



## Organizational Learning as Healing: Cultivating Safety and Growth After Trauma

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### Abstract

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Trauma impacts every sector of the modern workforce, shaping how individuals engage, learn, and contribute within organizations. Traditional models of organizational learning emphasize knowledge transfer but often neglect healing, safety, and restoration. This paper argues that trauma-informed leadership (TIL), when integrated with human resource development (HRD) theory and a Christ-centered worldview, can transform organizational learning into a pathway for human flourishing. Drawing on Lloyd's (2024) TIL framework, the study highlights three leadership behaviors – regulating distress, empowering others, and practicing emotional healing – and applies them within HRD contexts. Five dimensions of organizational safety – physical, psychological, social, moral, and cultural – are presented as prerequisites for effective learning. Case illustrations from nonprofit and military contexts demonstrate practical applications. The paper concludes with recommendations for HRD professionals, including reflective storytelling, pacing learning for deeper processing, and cultivating safe learning environments that affirm dignity and purpose.

*Keywords:* trauma, learning, healing, leadership, organization

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Trauma – whether personal or collective, acute or cumulative – significantly influences how individuals think, learn, relate to others, and perform at work. As organizations face crises like pandemics, leadership failures, economic downturns, and community trauma, more employees bear emotional and mental burdens that directly impact their ability to learn. Conventional organizational learning models focus on efficiency and knowledge sharing but often overlook aspects like safety, agency, and relational support. When these basic needs are unmet, organizations unintentionally deepen distress and contribute to burnout and disengagement (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).

This paper contends that organizational learning must become a trauma-informed, relationally grounded process that fosters both skill development and human healing. Trauma-informed leadership (TIL), defined as a leader's ability to prioritize follower well-being, resilience, and dignity (Lloyd, 2024), provides a model for establishing such environments. Lloyd's TIL framework combines four leadership attributes with four core leadership behaviors. The paper emphasizes the three behaviors most directly related to learning and human resource development (HRD): regulating distress, empowering others, and practicing emotional healing.

Adult learning theory reinforces these principles by emphasizing relevance, respect, and emotional readiness (Knowles et al., 2015). Trauma-informed learning builds on these foundations by supporting reflection, autonomy, and relational connection. This paper combines TIL, HRD theory, and a Christ-centered worldview to demonstrate how organizational learning can promote safety, restoration, and flourishing. Case studies and practical recommendations illustrate how trauma-informed practices enhance learning, trust, and long-term growth.

### **Trauma-Informed Leadership and the Learning Environment**

TIL acknowledges the emotional, cognitive, relational, cultural, and spiritual realities that employees bring to the workplace. Instead of viewing learning and performance only through behavioral or cognitive perspectives, TIL focuses on the whole person and how trauma influences perception, stress responses, and engagement. Leaders significantly impact the psychological climate of learning environments; thus, their stance, presence, and practices determine whether individuals feel safe or threatened.

The TIL framework links leadership theory, neuroscience, and trauma research to develop leadership behaviors that promote healing-centered workplaces (Lloyd, 2024). Among its components, three behaviors form the foundation for trauma-informed learning: (a) regulating distress, (b) empowering others, and (c) practicing emotional healing. These behaviors influence every part of the HRD process. They create psychologically and relationally supportive learning environments where trauma-affected learners can fully engage, reflect, and grow.

### **Regulating Distress: The Foundation of Trauma-Informed Learning**

Regulating distress is the essential behavior in TIL because it addresses the fundamental need for learning: human beings must feel completely safe – physically, emotionally, relationally, morally, and culturally. Without safety, the brain's ability to reflect, reason, and remember is impaired. Neuroscience research has confirmed that trauma activates the amygdala, which then narrows attention, disrupts working memory, and prioritizes physiological survival over processing new information (Substance Abuse and Mental

Health Services Administration; 2014). In simple terms, when people feel unsafe, learning stops.

Within Lloyd's (2024) framework of TIL, managing distress is more than just responding to crises; it involves intentionally creating environments where individuals can stay grounded, connected, and emotionally secure. Leaders are encouraged to proactively identify potential triggers, minimize uncertainty, establish predictable routines, and demonstrate calm behavior. Taking the time to do this helps learners transition from survival mode to engagement mode.

