

Sustainable Systems for Wellness: Advancing Staff Resilience and Well-Being

Annual Nonprofit Conference 2025



A New Approach to Reducing Secondary Stress

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TRAUMATIC STRESS
INSTITUTE

Brian C. Miller, Ph.D.

Dr. Miller He holds a PhD from Case Western Reserve in Cleveland, Ohio

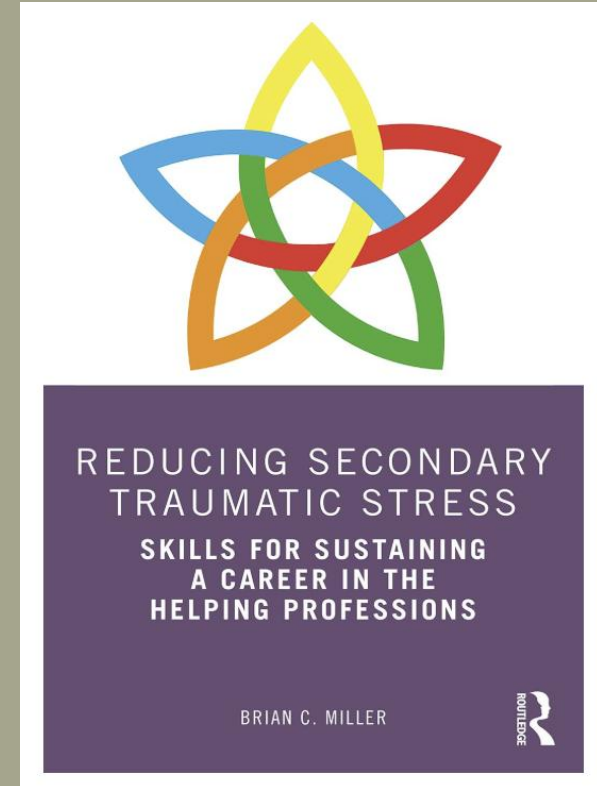
CE-CERT

A Skills-Based, Evidence-Informed Approach to Thriving in the Helping Professions:

- Psychotherapists
- Child welfare workers
- Social Workers and Counselors
- Nurses
- Educators

Ultimately, the goal of CE-CERT is not merely to survive this work:

Rather, the goal is to have a vocation that is uniquely and deeply satisfying.



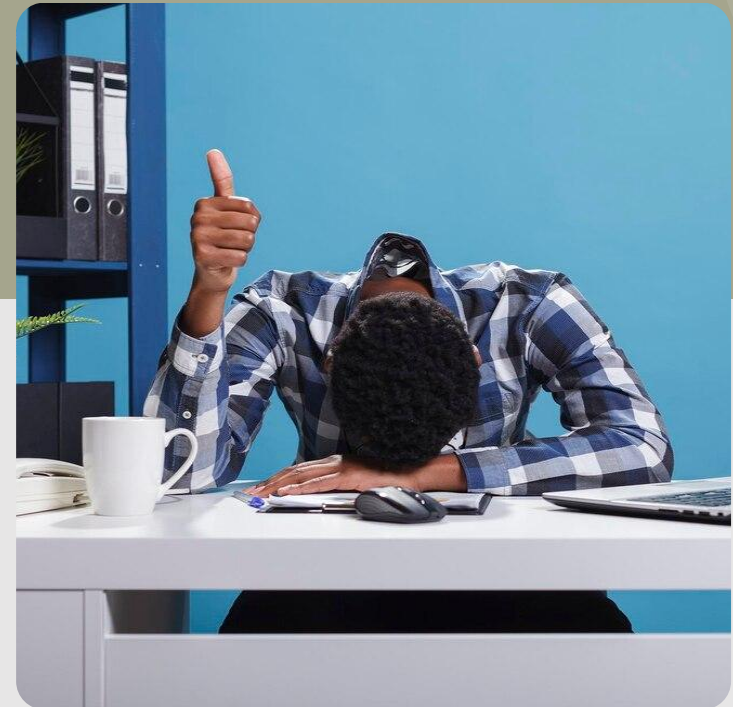
SUSTAIN VS. THRIVE

Problem :

Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, Secondary Trauma, Stress
The emotional toll of the work on the helping professional

Traditional Solution:

Boundaries and Self Care
Has it worked for you yet?



Maybe it is time for an evidenced-based approach?

