizations, or even whole organizations, that suffer under organizational trauma. Even though they present the symptoms via the individual, it is essentially the organization that is sick and in need of healing. Particularly powerful leadership is required to work on this because besides powerlessness, there is also talk of shame, making the Trauma Trap particularly difficult to escape from.

## Tracking down organizational trauma by zooming in and out

A first step in dealing with organizational trauma is becoming aware of its existence and tracking it down. In his book, Bailleur is offering plenty of examples that will help you recognize the signs and symptoms of organizational trauma. The increasing number of burnout cases in organizations could be a possible door to further

<sup>1</sup>Visuals by Hans Hoegaerts: [www.visualchangeagent.com](http://www.visualchangeagent.com)

recognizing this phenomenon. But there's just as much reason to start with declining figures, improper practices or more frequent customer complaints. Bailleur invites you – as a leader or a consultant – to become more alert if you begin to notice a sort of tenacity or even extreme rigidity in your work. But for now, let's focus on the increasing number of burnout cases. Most organizations immediately consider this phenomenon as something related to the individual: lacking resilience, being too perfectionistic, being unable to keep to their limits, or being too ambitious. In the worst cases, it results in the departure of the employee. With a little luck, there is support offered in the form of coaching.

But what if a certain department has noticeably struggled with short – and/or long – term absenteeism (including burnout)? Do you close your eyes to the fact that there may be something amiss in the organization? There are some organizations that stubbornly commit to this approach, whether it's because they aren't prepared to see their own faults, because management itself is in a stranglehold or because they simply don't know how they should approach the situation.

However, if there is talk of organizational trauma and the fallout of employees is actually a sort of cry for help from the underbelly of the organization, then sheltering or removing individual employees will not offer any solace. In that case, the employee becomes the proverbial miners' canary that's the first to drop from its perch. Such alarm signals invite us to zoom in at the level of the organization. Knowing that organizational trauma exists – and how to recognize, approach and even prevent it – is in this sense an entirely new world for leaders, managers and organizational developers. And as you will notice in the reading of the third chapter of the book, organizational trauma can originate in very different ways.

The following 19 pages are the contents pp. 87 to 106 of the book

# How organizational trauma arises

# 3

The Trauma Trap shows what can happen when the relational fabric of a living system comes under too much pressure. The pressure can be of external origin such as an environmental disaster, or internal such as mismanagement. The chance that now or in the future you'll have to deal with organizational trauma is substantial – whether you're an employee, the MD, an external consultant; whatever your role. There are a number of issues important to identifying and working with organizational trauma:

- Exactly what causes organizational trauma?
- How do you initially get on the scent of organizational trauma?
- How do the patterns, that ensure organizational trauma, fit together?
- How can you work with these patterns?
- How do you repair or heal the relational fabric of an organization?
- How might trauma-informed leadership help organizations to function in a healthy way while enduring the turbulence that trauma brings?

We've already seen that trauma is caused by an overwhelming event, series of events or by persistent, toxic conditions. Knowing what could cause organizational trauma will allow for earlier intervention and better ongoing guidance, should an organization be overcome by it. It would also permit the establishing of more-extensive preventive measures that would improve the resilience of the organization. It would ensure that certain, often unavoidable, decisions, such as closures or mergers, could be taken while bearing in mind the possible impact on the relational fabric of the organization. In short, trauma-informed leadership is an important condition for getting the best out of organizations and their people.

In the context of organizations, we can subdivide the origins of organizational trauma into four parts. These will be briefly discussed and clarified using specific examples. Then follows a series of insights and approaches that are critical to really getting to grips with organizational trauma.

So we come, again, to the difference between trauma with a small 't' and with a capital 'T'. As you move through the examples, you will notice that the subjective, less-tangible dimension, as shown in the Trauma

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Cube, increases. In this case, it is often very difficult for organizations to recognize that something is going on or wrong. Ways of recognition, that now exist in the area of individual trauma, are still largely unexplored in organizations. Often organizational trauma is just laughed-off or falls under a blanket of silence. This approach can appear to work – as long as business results are good – but, meanwhile, something damaging is developing under the surface (= ‘The Slow Killer’). Covering it up or ignoring it – as with unmourning grief – simply makes the problem more complex and working on it more difficult. Trauma patterns can also become entrenched in a system.