Lloyd's (2024) TIL framework outlines five safety dimensions – physical, psychological, social, moral, and cultural – that together form an ecosystem of security where learning can thrive. While each dimension is vital, sustainable organizational learning relies on all five being purposefully cultivated. If even one dimension is compromised, learners may feel threatened, withdraw, or revert to self-protective behaviors that impede growth.

### **Physical Safety: Creating Environments That Support Presence and Attention**

Physical safety is the most tangible aspect and often the easiest to overlook because it involves basic environmental conditions; however, these conditions have significant cognitive and emotional impacts. Factors such as lighting, room temperature, seating arrangements, noise levels, accessibility, and spacing affect how comfortable learners feel and how present they feel. Research in adult education has shown that physical comfort improves attention, participation, and memory (Brookfield, 2013). On the other hand, environments that are chaotic, cramped, overstimulating, or poorly equipped can increase anxiety and hinder learning readiness.

For trauma-affected individuals, environmental cues are crucial. A slamming door, blocked exit, bright lighting, or sudden noise can trigger startled reactions or dissociation. Trauma-informed leaders, therefore, intentionally create learning spaces: clear sight lines, tidy rooms, opportunities for movement, and consistent physical layouts. Even small changes, dimmed lights, soft seating, and access to water show that the space is designed with human needs in mind.

In HRD contexts, physical safety also involves making sure training spaces are accessible to all participants, including those with disabilities or sensory sensitivities. It means removing unnecessary barriers and respecting each participant's needs for comfort, mobility, and environmental consistency.

### **Psychological Safety: Encouraging Openness, Questions, and Vulnerability.**

Psychological safety is the belief that individuals can express thoughts, ask questions, admit mistakes, and share reflections without fear of judgment or retaliation. It is

widely recognized in leadership and team science as a core predictor of engagement, creativity, and risk taking (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). For trauma-impacted learners, psychological safety is especially vital because shame, fear of failure, and fear of misinterpretation are often heightened.

Trauma-informed leaders foster psychological safety by focusing on learning rather than performance, encouraging questions without assigning value judgments, clarifying expectations to minimize ambiguity, showing appreciation for vulnerability, avoiding public criticism or shaming, and demonstrating self-compassion and humility.

In a trauma-informed learning setting, failure is viewed as part of the learning journey rather than as proof of inadequacy. This perspective eases the pressure that trauma-affected individuals often feel and enables them to try, explore, and grow without the fear of emotional harm.

Psychological safety in learning environments encourages meaning making and reflection. When learners feel they can participate authentically, their cognitive and emotional processing becomes more profound and personal.

### **Social Safety: Belonging, Connection, and the Power of Community**

Social safety involves people feeling a sense of belonging, acceptance, inclusion, and connection within a group. Trauma can cause people to withdraw from relationships, develop mistrust, or become overly alert in social situations. Social safety promotes this by building group unity, shared identity, cooperation, and mutual respect.

In trauma-informed learning environments, social safety is created by encouraging small-group discussions, using inclusive language, designing activities that foster collaboration, establishing guidelines for respectful engagement, and celebrating differences rather than just tolerating them.

Leaders play a vital role in demonstrating relational warmth and consistency. When leaders show empathy, active listening, and approachability, learners feel more socially connected. Over time, social bonds form, enhancing the group's ability to engage in shared learning and build resilience.

Social safety also promotes accountability in learning communities. When learners care about each other and feel safe together, they take relational risks that increase their engagement, such as providing feedback, sharing personal insights, or engaging in reflective dialogue.

### **Moral Safety: Integrity, Fairness, and Ethical Consistency**

Moral safety refers to an environment where individuals experience fairness, justice, and ethical integrity. Moral injury can occur when organizations violate personal values, break trust, or engage in inconsistent or harmful practices. When moral safety is compromised, learners experience dissonance that undermines trust and blocks engagement.

Trauma-informed leaders build moral safety by demonstrating ethical consistency, being transparent about decisions, addressing inequities instead of ignoring them, holding everyone—including leaders—to the same moral standards, and acknowledging harm while working to repair it.

In HRD settings, moral safety means that learning experiences are not manipulated, coerced, or designed to serve hidden agendas. It ensures that leaders do not use learning environments to shame, pressure, or punish employees. Instead, integrity guides the framework of the learning experience.

Moral safety helps learners relax into trust, knowing the environment aligns with both organizational and personal values.

