Season /Episode #:	Season 3 Episode 9
Guest:	Paul Harman
Title:	Creating Informed and Healthy Workplaces with Paul Harman

Dr. Shari Dade	You are now listening to The Audacity to Fail podcast, a podcast about mis stepping into success. Get ready to dive into conversations and real stories from leaders as they share. How failure activates a growth mindset is an important part of learning and motivation for improvement. I'm your host, Dr. Shari Dade, psychologist with the National Center for Organizational Development.
Dr. Shari Dade	Thank you for tuning in. Let's get started.
Announcer	Support for this leadership podcast comes from the National Center for Organization Development. NCOD aims to increase the long term growth and performance of the Department of Veterans Affairs by collaboratively working with the leaders throughout the VA to improve organizational outcomes by supporting the development of an engaged workforce. For additional information on our services, click the link in the show notes.
Dr. Shari Dade	When people thrive, organizations do too. This sounds like a simple statement, but there are deep complexities within. In the midst of burnout culture, staff shortages, chronic stress, pandemic loss and trauma, creating a well and healthy workplace is critical to meeting our mission and providing the best care to our nation's veterans. Leaders who strive to become trauma informed can design workplaces with the understanding of what their staff needs to thrive in today's workforce.
Dr. Shari Dade	For this episode, I'm excited to be joined by Paul Harmon. Paul was a licensed clinical social worker who has held many leadership roles both in and out of the VA. He has been the associate chief of staff for mental health at the Montana VA for seven years. During this time, Paul has been detailed to several VA's, including the Eastern Colorado health care system, as their acting associate chief of staff for mental health and is currently on detail at the Roseburg health care system as their acting associate chief of staff for mental health.
Dr. Shari Dade	He is also a national coach for the VA Voices Program with the National Center for Organization Development in Cody and has also worked with Cody to create and implement other programs at the VA Montana to improve morale and culture. Polic sales and building new programs and leading change to help the organizations he works for to be a high quality organization.
Dr. Shari Dade	Get ready to join us as we explore the journey of stepping into success. This is the audacity to Fail Podcast Episode 29. Creating Informed and Healthy

	Workplaces. Hi Paul, It's so great to have you today. How's it going?
Paul Harman	It's going great. Thank you, Shari. I'm excited to be here with you.
Dr. Shari Dade	I am very excited for you to be here too. And I am so ready to jump into this dialog because this is something that you and I, we've had some pretty deep discussions and conversations about, and I do consider you to be a very positive, a very caring person, a very caring leader who's motivated to facilitate change in your organization and in your VA.
Dr. Shari Dade	So there's no greater person to discuss how to create a healthy workforce with. So I'm excited to jump in today. Are you ready?
Paul Harman	I am ready. Let's go.
Dr. Shari Dade	Let's go, Let's go. So, Paul, like I said, we've had so many conversations relating to how to create a well and a healthy workforce. When you think about from your perspective and some of the work that you've done, what are the characteristics that would be hallmark to a healthy or well workplace?
Paul Harman	Well, I think that the key to building a healthy organization, our workforce, is really around building community and caring about people. I think the struggle and something that lots of organizations get caught up in is they get caught up in numbers and data, which is all important, don't get me wrong. But I think the key is, is is we lose sight of the community and the people as we focus on data and some of those things.
Dr. Shari Dade	Absolutely. Organizations are created with people. Think about organizations or even teams or work groups to be kind of these small communities that have their own norms. They have their own cultures, their own rules, regulations, their own kind of customs. In a sense. And so when we think about a well or a healthy workplace, oftentimes it is more complex than the numbers will always allow us to see.
Dr. Shari Dade	And so it's great to think about what would it look like if we were to look beyond numbers? What would it look like if we had those conversations? We built those relationships in order to create the community that is already kind of existing within our organizations. Right. As a leader, what missteps have you found yourself falling into when you've attempted to create these healthy workspaces for your staff?
Paul Harman	Well, the reality is, is probably a lot.