### 3.1 Origin 1: Sudden and external

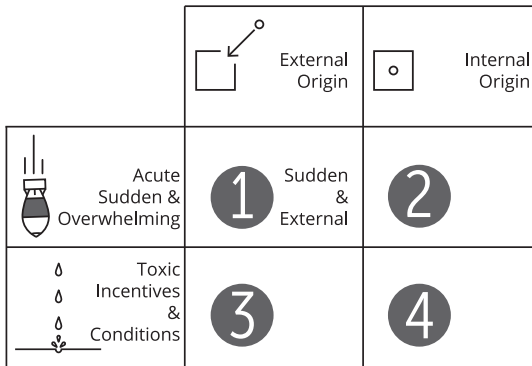


Figure 17: Sudden and external origin of organizational trauma

Some of the events, that cause organizational trauma, can be traced to a specific moment and originate outside the organization. They are acute, sudden and dramatic (= trauma with big ‘T’). Sometimes Nature can be brutal. Natural disasters, such as hurricanes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions and forest fires, are all examples of major events that can overwhelm and seriously damage a family, village or organization.

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The pace and level of human development has also given us the capacity to do massive damage to people, places and the planet. Atomic bombs, terrorist attacks, nuclear accidents or oil spills can turn the world upside down in an instant. Here are some recent examples:

*September 11, 2001 was a wake-up call for the whole world: two aircraft were deliberately flown into the WTC, aka the Twin Towers, in New York. Local communities, organizations with offices there, family members of those who died, the whole world in fact, were deeply affected by this terrorist attack.*

This major event touched, and touches still, the families of all the victims, but also the relational fabric of the organizations involved. 9/11 is an extreme example of the damage man can do. It can be useful to track this example across the faces of the Trauma Cube and see just how widely it is spread.

There have been other examples from the world of aviation; a series of recent disasters involving aircraft.

*In 2014, Malaysia Airlines lost two passenger aircraft with a total of more than 500 passengers on board. One plane disappeared in the Indian Ocean, the other was shot down over Ukraine during fierce battles between the Ukrainian armed forces and pro-Russian separatists.*

*A year later, Germanwings co-pilot Andreas Lubitz flew a passenger plane into the side of a mountain in the French Alps. It was a very costly suicide: Lubitz took 150 passengers with him to their graves.*

That these drastic events had a heavy impact on the airlines involved is clear. But what we don't know is what kind of indirect effect this had. On each of those flights were business people, sometimes several from the same company. So you could say the passengers and the airlines were the primary victims and the passengers' employers, as they were not directly involved, were secondary victims. This applies, too, for the families of all the people who perished.

In the Netherlands, from where most of the victims of the Malaysian Airlines flight came, exceptional attention was given to the aftermath of

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the disaster, including an official national war commemoration service. But how and what place the two airlines gave to the disaster remains unclear. When something like this happens, organizations often close themselves off to the outside world.

Wars still cause a lot of suffering. Terrorism – once relatively rare in the Western world – is now a frequent and global threat. In recent years, the world has seen a host of large-scale terrorist attacks: 9/11 was the first deliberately-public attack of that size, and the domino effect continues, apparently unabated. There was the attack on the French satirical weekly magazine *Charlie Hebdo*; the shooting at the Paris concert hall *Le Bataclan*; the recent attacks at Brussels Airport and on the Brussels subway and, in Nice, France, the truck driven into the crowd celebrating Bastille Day. The list gets ever longer: Berlin; Stockholm; London; Paris; Manchester...

A final, and far less-distressing example in this category, is when an organization unexpectedly loses essential funding. If money or support, that was fundamental to future plans, suddenly becomes unavailable, then there is nothing immediately ready to fill that gap. This can lead to bankruptcies or painful layoffs, especially in small, start-up companies, or in institutions – such as hospitals, cultural centers, schools and so on – that often depend on subsidies for funding. Some organizations make the best of such situations and find the strength to persevere, while others are so deeply affected that they either never fully recover or they cease to exist.