### **Cultural Safety: Honoring Identity, Equity, and Diverse Narratives**

Cultural safety tackles power dynamics, diversity, identity, and representation. Trauma and culture often intersect: individuals from marginalized groups may face compounded trauma from discrimination, microaggressions, cultural invisibility, or systemic inequalities. Cultural safety in learning environments requires acknowledging cultural identities, avoiding harmful stereotypes, representing diverse experiences, using learning materials that reflect diverse experiences, and being sensitive to how trauma affects different communities.

Trauma-informed leaders work to challenge cultural invalidation. They create learning experiences that respect each person's background, avoid making cultural assumptions, and make room for diverse perspectives. A culturally safe environment communicates, "You belong. Your story matters. You are seen." This form of validation builds trust and deep engagement.

### **The Interdependence of the Five Dimensions**

These five dimensions are interconnected and mutually reinforce each other. Physical safety supports psychological safety; psychological safety enables social connection; social safety fosters moral awareness; moral safety strengthens cultural safety. Together, they create a learning environment where individuals feel grounded enough to engage themselves fully.

If any dimension is overlooked, trauma-affected learners may resort to self-protective behavior, which can hinder learning. Therefore, managing distress requires a comprehensive focus on all five dimensions, each acting as a pillar that supports the entire structure of trauma-informed education.

### **Empowering Others: Restoring Agency in the Learning Process**

Empowering others is the second key TIL behavior related to organizational learning. It stems from a fundamental truth: trauma reduces agency, and learning helps restore it. Traumatic experiences, whether personal, organizational, relational, or systemic, often involve losing control, facing unpredictability, feeling powerless, or experiencing coercion. These conditions influence how individuals participate in environments that mirror these power imbalances, including workplaces and formal learning settings.

To address this, trauma-informed leaders intentionally create learning environments that foster a sense of ownership among participants. This process is not just a superficial tactic; it directly counteracts the psychological and emotional effects of trauma. When individuals are allowed to choose how they engage, share their perspectives, or influence their learning experience, it activates parts of the brain linked to autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and self-regulation, key abilities that trauma often suppresses.

At its core, empowering others involves shifting the learning approach from teaching at learners to learning with them. It is a democratizing move that shares power, values contributions, and recognizes learners as active agents in their own development.

### **The Connection Between Agency and Healing**

Trauma often leads to patterns like learned helplessness, hypercompliance, withdrawal, or fear-based decision making. When people have experienced environments where their choices were ignored or punished, or where their voices were silenced, they may approach learning with caution or skepticism. Even highly skilled professionals can resort to self-protective behaviors when they associate authority with danger or humiliation.

Restoring agency is essential for both learning and healing. Trauma-informed learning environments are based on the idea that every learner has something valuable to offer, has the right to independence, and should have opportunities to influence their learning journey. Learning is most effective when built on collaboration rather than compliance. When individuals experience genuine agency, they feel psychological safety, competence, and empowerment – three elements closely linked to resilience.

## Alignment With Adult Learning Theory.

Knowles et al. (2015) described adult learners as self-directed, experience-rich individuals who thrive when given autonomy and control. Merriam and Bierema (2014) similarly emphasized that adults learn best when learning is relevant to their personal goals, connected to their lived experiences, respectful of their autonomy, and participatory rather than passive. These principles closely align with the trauma-informed need to restore agency. When learners have the freedom to choose how they participate, explore content through their lived experiences, or cocreate learning outcomes, they engage in more profound meaning making and achieve long-term retention.

Adult learners do not want to be talked at; they want to be engaged, respected, and invited into dialogue. Trauma-informed learning honors this by treating learners as full participants capable of contributing to their growth rather than passive recipients.

## Practical Strategies for Empowering Others

Trauma-informed leaders promote empowerment through intentional instructional and leadership approaches. The following practices show how empowering others can be incorporated into HRD settings.

- **offering multiple modes of engagement:** Not all learners feel comfortable participating in the same way, especially those carrying trauma. Options may include verbal discussion, silent reflection, small-group conversation, written responses, and pair-share activities. By providing alternatives, leaders ensure that all learners can contribute without pressure.
- **providing options for learning activities:** Choice can be embedded in the content and format of learning tasks. Learners might select which case study to analyze, which project to pursue, whether to write, present, or create something visual, and how to demonstrate competency. This autonomy increases engagement and personal investment.
- **inviting story and lived experience:** Allowing learners to connect content to personal experience affirms their identity and expertise. Trauma-informed leaders recognize lived experience as a valid form of knowledge, not just an aside.
- **encouraging reflection and meaning making:** Open-ended questions enable learners to connect content with personal insights. Reflection is especially healing for individuals affected by trauma because it reengages cognitive processes and aids emotional integration.
- **allowing participation on one's own terms:** Trauma-affected learners may require flexibility in participation. Allowing learners to "pass," take breaks, or work at a comfortable pace helps prevent retraumatization.

