

Trauma-Informed Responses & Language

Shifting the way we ***understand and respond to*** employee behavior can help us neutralize the work environment, promote a sense of safety, connect employees to the larger purpose and provide choice for all.

Employee Behavior	Understanding the Behavior using a Trauma-Informed Lens
Angry	The employee may feel unheard, or lacking choice.
Disrespectful	The employee is communicating frustration, seeking to be heard by leadership.
Impatient	The employee is struggling to manage how they are feeling or the task at hand.
Not completing tasks	The employee may not have (or believe they have) the ability and/or stamina to complete tasks. There may be gaps in skills, or lack of understanding of the purpose of the task.
Resistant to change or creative ideas	The employee may be anxious or hesitant to make a mistake due to previous experiences with failure at work.
Apathetic	The employee may be very distrustful of others and/or may avoid showing emotions as a self-preservation strategy.
Unmotivated	The employee may be overwhelmed by experiences in and/or outside of the work. There may also be gaps in foundational skills.

We stop asking,
“What is **wrong** with this person?”
and begin asking,
“What has **happened** to this person?”

Trauma-Informed Responses & Language

Our choice of language is particularly important when **responding to an employee who is activated**. The goal is to avoid escalating the situation by conveying a message of safety and choice for all.

What to Do	What to Avoid
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep your tone of voice neutral • Use “I” statements • Convey a sense of calm and concern • Reflect and validate what employee is communicating • Set boundaries and offer choice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absolutes – “must,” “always” • Shame – “should” • Blame – “why” • Sarcasm • Over-emphasis on compliance or punishment

Employee Behavior	Example Language to Respond
Angry	I want to understand what you are saying, and I can see that you are upset. Do you want to step away from work for a moment to consider how to communicate this differently?
Disrespectful	I am sorry that you feel that way, and it is not ok to curse at me when you are angry. I am here to provide guidance on this project. If you would like to take a moment to consider next steps, please let me know.
Impatient	I understand that you really want this information immediately. Can you please give me space to complete my task? It will be ready in _____.
Not completing tasks	Tell me more about what you need from me to complete the task? How have you completed this task previously?
Resistant to change or creative ideas	What needs to happen for you to participate in this project/change? What do you need from me so you are able to contribute to the creative process?
Apathetic	Last week you shared that you were excited about this project and had ideas about how to proceed. What is needed to access that energy again?
Unmotivated	How have you managed to get through similar situations or tasks in the past?