

## Identifying the *Adverse Organisational Experiences* that derail change



*Adverse Organisational Experiences* (AOE) are forms of trauma that arise in organisational systems. They are common to most organisations and their effect is usually strongest during times of organisational change and stress. These AOE's may be often talked about (and perhaps held to be part of the "DNA" of the organisation) or they may be held more secretly or unconsciously within the organisation, for example through rites of passage, hidden loyalties, repeated narratives, components of incentive systems, "unwritten rules" and other factors which shape organisational culture.

Unresolved, AOE's lead to a range of symptoms including:

- Poor performance, however measured.
- Persistent resistance to change. (Some resistance to change is healthy.)
- Distrust.
- Repeated storytelling relating to past events and/or people.
- Newcomers being unable to find their place in the organisation.

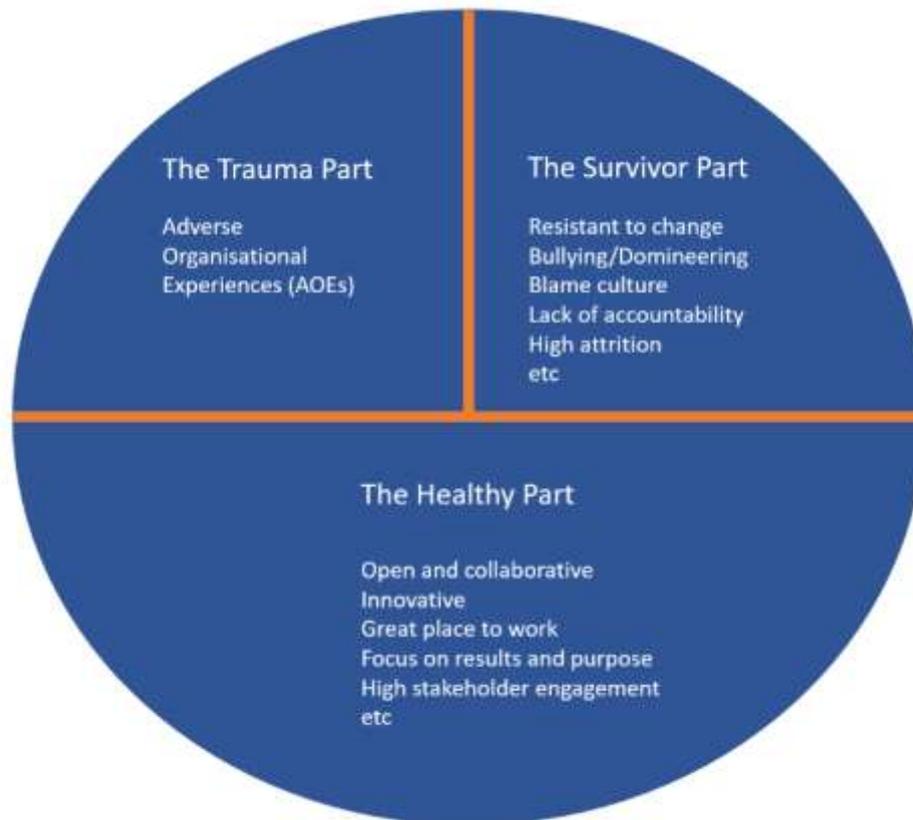
To resolve these issues (many highlighted well by the work of Patrick Lencioni on dysfunctional teams [1]), the first step is to identify the possible AOE's that may be giving rise to the symptoms. Understanding the history of an organisation – whether it's the whole organisation or a team within it – plays a vital part in this diagnosis. In the same way that people are shaped by their histories (and traumas), so are organisations.

In addition, looking at an organisational system, with curiosity and without judgement, allows the difficulty within it to be seen, acknowledged and accepted for what it is, just as it is. This acknowledgement is an important first step in promoting "healing" of the system trauma that resides within the organisation.

Much of the work that relates to healing trauma in individuals can also be related to organisations. For example, the three-part model developed by Franz Ruppert [2] can be applied to organisations too.

To explore this topic further, please contact Mike Price at Brilliance Unlocked Ltd.  
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## **The Three-Part Model adapted to Organisational Trauma**

Every organisation wants their “Healthy part” to shine through but those with symptoms of their “Trauma part” are locked into living their “Survivor part” responses. Releasing the organisation from these learned survival responses to system trauma, facilitates the return to organisational health and flow and the consequential improvement in performance.

