“I’m a better manager”

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“If you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if I want to know myself, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life, then I, too must come to know my own story.”

(McAdams, 1993:11)
Definitions

Personal trauma

“If a person refers to a negative event as a watershed that divides life into a ‘before and after’ the event, it has been traumatic.” (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006:9)

Personal narratives

“A means by which internal experiences, thoughts and feelings are given external expression.” (Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou, 2008:5)
Study aims

- Previous academic studies explored experiences of trauma in ‘extremis’ settings (e.g. military; disaster recovery work; emergency services), but to date none had systematically explored the impact of personal trauma on managers in ‘ordinary’ organisations.

- The research therefore sought to exploit this “missed opportunity” (Maitlis, 2012)
Design and method

• Biographic Narrative Interpretative Method (BNIM) (Wengraf, 2010).
• ‘Minimalist passive’ approach to interviewing.
• ‘Blind interpretative panels’ at data analysis stage.
• Four managers (Edgar, Bill, Diane & Peter) each interviewed three times (over 14 hours of talk).
• Nine ‘workplace witnesses’ (i.e. colleagues, line managers, direct reports who could talk from a third party perspective).
Fostering growth in the post-traumatic narrative

• Act of constructing a trauma story can be a coping strategy as the individual seeks to find meanings in their experience; or the narrative itself may be a sign of growth. (i.e. construction of pre versus post-trauma self.)

• Study focused on construct of Post-traumatic Growth (PTG) (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996) which describes self-reported positive psychological change across five dimensions.
Study findings

- Unprompted, managers described their personal traumas as catalysts for learning and growth at work.
- All reported becoming ‘better managers’ as a result of their experiences & these changes were also independently observed by workplace witnesses.
- 4/9 workplace witnesses described their own professional growth as a result of their colleague’s trauma.
- New domain of PTG emerged ‘managerial growth’.
Dimensions of growth

• **Appreciation of life**: re-dressing work-life balance; gaining a new perspective on the relative importance of work; not ‘sweating the little things’

• **New possibilities**: discovery of new directions in life post-trauma

• **Personal strength**: increased self-awareness and a new found strength when dealing with difficult situations.

• **Relating to others**: increased self-disclosure; new found empathy and compassion; feelings of closeness in work relationships; recognition that while some work relationships had become more meaningful others had weakened or ended.

• **Managerial growth**: managing with empathy and compassion; increased delegation; empowering and entrusting others.
Dimensions of growth

• Appreciation of life

“I’ve probably missed an awful lot of their childhood not being there having dinner with them every night as most other families probably do but I need to actually really do something about this and had I not had this opportunity to stop and step back and think about that it would’ve been too late” (Edgar, sub-session 2, lines 967-971)

“I have to say sometimes what seemed to be a drama here or what people were focussing on I found completely laughable [laughs] so inconsequential in the scheme of things ..is it really all that important?” (Diane, sub-session 2, lines 93-97)

• New possibilities

“There’s other amazing things that have come out …Mary who’s a lady that worked in our department resigned to go and pursue further education with a view to becoming a midwife and spoke to me and said it was as a result of what I’d been through because she realised life was too short and that she had to go and follow her dreams”(Edgar, sub-session 1, lines 823-828)
Dimensions of growth

• Personal strength

“That’s one of the other positive things that have come out of this whole situation I’m more in-tune with myself in terms of what I want I’m more aware of how other people within the industry perceive me” (Edgar, sub-session 1, lines 801-804)

• Relating to others

“I have this insight … [I] have a lot more understanding and empathy about what people’s lives are like and I want my team to have a really good work life balance …so in terms of managing people I think if anything maybe it’s made me a much better manager (….) I seem to have a lot more insight (..) and emotional intelligence” (Diane, sub-session 3, lines 162-168)

“You do discover how many other people have suffered something similar and it is surprising but people don't talk about it until they know that you’ve suffered the same” (Peter, sub-session 1, lines 408-411)
‘Managerial growth’

“I’m a better manager as a result of the fact that I’m providing people with the opportunity to do their own thing and be grown-ups” (Edgar, sub-session 2, lines 1129-1136)

“I have noticed recently that he seems to be allowing Michael more autonomy than he would have done previously (…)” (Kerry on Edgar, lines 304-310)

“Now it’s very much like she just trusts us to get on with it” (Nicola on Diane, lines 263-264)

“He did become much more relaxed and much more flexible about his approach and certainly his line management style did change quite a bit” (Paul on Bill, lines 133-135)
Practical implications

• Employers in this study knew little about how to respond to individuals who had experienced personal trauma.

• Line managers were pivotal in making or breaking individual’s re-adjustment back at work.

• Work plays a role in the coping and healing process.

• Creating a safe environment in which individuals are able to openly express their feelings at work is crucial.
Thank you for listening

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