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### 3.2 Origin 2: Sudden and internal





	 External Origin	 Internal Origin
 Acute Sudden & Overwhelming	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b> Sudden & Internal
 Toxic Incentives & Conditions	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>

Figure 18: Sudden and internal origin of organizational trauma

Major events can also occur via an organization's everyday operations. In practice, this means also that the origin of the pain, the proverbial perpetrator, is a part of the organization or even can be the organization itself. Experience shows that this often sets loose a totally different dynamic, one that makes the road to recovery a whole lot tougher. This occurs more regularly in certain industries due to the nature of the work. Employees of hospitals, nursing homes, psychiatric institutions and other care-giving bodies often face situations that are profoundly difficult for their patients, clients or family members. When employees have to face this kind of situation – even when it is not actually about them – it still affects them and the relational fabric of their organization. As mentioned earlier, in these cases, we use the term 'vicarious' trauma to describe the way it seeps into, for example, aid workers and carers, through the 'emotional' pores of their skin.

Whether it happens to someone suddenly or it seeps in over time because employees are constantly dealing with others' suffering, a person working in a hospital's emergency department, an on-duty doctor for example, has to face death every working day. Critically-ill patients come under his care: some survive – he 'saves' them – and some do not. Dur-

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ing such a career, a doctor might be intimately face-to-face with 1,000 or more people who die in or soon after his care. And just like this emergency medical practitioner, there are many professions that are constantly confronted with this kind of deeply-affecting situation. The professions call this 'compassion fatigue': the psychological damage suffered by carers who are constantly confronted with illness, dying and death. It is worth noting that, in such cases, there is no organizational trauma; more likely there are multiple employees with individual trauma. This has, to some degree and at some cost, to be carried by the relational fabric of the organization. And so we come to our next example:

No matter how carefully and precisely everything might take place in a hospital, things do, inevitably, go wrong. And medical errors can lead to deaths, such as Catherine's newborn baby (see preface). Sometimes it is very clear that a medical error was made, and sometimes it is not. But clarity doesn't necessarily help: either situation can completely paralyze an organization. Such a sudden event injures a team or organization to the core and, in one blow, smashes the relational fabric to the bottom of the Trauma Trap.

Often the quality of the triage, the immediate reception and care of people and groups, is crucial to reducing the chances of individual and organizational trauma developing. However, in practice, we see a different way of responding to major internal events that come from within the organization – compared to external. With a physical attack, the origin is clearly external. Having a visible, external enemy often seems to motivate, connect and mobilize victims and aid organizations. We see a similar phenomenon in terrorist attacks. People are more selfless, they look out for each other. Recovery activities, events and rituals are organized together. It is easier to find care and shelter. The relational fabric is, to a degree, re-activated and this provides support and recognition. Mind you, in spite of this, victims are often still left out in the cold. What we determined earlier, is that an internal event causes much deeper damage and paralysis within the organization. In addition, a completely different dynamic is triggered when there is a need to identify exactly what went wrong, and who might have been negligent. At the exact moment that healing action is necessary – to restore the relational fabric – this 'blaming' dynamic gives precedence to legal and insurance issues, blocking what is really needed.

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*In a hospital, a medical error occurred, leading to the death of a teenager. Pressure on the department where the error was made was particularly high for several years, making the resilience of the relational fabric particularly fragile. The parents started a legal battle that lasted five years and, for those five years, time stood still for the medical teams involved. Only after the official report was published was there even a little bit of safe space for people to talk about the events with each other. Some people had already left the hospital. The split between certain people, teams and departments had grown so wide it had become irreparable. Meanwhile, shame and grief had nestled deeply under the surface and teams were stuck in an obstinate 'blaming' dynamic.*

Over time, we have learned that the safe space needed, to reduce the risk of organizational trauma, can be completely eradicated if one starts looking for a guilty person, process or event. Doing so tends to cause total paralysis. It is possible for this approach to work, but it requires extraordinary levels of maturity in all concerned.