- **choosing between collaborative and individual learning:** Some learners feel safer in small groups, while others prefer individual tasks. Providing both options respects personal boundaries and helps lessen social anxiety.
- **cocreating agreements for the learning space.** Instead of imposing rules, leaders should involve learners in creating group norms. This process of inclusion encourages ownership, fairness, and shared commitment.

When leaders apply these strategies, they send a message to learners: “Your voice matters. Your choices matter. You matter.” This fundamental respect fosters open learning environments where individuals feel empowered and valued.

### **Agency as Spiritual Formation.**

From a Christ-centered perspective, empowering agency aligns with the biblical theme of human dignity. Jesus consistently empowered individuals, inviting them to respond, choose, follow, question, and participate actively in their transformation. He healed people by restoring both their bodies and their agency: “What do you want me to do for you?” (*New International Version*, 2024, Mark 10:51; Matt. 20:32) was not a rhetorical question but an affirmation of dignity.

TIL reflects this outlook. It affirms that each learner is an image-bearer of God with a story, voice, and purpose. Allowing learners to make choices honors their humanity; inviting their perspectives recognizes their worth.

In this sense, empowering others is not only psychologically beneficial but also spiritually restorative. It contributes to the redemptive process of recovering what trauma tries to take away.

### **The Impact of Agency on Organizational Outcomes.**

When learners experience agency, several outcomes emerge. Increased motivation occurs when people engage more deeply, feeling a sense of ownership. Greater retention and application happen because autonomy enhances relevance and meaningful impact. Improved trust and empowerment signal respect and relational safety. Strengthened team cohesion is built through shared agency, fostering collaborative cultures. Reduction in trauma reactions happens as choice lowers threat perception and increases regulation. Higher levels of creativity and problem solving occur because agency fuels innovation. Organizations that empower learners see long-term benefits in culture, morale, and performance. HRD becomes not merely functional but transformational.

Empowering others restores what trauma diminishes: autonomy, self-worth, and participation. It aligns with adult learning theory, enhances HRD effectiveness, and reflects a Christ-centered ethic of honoring human dignity. When leaders incorporate



agency into learning experiences, they create a path for both learning and healing—supporting the whole person and promoting organizational flourishing.

### **Practicing Emotional Healing: The Relational Core of Trauma-Informed Learning**

Practicing emotional healing is the third key TIL leadership behavior that fosters meaningful organizational learning. While regulating distress helps create safety, empowering others restores agency, and practicing emotional healing focuses on the relational, emotional, and spiritual sides of learning. It acknowledges that trauma is mainly relational—it causes wounds through disconnection, betrayal, violation, abandonment, or unmet human needs. Therefore, healing must also happen through relationships, presence, empathy, and trust building. Trauma-informed learning environments intentionally foster the relational conditions needed for emotional repair, identity integration, and transformative growth.

Unlike traditional workplace learning models that see emotions as distractions or obstacles, trauma-informed approaches recognize emotions as vital data and essential to meaning making. Mezirow and Taylor (2009) highlighted that transformative learning depends on the learner's ability to critically reflect on assumptions, reinterpret experiences, and adopt new perspectives, processes that cannot happen without emotional engagement and relational support. Emotional healing is not secondary to learning; it creates the environment in which genuine learning can occur.

### **The Role of Relationship in Healing-Centered Learning Environments**

Trauma affects a person's ability to trust, connect, and depend on others. Consequently, learning environments that overlook relational dynamics risk retraumatizing participants by repeating past experiences of isolation, shame, or powerlessness. Trauma-informed leaders counter this by providing consistent relational cues of safety: warmth, predictability, empathy, appropriate transparency, and regulated emotional presence.

In trauma-affected learners, relational cues from leaders are often interpreted with heightened sensitivity. A harsh tone can trigger fear. A dismissive response may induce shame or withdrawal. A lack of attunement can signal danger. By demonstrating emotional stability, leaders create an environment where learners feel secure enough to explore, reflect, and grow.