Dr. Shari Dade	Right?
Paul Harman	I think that's one of the things in leadership is we're continually making mistakes and we have to be aware of that. And I think part of it is also being open to to standing up and saying, you know what, I've made a mistake for sure. But there is a quote and I'm I love quotes, so I'll probably say a few.
Paul Harman	Rumi, who is a Persian poet.
Dr. Shari Dade	Mm hmm. I've heard a rumor. Yes.
Paul Harman	Yes. He said yesterday was clever. So I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise. So I am changing myself. And I think that's so important. You know, early in my career, when I was a leader, I wanted to change the V.A.. I wanted to change everybody else. And I had all the answers. But the reality is, is I didn't.
Paul Harman	And, you know, now that I've been a leader for a while in inside and outside the V.A., I've realized that, you know, I have to continually look at myself and look at how do I change myself. And in the process, as I do that, then I'm able to make change and help other people around me.
Dr. Shari Dade	Absolutely. I love that quote and that perspective of how do I back up and look at the change within myself, the change that could happen within myself first, and how that could span into the change of the organization. And I think that's so imperative for leaders to be able to say, when I look at myself and when I look at my seed of change, the things that I can impact, what are those things?
Dr. Shari Dade	And it starts with me. And then how can I expand that into those who I work with daily and processes and different procedures that we do follow within our system.
Paul Harman	But I think, you know, it's very easy to get caught up in the thing of the week. And, you know, right now productivity, access, all of those things are really important and they really are important. But I think the struggle is it's very easy to get caught up in that and and lose sight of some of the data around burnout and other things that if we don't have enough staff and their burnout, their productivity is going to be worse for so and then if we keep pressuring them, it then makes it worse.
Paul Harman	Their productivity is going to get worse and we're going to have less access. And so I think that that that what we have to do and what I've tried to do, but I think I've missed it sometimes, is that we have to sometimes step back from the data and saying, you know what? What's really going on in the organization and

	making sure that we have the people in the right seat on the bus.
Paul Harman	And I think that's really key is that if we have the right person in the right job, then they're more likely to succeed and to be productive and to to enjoy their job. And so I think those are just some of the things that I continually look at.
Dr. Shari Dade	One of the things, Paul, that you mentioned and you said in that statement was when we kind of step back and think about the trauma that people are experiencing this, like I said, this is something that you and I have talked about. But from your perspective, how do you define organizational trauma and how does it impact the well-being of employees?
Paul Harman	Well, I think that there's very scientific definitions of organizational trauma. But I think really the key, again, when we look at and how I like to define it more is things that happen in an organization that create a struggle or a challenge. And I think as mental health professionals, a lot of times we get stuck in this definition of really traumatic events and and the things that happen with with our our military and our veterans.
Paul Harman	But the reality is, is I think that there's traumas that happen in organizations all the time. I mean, I think one of the major ones that is skipped a lot is COVID. You know, this was a trauma that happened to the whole world. And I think we're still reeling from the effects of of this trauma. So I think that's part of the key is is really realizing that things that happen in organizations and in the VA, there's times when things happen, leadership changes.
Paul Harman	You know, many things that occur in an organization that create a traumatic experience for for the staff there and can really destroy or hurt the culture.
Dr. Shari Dade	Yeah, absolutely. You know, COVID was definitely a global trauma that as a community, as a global community, we all experienced. And now it's very easy to say, okay, that was the COVID years, right? Or that was, you know, the two years or the three years that quote unquote, you know, we don't want to speak about. But the impacts are still really there within our system.
Dr. Shari Dade	And when we think about things like burnout and we both said that as an example, how burnout is one of these things that we look at and we talk about and we say, okay, you're experiencing burnout, so go and fix that employee, right, right off and figure out how to manage that burnout. But when we start to think about burnout compacted with COVID, compacted with staffing shortages, come back with all of these other things that are a part of our day to day work and the day to day workforce, we start to see how those compounds really do build up into these overwhelming reactions to trauma and how the pandemic