Industrial and workplace accidents that are fatal or cause permanent disability also take a severe toll on the victim, colleagues and family. This is another clear example of a major internal event which, in the absence of appropriate guidance and response, can cause organizational trauma.

*An organization was faced with two fatal accidents and a suicide (which the deceased's colleagues had seen coming) over a period of fifteen years. There followed a judicial inquiry. To avoid persecution and negative press coverage, very little was communicated. There was much shame and fear of prosecution with all involved: the management, the executive and the colleagues. These choices, however, gave no room for emotions to be naturally expressed and worked through.*

*Years later, an organizational coach was hired because the management was experiencing a lot of resistance from employees. During exploratory interviews it became evident that this 'resistance' had its roots in a bilateral lack of respect and confidence. In addition, there was a bullying problem among the employees. Once there was clarity around the organization's*

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*history, it became obvious that the issue was organizational trauma. Rather coincidentally, the coach had experience in dealing with organizational trauma. This opened the door for dealing with the unhealed trauma that had its origin in a combination of easily-identifiable major events, that had not been addressed. It was these events that pushed the organization into the Trauma Trap.*

Because the scale of these examples is narrower – it's not about multiple people as with a disaster or a terrorist attack – what happens will be forgotten sooner. But the chance is high that the event will continue to affect the family members, the parties themselves and the colleagues in one way or another. What is important in these examples is the fact that exactly by not dealing transparently with the various deaths or accidents, an unhealthy dynamic is established, in the culture of the organization that, step by step, starts to impair its daily operations. However, it doesn't always need a serious incident. Here's another example of how an organization might find itself in the Trauma Trap.

*A recently-established foundation had a particularly open and participatory culture. There was a deep trust in and between employees and good work was done with and for the clients (people with mental handicaps). The foundation was also embraced by the local community. One day, however, an accounting error was found. A large sum of money had disappeared and, due to the blind-faith culture, no perpetrator could be identified. The fact that people who had always worked in an atmosphere of transparency and trust suddenly ended up in an atmosphere of distrust and suspicion caused an immediate, deep wound in the organization's fabric. You could call it a shock to the organization's soul. Fortunately, the managers were committed to providing space for everyone to exchange and air their views and grievances. The organization lost something through the incident, but also learned something. During the recovery period, clearer agreements were made on a number of issues and more control was built into a number of processes.*

For certain organizations, such an incident would have had little or no impact. In this organization, the impact was exceptional for various rea-

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sons. First and foremost, it had a direct impact on the core values of the organization, exacerbated by the fact that the organization was very dependent on grants and donations. The incident threatened its basic functioning and core values. This example emphasizes that you cannot simply create a list of what might or might not lead to organizational trauma.

The following is worth bearing in mind when discussing the internal or external origin of organizational trauma, especially sudden, unexpected, overwhelming events:

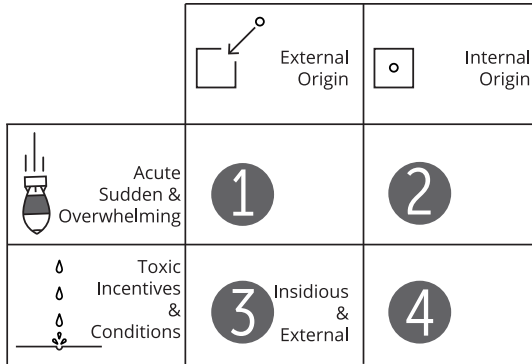
- A clear-cut, profound event that is not properly addressed at the moment itself can cause organizational trauma.
- It might, however strange it might sound, also provide growth and development (= Post-Traumatic Growth), provided that one addresses it right away. When the origin is external, this chance that something positive ensues, seems to be greater.
- In practice we provide appropriate care and intervention before legal and/or insurance requirements impair the chances for recovery. When we do not act in time, the organization can spend an extended period of time stuck in the lower layers of the Trauma Trap, ensuring that organizational trauma becomes imbedded in the dynamics of the organization, making eventual healing significantly more difficult.