Practicing emotional healing requires leaders to adopt relational behaviors such as attentive listening, listening to understand rather than to correct, empathic responses that validate emotional experiences without minimizing them, nonjudgmental curiosity that invites deeper reflection with compassion, consistency, and follow-through that

build trust through reliable behavior, and calm emotional presence that models regulation in the face of tension or discomfort.

Leaders do not need to act as counselors; instead, they show a caring attitude that supports learner well-being. They create relationships where vulnerability is safe and accepted and where emotional expression is welcomed rather than punished.

### **Emotional Healing as a Cognitive Enabler.**

Trauma-informed leaders understand that emotional healing is more than a soft skill; it is a vital cognitive need. Emotional distress hampers working memory, executive functions, creativity, and problem solving – all essential for workplace learning. When learners carry unrecognized emotional burdens into learning environments, they may struggle to focus, participate, or retain information.

Healing-centered approaches remove emotional barriers to learning by allowing learners to acknowledge feelings before shifting into instruction, providing opportunities for reflection, journaling, or discussion, offering breaks when learners feel overwhelmed, using grounding exercises or mindfulness techniques, and creating space for emotional processing without stigma. Once emotional distress is acknowledged and supported, cognitive resources become accessible again. Learners can think more clearly, engage more deeply, and process new information more effectively.

### **The Spiritual Dimension of Emotional Healing**

Within a Christ-centered worldview, emotional healing is closely linked to spiritual growth. Scripture presents Jesus as a healer whose leadership was characterized not by control but by presence, compassion, and renewal. His invitation in Matthew 11:28-30 focuses on offering rest to the weary and burdened, showing that learning and transformation happen through a relational connection with Him.

Jesus modeled trauma-informed pedagogy long before the term existed:

- He saw people before He taught them.
- He addressed emotional wounds before offering instruction.
- He restored dignity before extending a challenge.
- He created safety through gentleness and compassion.
- He prioritized relationships over performance.
- He paced instruction according to readiness, not urgency.

In every encounter, Jesus ministered to the whole person, body, mind, emotions, and spirit. Trauma-informed leaders adopt this model in both secular and faith-based settings, creating learning environments where people feel valued, seen, and known. In

this way, emotional healing becomes an expression of the imago Dei—honoring the divine worth within each individual.

### **Emotional Healing as a Trauma-Informed Leadership Posture**

Emotional healing is not an event but a posture—a consistent way of being in relationship with learners. It shapes how leaders respond to distress, navigate conflict, and interpret behavior. Instead of taking emotional reactions personally or viewing them as barriers, trauma-informed leaders interpret them as signals of unmet needs or past experiences that require compassion and support.

This posture emphasizes grace over judgment, assuming people are doing their best; patience over urgency, understanding that healing takes time; curiosity over control, inquiring about what drives behavior rather than trying to fix it; support over demand, scaffolding learning instead of forcing participation; and presence over performance, focusing on who the learner is, not just what they produce. In HRD, this posture transforms learning environments from transactional spaces to relational sanctuaries where individuals feel safe enough to take risks, grow, and access their full potential.

### **Operationalizing Emotional Healing in HRD Practice**

Emotional healing becomes visible in organizational learning through specific practices that communicate care and relational safety.

- **circle-based dialogue and story sharing:** Story circles allow learners to share experiences, connect emotionally, and develop empathy. Listening to one another's stories reduces isolation and fosters collective meaning-making.
- **relational check-ins:** Beginning sessions with simple questions such as "How is your heart today?" or "What do you need to feel present?" encourages openness and mental readiness.
- **trauma-informed facilitation techniques:** Leaders use warm tone, flexible pacing, invitational rather than directive language, and transparent expectations.
- **emotional regulation supports:** Practices such as grounding techniques, breathing exercises, or reflective pauses help learners regulate their nervous systems.
- **normalizing emotional expression:** Statements like "It is okay to feel overwhelmed here" reduce shame and encourage authentic participation.
- **creating connection before content:** Leaders build relational rapport before moving into instruction, ensuring learners feel emotionally steady.
- **offering repair after rupture.** If conflict arises, leaders model reconciliation, demonstrating that relationships can be restored.

These practices do not require clinical expertise; they require relational intentionality. When implemented consistently, they form a healing-centered learning culture.

