



**Business leaders in the ACE and resilience movement:
A different kind of bottom line**

The owner of the biggest construction firm in Walla Walla, Washington, sat through a February 2013 seminar that framed adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) in ways a business person could understand: how childhood trauma could translate into low productivity, high turnover, sinking morale and rising health care costs.

The top cause of on-the-job injury at the construction firm was substance abuse by young male workers. Suddenly, the dots connected. The owner leaned toward Teri Barila, co-founder of the Children's Resilience Initiative, and said, "Now I know what you've been trying to tell us." Across the country, the "aha" about ACEs is happening in board rooms and break rooms as business leaders begin to see the relationship between adversity, trauma, resilience, and the workplace.

At Vigor Alaska, a shipyard in Ketchikan, each day begins with a "stretch and flex," as nearly 200 employees—from welders to data-entry specialists—take the "big breath break," a two-minute, deep-breathing respite that they are invited to use anytime they feel stressed. Broetje Orchards in Eastern Washington, with 6,000 acres of apple and cherry trees and 2,400 workers during high-volume harvest months, operates a community of affordable housing for employees called "Vista Hermosa" ("beautiful view"); it includes year-round staff to offer guidance for substance abuse, domestic violence and parenting issues.

The Health Federation of Philadelphia recently contracted to bring sessions on trauma-informed customer service to frontline employees and managers of the city's Revenue Department, including coaching in verbal de-escalation and strategies to avoid re-traumatizing customers. And in Helena, the owner of two McDonald's franchises who wants to bring trauma-informed approaches to her managers recently invited leaders from Elevate Montana to conduct a four-hour ACE-and-resilience training.

Todd Garrison, executive director of ChildWise Institute, backbone organization for Elevate Montana, says his background in corporate finance helps him explain to business people why they should care about their workers' personal struggles. Business leaders understand the conventional idea of "return on investment" in the form of reduced absenteeism, job-related injuries and health care costs, Garrison says. "But it's when we talk to them about the other ROI—return on impact—that's when we get their ear. We talk about impacting their staff's personal growth, their health and their job satisfaction...all of which contribute to a healthier and more profitable business.

"If you want a strong community from which to draw employees, you want a healthy community," Garrison reminds business leaders. "Your employees have ACEs; their kids have ACEs. This isn't a problem for the YMCA or social services to figure out; this is a problem for your business."

At the same time, MARC organizers say their networks need the business sector to help spread the message about trauma, ACEs, and resilience.

"One of my great interests is how to pull the larger community into the conversation about ACEs and trauma-informed care," says Elizabeth Hudson, a member of Wisconsin's Collective Impact project, which is piloting a meditation app for the workplace. The project will measure change

through a wellness survey before and after workers use the app—which includes kindness and gratitude meditations as well as mini-lessons in brain science—for ten weeks.

For some businesses, the news about ACEs and resilience can be a hard sell. Early in the development of the Children’s Resilience Initiative, Barila wanted to offer training about brain development and parenting to workers during their regular staff meetings. “We had one bank give us fifteen minutes once,” she says.

The Children’s Resilience Initiative had more success entering business through the side door—for instance, responding to Chamber of Commerce and some downtown business members’ concerns about “homeless kids” in a local park (pictured) by having college students conduct a study that found the people in the park were primarily veterans dealing with substance abuse who were using the outdoor recreation space as a sober alternative to bars.

Initially, the Chamber’s “business mentality” response was that “the only answer was more law enforcement,” Barila recalls. “But there was a 360-degree turnaround; the whole business response settled down to understanding that what [the veterans] really needed was a bathroom, a shower, and a place to gather.”

Other times, connecting with the business world requires different terminology. Jasmin Williams—coordinator of Resilient KC, an initiative of Trauma Matters KC and the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce—says she introduces the notion of “trauma” to business leaders by relating it to “toxic stress.” She might talk about “bounce-back” rather than “resilience.” And she takes note of the efforts already under way by large and small companies to address employees’ well-being.

“One of our larger companies has mindfulness rooms for their employees,” she says, and another offers “Wellness Wednesday” classes with meditation and yoga. She hopes to build on that foundation by including business leaders in a year-long learning collaborative that is looking more deeply at ACEs, brain science, and epigenetics.

In some cases, company owners were practicing trauma-informed approaches for years before they connected with local network leaders or joined the larger resilience-building movement. Cheryl and Ralph Broetje, whose faith-based company carries the slogan “bearing fruit that will last,” realized 30 years ago that their labor force was, more and more, composed of Latino men and women who carried layers of trauma with them into the fields.

“They’d left everything behind; some of them nearly died getting here. They were living in terrible, dangerous conditions,” Cheryl Broetje says. The company established an off-site daycare for the children of those workers; they built Vista Hermosa; they created a scholarship fund. More important, they brought compassion and curiosity into the workplace.

Roger Bairstow, Broetje’s director of human resources and corporate responsibility, says ACEs research “has given us another tool and better understanding” of what is required to promote individual, family, company, and community health.

“Science is now confirming what we always knew,” says Broetje. “You know something’s wrong; you can see it when people start to shut down, when they don’t show up, or when they become aggressive. We ask, ‘What happened? How can we help?’”

At Vigor Shipyard, general manager Mike Pearson poses the same questions. The shipyard’s values, displayed prominently in the workplace, are “truth, responsibility, evolution and love.” There is a meditation group and on-site recovery support. Supervisors periodically ask employees questions including “Who do you want to be? Where do you want to see yourself at the end of your life?”

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Pearson likes to call Vigor “a school for the whole human being.” He believes trauma-informed care is the future for all types of business. “If you create a workplace where there is trust, where you really develop the wholeness of human beings, your incident rate will drop, your absenteeism will decrease, and your profitability will increase. That translates into work that is of higher quality, that has meaning to it.”

Written By Anndee Hochman

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