Our definition tells us that organizational trauma need not always be of acute origin. So we come to the following two categories.

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**3.3 Origin 3: Insidious and external**



*Figure 19: Insidious and external origin of organizational trauma*

Organizational trauma can also develop in a more subtle way (The Slow Killer), through a combination of seemingly minor events (= trauma with small ‘t’) or ongoing toxic conditions which ultimately can have the same destructive impact. These events too can push an organization down to the bottom of the Trauma Trap. We are now moving into the area of the invisible and elusive aspects of groups and organizations, which we encountered as we deepened our understanding of the Trauma Cube. The more-subtle these are, the greater the awareness needed and the more-challenging the task of spotting them.

A perhaps unpleasant, but nevertheless excellent comparison, is the classic Chinese torture technique of gradually letting water drip onto the forehead of the victim until he breaks mentally. Unless you knew of this as a torture technique, you would never believe that a tiny drop of water on the forehead could drive someone to madness. In a similar way, it might seem unlikely that certain working conditions could have a similar effect until you find yourself working in such a traumatizing situation.

In any case, persistent (emotionally) overpowering, toxic conditions (aka allostatic load) can cause a group of people – a living system – to lose its balance, or the mechanism that should ensure balance, to become

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completely disrupted. This is currently being discussed in more and more organizations. The impact of ongoing stressful circumstances can thus be as great as the impact of a single, overwhelming event. Certainly, if you want to draw attention to this kind of organizational trauma, it is essential to give people insight into the cost of certain negative dynamics or behaviors.

These overpowering conditions can originate in the outside world of a company. In that case, we are not talking about a single overwhelming event such as a terrorist attack, but about persistent stressors or circumstances from the environment to which an organization is constantly exposed, like the 'Chinese' water torturing. This threat might arise independently of the organization's involvement, but the initial trigger or the cause, could equally be from within the organization itself, as shown in the following example.

*In the mid-1950s, a particular drug was often prescribed to counteract nausea in pregnant women. This drug was found to affect the fetus, causing more than ten thousand children to be born with birth defects. When the link between the abnormalities and the drug was demonstrated, the producer immediately removed it from the market.*

*Like many organizations who find themselves in such a difficult situation, the producer initially stayed silent. A silence only broken 50 years later with a statement from the CEO wherein he expressed his personal apologies and those of the company as a whole. His statement was accompanied by the erection of a bronze statue of a malformed child in the organization's headquarters. It took half a century, he said, because the company was in shock and did not know how to respond.*

*For years, the company had denied any claims for compensation by stating that it acted according to the current standards regarding drugs testing. It was precisely this (lack of) action, that affected the parents and children because it did not give them the recognition they asked for. Consequently, they continued to besiege the organization for years with claims for justice ... and this caused constant tension on all sides.*

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The example shows a tendency in some organizations not to respond to a major event. Partly because the organization is in shock, but partly to avoid compensation claims. This ensures there is no completion for all involved and so the organization continues to be haunted by its past. This guarantees a constant, latent unrest. Whether intentionally or not, as long as an offender avoids responsibility for the consequences of his or her actions, the healing process gets stuck in its earliest stages. There might be no financial compensation, but there will also never be any peace. It is similar to a hit-and-run traffic accident, and it brings similar dynamics.

If new management is in place, it is often thought that the company can then turn over a new page. But this simply does not work. Just as trauma in families can be passed down from generation to generation, so can organizational trauma. When there is denial instead of recognition, the event, the issue, cannot find rest. In organizations where there is organizational trauma, an important responsibility falls on the leadership. It is in such moments that greatness might show itself. As a leader you must learn to recognize, allow or create these essential opportunities for recognition and healing. After all, every time such an opportunity is missed, the fires of denial are fuelled again, reinforcing the power of the Trauma Trap. We often see this in organizations that deny the effects – intentionally or otherwise – of the damage caused.