### **The Transformative Outcomes of Emotional Healing**

When emotional healing is incorporated into organizational learning, several transformational outcomes occur, such as increased trust between leaders and learners, greater openness to new ideas and feedback, stronger team cohesion, improved emotional intelligence, higher resilience during organizational change, reduced conflict and miscommunication, enhanced capacity for transformational learning, and a renewed sense of identity and self-worth. Perhaps most importantly, emotional healing rebuilds the relational connections that trauma weakens. It helps individuals see themselves not as broken or inadequate but as capable, valued contributors.

Practicing emotional healing is the heart of trauma-informed organizational learning. It recognizes that learning is not merely cognitive but deeply relational and emotional. Through empathy, attunement, and presence, leaders create environments where learners feel safe, valued, and supported. In these environments, learning becomes not only possible but transformative—restoring dignity, strengthening identity, and inviting individuals into deeper flourishing.

### **Adult Learning Theory and Biblical Integration**

Adult learning theory offers a crucial foundation for understanding how trauma-informed organizational learning fosters healing and growth. Adults come into learning settings with accumulated experiences, beliefs, and emotional patterns that influence how they interpret, remember, and use information. According to Knowles et al. (2015), adults learn most effectively when the content is relevant to their lives, when they are treated with respect, and when they feel equipped and confident to participate in the learning process. These principles naturally align with TIL practices, which focus on emotional safety, personal agency, and supportive relationships.

For individuals impacted by trauma, learning is deeply tied to identity, trust, and readiness. Trauma-informed environments enhance adult learning principles by lowering emotional threats, providing time for processing, and respecting the learner's lived story. Reflection and narrative meaning making help reassemble fragmented experiences, while self-direction restores autonomy often diminished by trauma. Together, these conditions foster a learning climate where adults can access curiosity, creativity, and confidence.

A Christ-centered worldview enriches these insights. Jesus taught in ways that exemplify the principles described by Knowles et al. (2015)—relational, invitational, and rooted in respect for human dignity. His pedagogy was trauma informed because it

focused on healing and restoration. He taught in ways that honored agency (Mark 10:51), valued experience (John 4:1-42), and restored dignity (John 8:1-11). His focus on rest, restoration, and relationship (Matthew 11:28-30) reflects both trauma-informed and adult learning principles.

Integrating adult learning theory with Christ's example frames organizational learning as a comprehensive process that fosters cognitive, emotional, and spiritual development. By creating environments grounded in relevance, respect, agency, and relational safety, HRD professionals establish spaces where trauma-impacted individuals can rebuild trust, reconnect with purpose, and undergo meaningful, transformative learning.

## **Case Illustrations**

### **Faith-Based Nonprofit Navigating Leadership Crisis**

A midsized faith-based nonprofit experienced a sudden leadership failure due to ethical misconduct by senior leaders. The aftermath was severe: employees felt betrayed, confused, and emotionally shaken. Trust rapidly eroded, and staff remained uncertain about the organization's direction, stability, or integrity. Before the crisis, the organization's learning environments were highly structured, compliance focused, and hierarchical; afterward, staff lacked the emotional readiness and psychological capacity to reengage with these traditional learning formats.

### **Recognizing Trauma in the Organizational System**

During assessment, it became clear that trauma was not limited to individuals – the organization itself experienced collective trauma. Staff showed signs typical of trauma-affected environments: withdrawal from participation, emotional volatility or numbness, increased suspicion of leadership, disengagement during team meetings, higher absenteeism, and loss of motivation and purpose.

These indicators reflected both acute trauma (triggered by the leadership scandal) and chronic organizational trauma accumulated over years of authoritarian practices that left little room for voice or emotional expression.

### **Introducing Reflective Storytelling as a Healing Mechanism**

Recognizing that traditional training modules would not address the relational ruptures, the new interim leadership team incorporated reflective storytelling into the development process. Storytelling was chosen because it supports sense making, identity formation, and emotional expression – key elements for trauma recovery (Brown et al., 2005; Denning, 2011). Additionally, stories foster empathy, break down isolation, and restore collective meaning, all of which are essential for healing.

Story circles were added to weekly team meetings. These circles included a shared prompt such as “What has this season taught you about resilience?”, an invitational tone rather than a mandatory format, opportunities to speak without interruption, and gentle facilitation that focused on emotional presence rather than problem solving. Participation was voluntary, in line with trauma-informed principles of agency and choice.

### **Outcomes: Rebuilding Identity, Trust, and Meaning**

Over several months, the organization experienced notable changes: renewed cohesion, as employees began reestablishing relational bonds and rebuilding shared identity; improved communication, with staff feeling more comfortable expressing concerns and naming emotions; restored trust, as leadership transparency and consistency helped rebuild psychological safety; and enhanced engagement, with learning activities becoming more collaborative and energizing.