Identifying the AOE – which members of an organisation are carrying on behalf of the “system” – highlights which of the “systemic principles”, that promote health and flow in organisations, has been violated. With this information, attention can be turned to reversing the violation and diminishing the dominance of the organisation’s “Survivor part”.

Identifying the AOE of the organisation is the first essential step, rather than simply treating the symptoms.

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## What is meant by “systemic principle”?

For organisations to function healthily – efficiently and effectively in the service of all stakeholders – certain conditions, within the organisational system, need to be met:

- Everyone who has been involved in (or associated closely with) an organisation must not be disrespected, rejected or excluded by those still in the organisation.
- Everyone currently involved in (or associated closely with) an organisation must be treated respectfully and fairly.
- The natural invisible ‘order’ in the organisation must be respected.
  - Time Served
  - Expertise and Experience
  - Ownership – financial and/or intellectual
- There must be a balance in the exchange between stakeholders and the organisation.
- The organisation must not ‘inherit’ difficulties from other organisations or leaders’ family systems.

These are the “systemic principles” (adapted from the work of Gunthard Weber [3]). If any one or more of these is out of alignment (i.e. violated), then the organisational system (i.e. the people) will attempt to compensate but not in a healthy way. This “trauma survivor response” in the organisational system gives rise to the dysfunctional symptoms described earlier.

Systemic principles were first developed for family systems by Bert Hellinger [4] and have been used for decades in guiding the return to health and flow of individuals, relationships and family groups. The family systemic principles are easily recognised as everyone has experienced childhood and most people have experienced an intimate relationship. To illustrate a few of these family system principles:

- The parent gives, the child receives. If the child or parent attempts to reverse this flow, the relationship suffers.
- A parent is a parent and their child is their child, there is no escaping this. The relationship cannot be reversed. As many people have experienced when looking after frail, elderly parents, if the child behaves

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towards their elderly parent as if the parent is a “child”, the relationship usually deteriorates.

- If there is not a balance of exchange in the relationship between parents (or between partners), their relationship suffers in some way. Often, one will become resentful of the other.

Extending the concept of the family system and its principles to organisations (which are also made up of people in relationship to each other), gave rise to the organisational “systemic principles” mentioned earlier. Research into how the principles can be violated within organisational settings (the typical “experiences”) led to the development of the list of Adverse Organisational Experiences (AOEs).

### **How do you identify AOEs?**

The AOE questionnaires, developed by Brilliance Unlocked Ltd, are designed to help identify the potential sources of unresolved trauma in an organisational system (whether the entire organisation or a team). From these, it becomes possible to identify which systemic principle(s) have been violated and, from there, develop a plan to restore organisational health and flow.

For a comprehensive assessment of all the systemic principles, the organisational system needs to be viewed through three lenses, each has its own questionnaire:

1. Historical perspective
2. Current culture perspective
3. Leadership perspective

After completing these diagnostic questionnaires, the next steps to take depend on which of the organisational systemic principles are found to be out of alignment. Usually, solutions involve one-to-one and/or team coaching to raise self and collective awareness and responsibility. In addition, it may be necessary to introduce other changes, such as:

- Adaptations to the way meetings are facilitated, e.g. respecting the “order of joining” or acknowledging the “elephant in the room”

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- Changes in the emphasis of internal and external communications. e.g. to remain connected to the organisation's founding energy and purpose or to "include" a component of the system that has been excluded
- Trauma-informed facilitation of post-merger or acquisition integration
- Changes to policies around how redundancies and terminations are handled

Above all, restoring sustainable organisational health and flow starts by identifying the *Adverse Organisational Experiences* that are giving rise to the observed symptoms. Simply treating the symptoms does not address their underlying cause.

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## References

1. Lencioni, P. (2005), *Overcoming the five dysfunctions of a team: A field guide*. Jossey-Bass
  2. Ruppert, F. (2014), *Trauma, Fear & Love: How the constellation of the intention supports healthy autonomy*. Green Balloon Publishing. (English translated version)
  3. Weber, G. (2000) *Praxis der Organisationsaufstellungen*. Carl-Auer-Systeme Verlag. (English translation by: Jane Peterson and Ute Luppert)
  4. Hellinger, B., Weber, G., & Beaumont, H. (1998). *Love's hidden symmetry: What makes love work in relationships*. Zeig, Tucker & Theisen
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