Denial can take many forms:

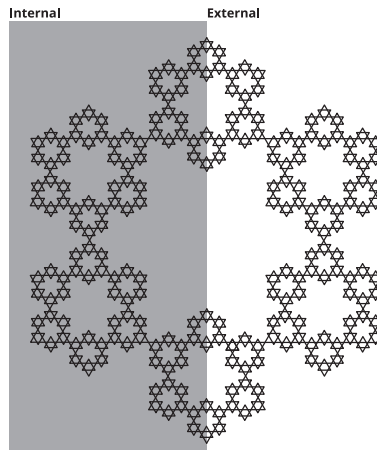
- Years of silence (internal and external), based on rational, legal thinking.
- Pass the (responsibility) buck by relying on legislation or legal constructions.
- Avoid costs by ignoring compensation claims.
- Ensure no authentic contact with the victims by channeling all communication through mediators, lawyers and so on.
- Any recognition of what happened should be formal not personal in order to protect the organization's image. For example, via the media instead of face to face with the victims.

Such events often involve a mechanistic illusion. Initially, it seems that the organization (as an institute) and the victims (as a group) are the only

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players. Secondly, it seems that something gets 'left behind' in time, like turning over a page. However, the inside and outside worlds cannot be separated. The chances are that the dynamics of the relationship with the outside world will color the internal dynamics of the organization. The chance is higher that similar patterns will unfold inside the organization: covering-up of failures, sticking exactly to procedures, avoiding authentic connection, refusing to take responsibility for errors and so on. Like a fractal the repeating pattern contains and reflects everything that arises in the organization's relationship with the outside and ensures it manifests in the dynamics of the organization.



*Figure 20: Fractal: as inside so outside*

If you're new to systemic thinking, the example above is worth taking time out to consider, with the Trauma Cube and the Trauma Trap 'at hand'. Examine what happened, what followed once the negative effects of the nausea-drug became clear, who was involved or impacted and in what way, the dynamics inside and around the company, the actions and inter-

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ventions, the effects pre and post any healing intervention. The following steps started to open up the path to healing:

- The public apology by the CEO. Even though it was fifty years late and made by a CEO who played no part in the tragedy. This was the first public recognition of the event.
- The organizing of an inauguration ritual for the statue at the head office. Rituals and symbols have been used for centuries to complete certain stages and transitions or to mark certain events in history, in such a way that those phenomena can no longer be made invisible by denial.
- Sitting down with the victims in a more authentic, problem-solving way, to work towards a correct settlement and/or compensation.
- The matter was given formal recognition in the history of the organization, including a comprehensive account on the company website.

Finally, it is important to point out that this affair had a positive consequence too: it brought about a total overhaul of pharmaceutical testing and marketing regulations. When the causes of trauma are recognized, the chances of growth and development increase.

At present, healthcare organizations in most countries are struggling with challenges in several key areas: budgets, growing demand on scarce resources and extreme quality requirements. Whole organizations are only just keeping their heads above water. More and more people, in vulnerable target groups, are falling by the wayside. Employees often compensate, for example, by working longer hours at their own expense, at the cost of their own resilience. At the same time, it becomes clear that a sick or depleted organization cannot really offer quality care. And the soul of such organizations, the wellspring of the inspiration they need, runs dry. Unfortunately, care without soul is not care at all. Many organizations in the industry operate within very narrow margins. Let's hope that this forward-looking, budget-oriented stampede will eventually be reined back and find balance again.

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### 3.4 Origin 4: Insidious and internal

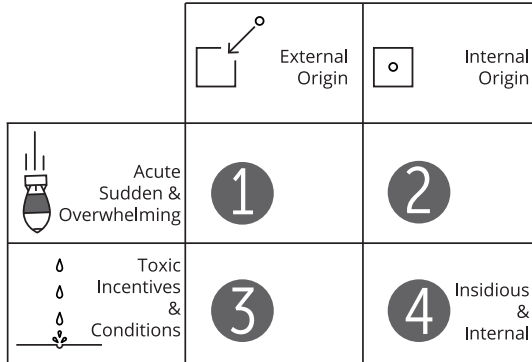


Figure 21: Insidious and internal origin of organizational trauma

Ongoing toxic conditions can also originate in the company. Below is an example of this quiet, creeping form.