One employee described the storytelling process as “the first time I felt like my voice actually mattered in this organization.” Another reflected, “Hearing others’ stories helped me realize I was not alone.”

Notably, turnover decreased significantly, and team members reported feeling more connected to the mission. The organization’s learning culture, which was once characterized by compliance and silence, had transformed into one focused on relational depth, meaning making, and shared learning.

### **Implications for HRD**

This case shows that healing must come before performance and that storytelling is an effective way to help individuals rejoin a community after trauma. Organizational learning shifted from just a way to build skills to a space for emotional healing and spiritual renewal.

### **Trauma-Informed Learning in a Military Training Environment**

The second context involves a military training unit operating in a high-pressure environment characterized by rapid turnover, an intense operational tempo, and ongoing stress. Military learning environments are typically hierarchical, fast paced, and performance oriented, which can unintentionally overwhelm trainees and hinder effective learning, especially for soldiers with prior trauma or heightened stress responses.

## Identifying Trauma Responses Within Training Dynamics

Upon evaluation, the leadership team identified several recurring challenges: trainees shutting down during high-intensity briefings, difficulty retaining information under pressure, increased disciplinary issues related to emotional outbursts, low morale and a declining sense of cohesion, and inconsistent performance across training cycles.

Instead of blaming these issues only on lack of discipline or motivation, leadership started to see them as possible trauma responses – especially in soldiers with prior deployments, combat exposure, or personal trauma histories.

## Implementing Trauma-Informed Training Adjustments.

Three key adjustments were made.

- ***Structured Debriefs Incorporating Emotional Awareness.*** Instead of immediately critiquing performance, leaders created space for trainees to share their emotional responses: frustration, fear, confusion, or tension. These debriefs normalized emotional expression and reduced shame, improving readiness for cognitive processing.
- ***Peer Mentoring for Relational Support.*** Pairs and small groups were created to offer mutual encouragement. Trainees were encouraged to support each other through challenges, review material together, and discuss strategies for managing emotions.
- ***Adjusted Pacing to Prevent Cognitive Overload.*** Instructors deliberately slowed down instruction during high-stress modules by adding reflection pauses, shorter lectures, and more time for hands-on practice. This change in pacing was grounded in adult learning theory and trauma-informed research.

## Outcomes: Increased Resilience, Performance, and Cohesion

Within 6 months of implementing trauma-informed practices, several measurable improvements appeared: better retention of essential information, increased confidence during assessments, fewer disciplinary incidents, higher morale and group cohesion, and greater adaptability and stress tolerance.

Feedback from trainees indicated that the environment felt “more human,” “less overwhelming,” and “more supportive.” Many reported feeling more prepared to handle both emotional stress and technical learning tasks.

## Implications for HRD

This case demonstrates that trauma-informed practices do not weaken discipline, excellence, or operational readiness – in fact, they enhance them. When learners feel

safe, seen, and supported, their cognitive performance, resilience, and teamwork improve significantly. HRD systems in high-stress industries can greatly benefit from trauma-informed practices without compromising rigor or mission-essential outcomes.

### **Synthesis of Both Cases**

Although the nonprofit and military environments differ in structure, purpose, and culture, both show the same lesson: learning thrives when spaces foster safety, agency, and relational bonds. Both organizations saw increased trust, greater engagement, less emotional and cognitive overload, stronger team dynamics, renewed purpose and identity, and better learning results.

These case studies validate trauma-informed organizational learning as a practical, evidence-based, and spiritually grounded approach capable of transforming diverse workplace settings.

### **Recommendations for HRD Professionals**

HRD professionals play a vital role in shaping organizational learning environments. Since HRD often overlaps with leadership, learning, talent development, and organizational culture, it is uniquely positioned to influence the overall environment where people heal, grow, and succeed. Trauma-informed practices offer not only a more compassionate approach to learning but also a more effective one by improving retention, engagement, motivation, and the long-term transfer of knowledge.

To incorporate trauma-informed principles into HRD systems, professionals must shift from isolated interventions to a comprehensive framework that influences every part of the learning experience. The following recommendations offer practical, actionable strategies grounded in research, trauma-informed theory, adult learning principles, and Lloyd's (2024) TIL framework.