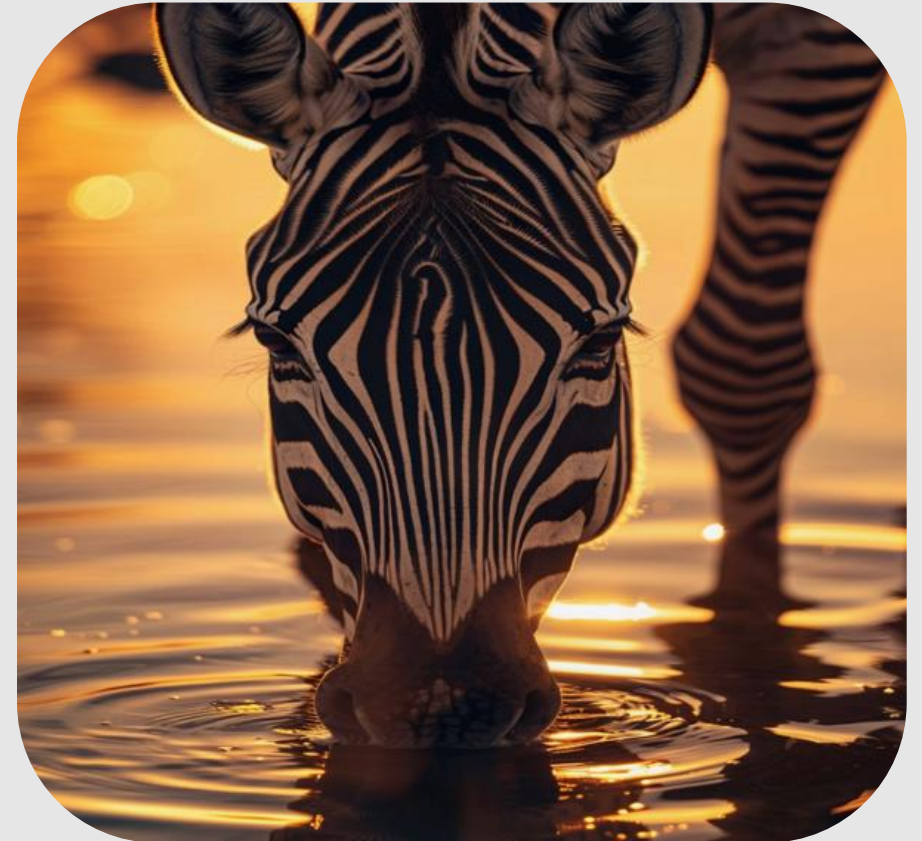
The Myth of Work Life Balance

Treatment as usual strategies

- Hold on until you get home and practice self care
- Don't think about work while you are at home
- Two bucket theory – work depletes us, home life fulfills us
 - Neither are always true
 - Not sustainable

We Aren't Zebras!

- Why don't animals experience trauma?
- Natural stress cycle:
 - Event
 - Breathe and experience fully
 - End event
 - Recover



Recovery Practices

Take a break between intense situations

- Connect with someone
- Physical activity
- Journaling
- Go to another place
- Do something fun



Rumination



- Chewing on previously swallowed food
- A continuation of stressful events through mental re-imagining that is stressful rather than problem solving
- It isn't distraction but rather absorption that de-energizes the rumination
- Action plans help- increasing our sense of mastery

Reducing Rumination

What to do?

- Notice and label
- Pay attention to your body
- Conversation and connection
- Physical movement
- Breathing and meditation
- Journal
- Engage in an absorbing activity
- Plan action steps such as learning or policy change



Name it to Tame it!

Our Use of Narratives

- Narratives harmonize the left and right hemispheres of the brain
- Narratives situate us in time
- They connect us with others
- They place events in context



Foundational Narrative

Why do you do this work?

Pride and joy in your purpose

Antecedent Narrative: What we tell ourselves before an event

How do you describe your job to others?

What are you expecting as you drive to work?

How do you describe your workplace and your co-workers?

Do you expect to be welcome, seen and supported?

Implicit Narrative

Stories we do not realize that we are telling ourselves

The result of living in our society for all people

Who is most dangerous?

Who do we feel hopeless about?

Who do we trust to have our back?

What do we expect from leaders?