*A consultancy firm, founded by three independent professionals, with a handful of employees, struggled with some tricky organizational issues of their own. So they hired a coach. During exploratory interviews a pattern emerged. The common theme, in every conversation, was trust or lack of it.*

*Step by step an important event was revealed that had not been given a place in this young, dynamic organization. Initially, each partner had shared all their contacts and networks with the other partners. In just the first year, one of the partners – despite agreements to the contrary – left, taking all the contacts and information from the other partners. This action was deeply in conflict with the values that the founders wanted to cultivate in their organization.*

*Although the partners experienced this event as very disloyal and unethical, they had no idea it might have an impact on the*

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*future functioning of the organization. They did not ‘process’ it and so it kept on working, down in the hidden dynamics of the company. What seemed to be an issue for the partners alone, over time became a sticky dynamic affecting the whole organization.*

People who are not initially involved often are kept out of such a situation or incident. Either because it really does not involve them or because the people concerned do not want to hang out their dirty laundry. Often enough, there are solid, rational reasons for these choices. But, unfortunately, this rarely ensures things stay private, even when they are never mentioned. We have seen that what is not spoken out can subtly accumulate in an organization’s dynamics. With the right kind of sensitivity you can ‘feel’ it, just as you can feel the tension between two people, even though they never speak of it.

What shows here is a particular mechanism by which living systems try to stay healthy: when something that is not healed stays neglected, it often manifests symptoms in other places. Looking systemically at organizations means knowing that certain symptoms might well be cries for attention by what is – as yet – unhealed.

The fabric of an organization or a team can also become brittle, or even tear, through a damaging or inappropriate management style.

*A small team was completely stunned by an unfortunate change of circumstances. The company was in a highly-competitive market and pressure on employees and resources was intense. Due to the fairly high cost structure, there was no spare capacity: employees had to respond very promptly and correctly to questions and complaints from customers. Any mistake made by the team was immediately passed on to the sales director. The team manager was himself a perfectionist, allergic to emotions, and led the team in an extremely rigid way.*

*In addition, it was not always easy to plan for (normal) absences such as holidays or medical appointments, as all the employees were part-time and it was essential that a certain minimum number were present. Coincidentally, all the employees had painful, personal histories, giving them little individual re-*

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STUCK? DEALING WITH ORGANIZATIONAL TRAUMA

*silience. Every time there was a problem with the team's performance or if someone made a mistake, tension increased. As a result, the manager gave the team less and less space to manage themselves. Willingness to step in for each other decreased, mutual rancor grew and collaboration became extremely rigid. The whole team had fallen into the Trauma Trap.*

Hyper-sensitive employees, combined with a manager who cannot tolerate or process any emotions, make for a deadly cocktail. Just like a muscle must be trained, the ability of a team to manage emotions requires practice. Without this, the relational fabric of the team is disrupted by the slightest 'injury'. Rigidity increases in a counterproductive attempt to avoid being re-stimulated. Unfortunately, the more rigid a living system is, the more sensitive it becomes to disruption. It is a vicious circle that opens the doors of the Trauma Trap as wide as possible.

In the context of the two insidious types of trauma it is important to remember the following:

- It is not only drastic/overwhelming events that lead to organizational trauma;
- The vulnerability or position of an organization in the Trauma Trap, however, allows particular, seemingly trivial, stimuli to have a particularly adverse impact;
- Facing-up to internal sources of organizational trauma will be even more difficult for organizations;
- For certain, organizations working with vulnerable target groups, and especially when the pressure on those organizations and employees is too high, will no longer be possible in a qualitative, sustainable manner.

These four categories – sudden and external, sudden and internal, insidious and external, insidious and internal – give us our first impression of the possible origins of organizational trauma. In Part III we take a closer look at the role of traumas' origins in helping or hindering the healing process.

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To close this part, there follows a brief list of fields in which people are investigating organizational trauma as described in the four categories discussed above. This accurately reflects the breadth of current research.