#### **Integrate Reflective Storytelling as a Core Learning Practice**

Embedding reflective storytelling in all development programs is essential because it deepens meaning making, boosts emotional processing, and facilitates relational healing. Storytelling helps learners connect content with their personal experiences, reframe traumatic events, and rebuild their identity after trauma. Using story circles, narrative prompts, and leader-modeled vulnerability, HRD professionals can shift learning from mere information transfer to a process of communal healing.

#### **Pace Learning Intentionally to Support Cognitive and Emotional Readiness**

Trauma-informed learning involves slowing down—not to lessen rigor but to create mental and emotional space for deeper understanding. Deliberate pacing minimizes



overwhelm, boosts retention, and respects the emotional capacity of trauma-affected learners. Practical methods include shorter teaching segments, built-in reflection pauses, guided silence, and longer debriefs after challenging content. This method helps learners absorb knowledge while calming the nervous system.

### **Foster Multidimensional Safety in Every Learning Environment**

The five dimensions of safety – physical, psychological, social, moral, and cultural – should serve as core design principles in HRD. When learners feel safe, trust grows, vulnerability becomes possible, and higher order thinking resumes. Safety practices include inclusive communication, clear expectations, group agreements, ethical consistency, confidentiality policies, and culturally responsive materials. These elements allow learners to participate fully and confidently.

### **Empower Learner Agency Through Voice and Choice**

Empowering others restores autonomy and strengthens intrinsic motivation – both critical in trauma recovery and adult learning. HRD professionals should design programs that offer options for participation, decision making in learning pathways, collaborative goal setting, and opportunities for learners to shape discussions. When learners feel ownership, their engagement increases, and their sense of personal capability is restored. Agency becomes both a learning outcome and a healing mechanism.

### **Flourishing in Christ as an Outcome**

Flourishing in Christ signifies the deepest result of trauma-informed organizational learning. While HRD usually gauges growth through performance and skills, TIL broadens the idea of development to include emotional healing, relational wholeness, and spiritual renewal. In this approach, thriving is not just about the absence of distress; it is about having safety, agency, connection, and purpose.

Trauma disrupts identity, confidence, and trust, often leaving individuals feeling fragmented or powerless. Trauma-informed learning environments address these effects by fostering safety, giving people their voices back, and encouraging relational support. Through the TIL framework, learners find conditions in which they can manage distress, actively engage in their growth, and reconnect with their sense of worth and ability. Over time, these experiences help rebuild parts of the self that trauma suppresses – creativity, curiosity, hope, and resilience.

Flourishing becomes apparent through several measurable outcomes. Learners develop healthier interpersonal skills, communicating with more empathy and collaborating with greater confidence. Workplace stress declines as paced instruction, reflective

practices, and emotional regulation techniques help restore cognitive clarity. Team resilience strengthens, enabling groups to navigate challenges with stability and unity. Perhaps most importantly, organizational trust deepens. Consistent TIL behaviors – transparency, ethical integrity, and relational presence – repair the trust that trauma often erodes.

From a Christ-centered perspective, flourishing also includes spiritual restoration. Trauma can distort a person's understanding of God and self, yet trauma-informed practices reflect Christ's ministry of compassion, dignity, and invitation. When learners are treated with grace, respect, and gentleness, they experience the heart of Christ through the learning environment itself. This experience fosters a renewed identity, more profound hope, and greater purpose.

Ultimately, trauma-informed organizational learning redefines HRD as a healing practice – one that respects each person as an image-bearer of God and fosters environments where individuals can heal, grow, and thrive fully.

## Conclusion

Organizational learning must shift from a content-focused model to a trauma-informed, Christ-centered approach that fosters healing, trust, and holistic growth. Trauma profoundly influences how individuals learn and interact, underscoring the importance of safety, agency, and relational support for effective HRD practice. Lloyd's (2024) TIL framework, which includes regulating distress, empowering others, and practicing emotional healing, guides leaders in creating environments where learners restore cognitive clarity, emotional stability, and relational confidence.

When combined with adult learning theory and the restorative posture of Christ's teaching, organizational learning becomes transformative rather than transactional. Case examples from nonprofit and military contexts show improvements in engagement, resilience, and trust when trauma-informed practices are incorporated.

Ultimately, trauma-informed learning redefines HRD as a redemptive process. By honoring individuals as image-bearers of God, leaders foster environments where people can heal, grow, and flourish.

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### About the Author

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