Conscious Narrative

Imagining the best possible day (like athletes visualizing perfect performance before their event)

- Grace and goosebumps
- Narrative of competence and compassion
- I know what to do. I can make a difference
- Narrative includes pain, and includes joy and meaning
- Acknowledge limits

Consolidation Narrative

What we say to ourselves and each other after an event

- How do we make sense of what happened?
- Created with others
- Intense experiences demand a narrative
- Opportunities to create and share narratives
- Find the meaning in what happened



Making the Work Easier

- We have good jobs
- Emotional labor- difference between what you feel and what you can say
- Challenge for staff of color
- Emotions caused by lack of mastery
- Stress caused by “unacceptable” emotions
- I used my full self and I made a difference

Is our work a labor of love?





Work-Life Balance

Who do you know that never thinks of work at home?

WORK

- **Creating replenishment at work**
- Notice crisis has ended
- Recovery practices
- Talk with someone
- Acknowledge distress (do we feel able to share distress?)
- Physical movement
- Conscious compassion for self and others
- Plan for action and mastery

LIFE

- **Creating replenishment outside of work**
- Rituals for end of day: review, plan, thank
- Rituals for returning home
- Absorbing activities (at work and at home)
- Connection with community, family, pets

For more information:

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Risking Connection - Learn More



Kintsugi Pottery:
What is broken can be healed;
we all have cracks and imperfections



Self-Compassion and Practical Leadership

Maya Nicole Matthews

Enfield Loaves and Fishes

Agenda

Professional development as self-care: growth days, investing in learning.

Boundaries that protect & empower: scripts and practices for compassionate “no.”

Operating with joy: reframing work from survival mode to meaningful leadership.

Delegation & trust: role ownership maps, empowering volunteers and staff.

Finding resources: identifying networks, peer groups, and sustainable tools.





Introduction

Leadership in nonprofits often runs on **urgency and service**, not sustainability.

Today, we'll explore **how self-compassion directly strengthens your operations**, decision-making, and team resilience.

A woman with short dark hair, wearing a white shirt and a yellow vest, is looking up and to the right. Next to her, a man with glasses and a beard, wearing a grey shirt, is pointing his right hand towards a whiteboard. The whiteboard is covered with various sticky notes and papers. The background is a bright, modern office space with large windows and other people working in the distance. The overall atmosphere is professional and collaborative.

Professional Development as Self-Care

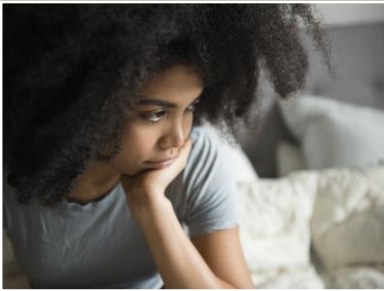
Growth Days: Permission to Learn

- Treat professional development as **maintenance**, not luxury.
- Build “Growth Days” into your calendar — a few hours monthly to step back, reflect, or learn something new.