Take a moment to link the following examples with one of the four categories:

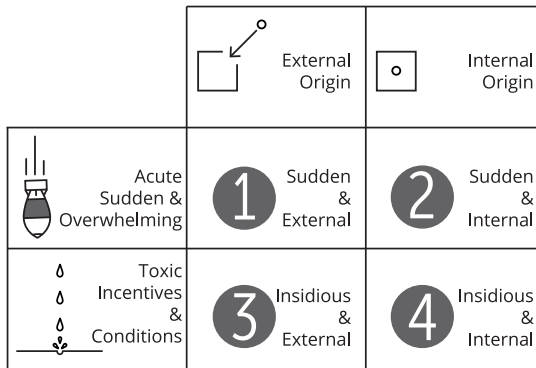


Figure 22: Overview of origins of organizational trauma

- Adverse effects of organizational processes such as procedures, management and governance;
- Scandal, theft, fraud, ethical issues, environmental damage, damage to the community;
- Inappropriate treatment of employees such as bullying, mobbing, discrimination, toxic working conditions both physical and mental;
- Major organizational changes such as mergers, acquisitions and downsizings;
- Unpredictable, turbulent market conditions within a particular sector;
- Human or organizational mistakes;
- Deaths, serious injuries, hostage-taking of members of the organization;

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- Workplace accidents, security issues, high risk situations;
- Technological disasters, explosions, environmental disasters and serious accidents such as train and airplane crashes;
- Professions with stressful work and working conditions that negatively-impact employee resilience, such as the fire service, police, hospitals, the military, aid workers operating in dangerous locations or with dangerous diseases;
- Natural disasters such as forest fires, floods, earthquakes and tsunami;
- Epidemics like the Ebola and Zika viruses and any crisis in the field of public health;
- Financial and economic crises;
- Political persecution/oppression and (civil) wars;
- Terrorist attacks, mass murders.

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## Trauma-informed Leadership a must

No one will be surprised to read that leadership is a crucial factor in maintaining or regaining the health of an organization. In a world that's becoming increasingly complex and turbulent, organizations are becoming increasingly vulnerable. In this day and age, it is only appropriate that management is open to learning about this sort of phenomenon, both preventatively and curatively. Fortunately, it's becoming clearer and clearer that the overall health of the organization is paramount to surviving a VUCA world.

This book is a must read for people that care about the health of organizations. It will help you to recognize the signs and symptoms of organizational trauma and it will learn you how to deal with it in a preventive and curative way.

## Reading more?

In *Stuck? Dealing with organizational trauma*, Philippe Bailleur takes you all the way into this fascinating phenomenon which is still under the radar of Corporate Leaders and a lot of OD consultants, although it can become a slow killer for the effectiveness of companies. Through practical examples, you'll learn to recognize the signs and symptoms of organizational trauma. The book also offers several tracks to deal with it. It gives words to a phenomenon that you probably already have experienced in a more intuitive way. Go to [www.traumainorganizations.com](http://www.traumainorganizations.com) for more information

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## About Philippe Bailleur



Philippe Bailleur was born in Belgium, educated at the Royal Military Academy in Brussels, and spent a number of years working at the Melsbroek Air Transport Base of the Belgian Airforce. In 1996, just after his appointment as a personnel officer, a Hercules transport aeroplane crashed. All crew members (Belgian) and passengers (Dutch) lost their lives. This overwhelming event defined his career. From then on he chose to focus on guiding organizations. For 20 years, he has worked as an organizational coach in a large variety of organizations. This book is the harvest of his personal and professional journey.

## About Connecting Books

Connecting Books is a collaboration between authors from the Netherlands and Belgium, who, via their books, give you access to knowledge about systems. The books are practical, in-depth and offer answers to the questions of today. The authors are leaders in their field as consultants and coaches. Stuck? Dealing with organizational trauma is part of the Systemic Essentials series. Other titles include:

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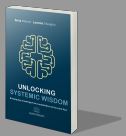
Control your life through insight into your family system. The fountain clarifies your place within your family system. And when you can take your place within the family system, you'll also be able to more easily find it in other aspects of your life. By standing firmly in your place in the fountain, you can live your life freely and enter into relationships without being swept along by the instability of others.

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