Memberships with Learning Opportunities

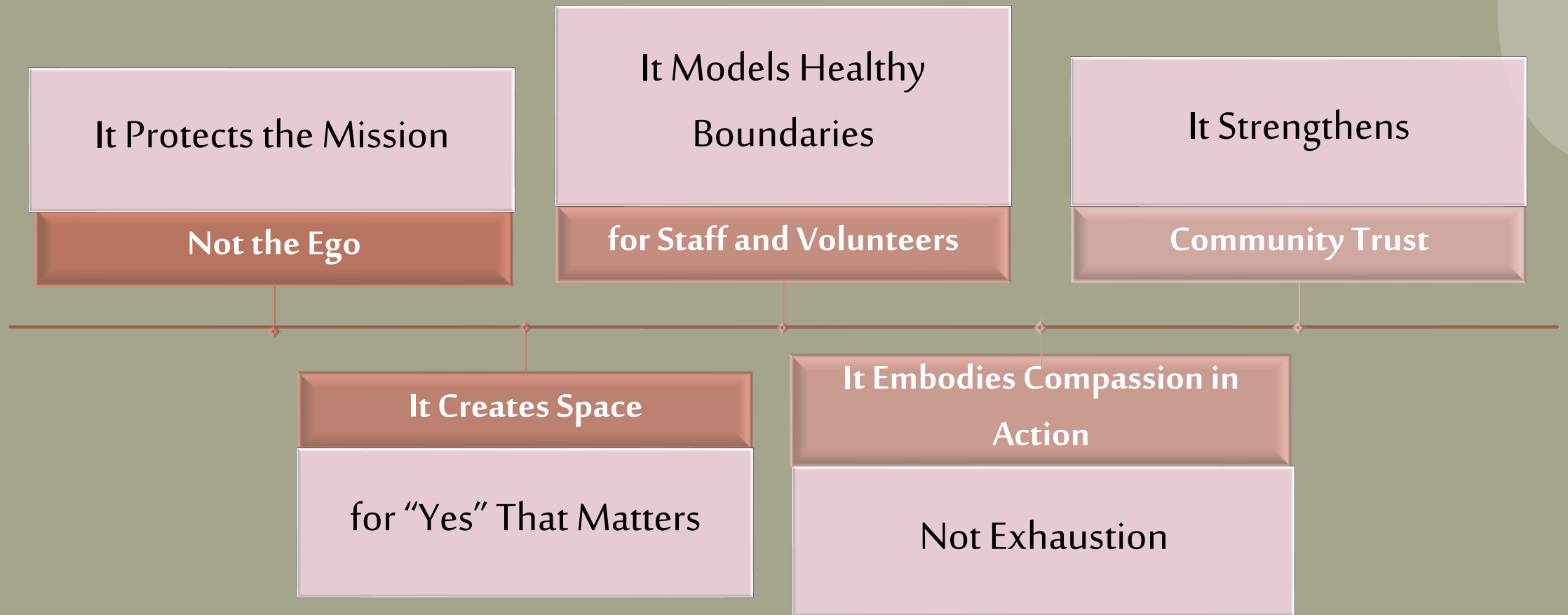
Organization	Membership Benefits
Human Services Forum	The mission of the Human Service Forum is to create a powerful hub of knowledge, experience, and community, that supports and invigorates the human service providers of Massachusetts.
Hartford Foundation for Public Giving	NSP offers a range of learning opportunities and grants to help agencies in the Greater Hartford region plan for their futures, evaluate programs, improve operations and finances, build strong boards, and update technology.
The Alliance	Effective, affordable and accessible opportunities designed to keep nonprofit leaders and staff at the top of their game and working effectively for the success of their organization.
Bloomerang	free, educational webinars are open to the public, and are recommended for any nonprofit staff member or fundraiser

Boundaries that Protect & Empower



“Nonprofit leaders are helpers by nature — but saying yes to everything depletes the very compassion we lead with.”

The Compassionate 'No'



Boundary Scripts

“I’d love to help, but my plate is full. Can we revisit this next month?”

“That’s important — let’s find someone who’s the right fit for it.”

“I can’t take that on, but here’s a resource that might help.”

Boundaries aren’t barriers — they’re **filters for impact.**

Operating With Joy



From Survival Mode to Meaningful Leadership

When we're constantly reacting, we lose the *why* behind our work.



Practical Reframes

- . Replace “*I have to*” with “*I get to.*”
- . Celebrate small operational wins (a smooth shift, a happy volunteer).

Delegation & Trust



Empowerment Maps and Role Ownership

Delegation isn't about giving tasks away-it's about giving *trust* away.



Role Ownership Map

List team and volunteer strengths.

Match people with tasks that energize them.

Review quarterly to adjust responsibilities.

*Try a shift from 'who's available'
to 'who owns this piece of our mission?'*

Finding Resources & Networks



The Web of
Connection



Building Bridges



The Resource Map

Try This:

Building **peer groups** of local directors or managers.

Using community and statewide alliances for shared learning.

Discovering nonprofit resource databases.

No One Leads Alone



Collaboration is the New Resource



Closing Reflection



**Sustainable Leadership =
Compassion in Action**

Growth Days = self-care for leadership.
Compassionate “No” = empowered focus.
Reframe for Joy = renew purpose.
Delegation = shared ownership.
Networks = collective strength.



Sustainable Systems for Wellness

Edith Boyle, LCSW
President & CEO



What If Work Wasn't Just About Surviving 22 Years?

Of the hours we're awake, **22 solid years** are devoted to work.



- Workday averages: 8.4 weekdays, 5.6 weekends
- Total waking hours in lifetime: 467,200
- 24% of waking hours at work

Why Systems Matter

Organizations are living systems — not machines.



Why We Need Systems to Sustain Practice

Individual practices fade without structural support.
Self-care can't compensate for systemic dysfunction.

The Cost of Ignoring Systemic Wellness

Burnout reflects broken systems, not people.
80% would leave for empathy over pay.



Key Elements of Organizational Systems Change

Leadership → Practice → Data → Learning → Communication
Lead → Do → Measure → Reflect → Connect

Leadership → Sets Conditions

What leaders pay attention to signals
what matters most in the organization.



Practice — Make It the Norm

How are we showing up today?

Enraged	Panicked	Stressed	Jittery	Shocked	Surprised	Upbeat	Festive	Exhilarated	Ecstatic
Livid	Furious	Frustrated	Tense	Stunned	Hyper	Cheerful	Motivated	Inspired	Elated
Fuming	Frightened	Angry	Nervous	Restless	Energized	Lively	Enthusiastic	Optimistic	Excited
Anxious	Apprehensive	Worried	Irritated	Annoyed	Pleased	Happy	Focused	Proud	Thrilled
Repulsed	Troubled	Concerned	Uneasy	Peeved	Pleasant	Joyful	Hopeful	Playful	Blissful
Disgusted	Glum	Disappointed	Down	Apathetic	At ease	Easygoing	Content	Loving	Fulfilled
Pessimistic	Morose	Discouraged	Sad	Bored	Calm	Secure	Satisfied	Grateful	Touched
Alienated	Miserable	Lonely	Disheartened	Tired	Relaxed	Chill	Restful	Blessed	Balanced
Despondent	Depressed	Sullen	Exhausted	Fatigued	Mellow	Thoughtful	Peaceful	Comfy	Carefree
Despair	Hopeless	Desolate	Spent	Drained	Sleepy	Complacent	Tranquil	Cozy	Serene

High Energy

Low Energy

Low Pleasantness

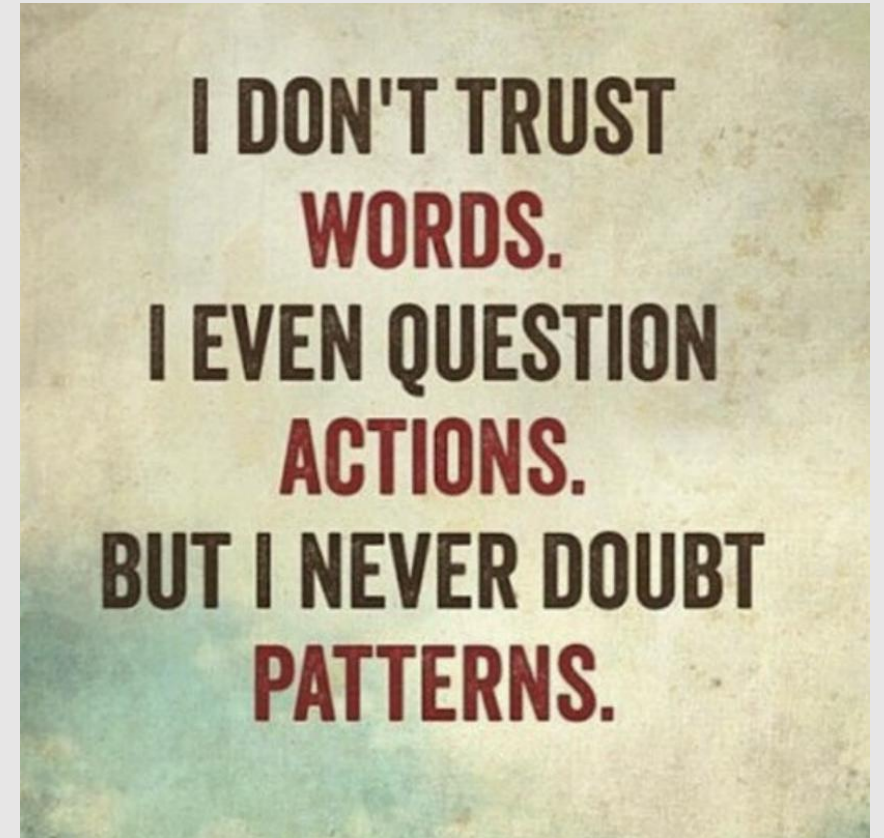
High Pleasantness

Data → Drives Meaning

What we measure shapes what we value.

When burnout or turnover keep repeating, they're not random — **they're patterns.**

And **patterns are data** — they reveal what the system is designed to produce, *intentionally or not.*



Learning — Requires Safety

Without psychological safety, there is no real learning —
only compliance or self-protection.

A photograph of a notepad with a pen and a yellow cup. The notepad is open, and the text "IT'S OK TO MAKE MISTAKES" is written in blue ink on the left page. The text is underlined. A silver pen is lying on the notepad. A yellow cup is visible in the top left corner.

IT'S OK
TO MAKE
MISTAKES

Communication → Fosters Trust



The **quality of relationships** determines the resilience of the whole.

Attend to psychological safety, communication norms, and power dynamics.

Closing Reflection

Systems can heal — if designed to.

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