	just shined a lot more
Dr. Shari Dade	light on that. And also increase those reactions and those impacts. And so when we think about trauma informed leadership, I often believe that leaders hold the key to being able to sit back and understand like, oh my goodness, all of these things are happening and they're compounded and they're impacting myself, but also my employees. How can I make sure that the structures, the processes, the procedures that we do have to follow, the metrics that we do have to track aren't in fact adding to that compound effect of all of those other things that are part of the workforce.
Dr. Shari Dade	And that's how I think about how leaders can lean into this idea of trauma and how it does impact their employees.
Paul Harman	Well, and I think the key really is, you know, we talked about burnout and, you know, and you said, I think which is right, that piece of employee, you're burnt out, fix it. But I think the thing that also usually comes right after is the supervisor or manager says, fix your burnout and still be productive for sure. So it's it's that piece of you know, don't let the feelings and the trauma that you're experience affect the outcome, which in essence is saying, I'm going to get more burnout and I'm not going to affect it.
Paul Harman	So I think the first piece is we have to recognize that that people have experienced trauma and a shrink. The key, really, when we look at how people are affected by trauma, are natural responses to trauma. As as a person and as a leader are to shrink our circles.
Dr. Shari Dade	Yeah, yeah. To go inward.
Paul Harman	And as a leader, you're they micromanage. They want to control everything because they they're afraid it's all based out of fear. And so instead of being an open just culture, like we're really striving, it's a culture of that. I'm going to control everything because I'm afraid. And so the key is, is really stepping back and sitting in the trauma and sitting in it and saying, Hey, I understand where we're at.
Paul Harman	Let let's talk about that. And the important thing is, is that we're not saying that because we're going to identify the trauma and identify what's going on. It doesn't mean that we're not going to continue to say, hey, we need to get through this and we need to be productive and we need to do these things. It's saying, you know what, I'm going to sit with you and I'm going to understand and we're going to have a discussion about what what's going on for you, and

	then we can come and work together to come up with a solution instead of trying to micromanage and trying to pressure somebody into getting better.
Dr. Shari Dade	It reminds me of I don't know if you've read a book called What Happened to You. It was written by Bruce Perry and Oprah Winfrey, and it talks a lot about not necessarily looking at the reactions to trauma. What's wrong with you? So you've got burnout. What are you not doing right? Like, go fix that. Let's figure that out as opposed to, well, what's happening here in our system, what's happening on our team, what's happening in our procedures that might be contributing to some of these things?
Dr. Shari Dade	And how do I dig in as a leader and make sure that those things aren't being compounded? And so it really makes me think about that as a space to start for leaders, a space to start to go from what's wrong with you and to what's happened to you or what's happening here, and how can I change those things.
Paul Harman	Yeah, and I think that's really key and I think that's the struggle. And we're driven by trying to find out who did something wrong instead of looking at systems and and what is wrong. Because I think the struggle is, is if, if we focus completely on pinpointing a person and we remove that person, then we still have the systems issues.
Dr. Shari Dade	And the culture lives on in the system. Yeah.
Paul Harman	So, so I think the piece is, is not saying that if somebody does something wrong, that they shouldn't be held accountable because they should. But I think the other piece is really looking at that system and saying, okay, what's going on with the system and how do we fix this and how do we make change?
Dr. Shari Dade	Right. It really gets to the notion of pushing interventions upstream or pushing different things that we can do as leaders upstream. When we think about how can we look at systems, how can we look at the structures of our work, how can we look at the structures of our teams and make changes appropriately there to circumvent the impacts of trauma or we compound that impacts of burnout or all of these things that we kind of flippantly say, right, we've got burnout, we've got stress, we've got these failings, we've got a shortages, but really looking upstream to say, what can we do up here so that the effects don't flow downstream into our workforce and the
Dr. Shari Dade	key to being able to create those healthier spaces and those healthier workplaces as a result of that. And you touched on this a bit, what role do you see leaders playing in creating that safe and supportive workplace for their teens, for their direct reports?

Paul Harman	I think that leaders are vital. If if leaders don't step up, then it won't happen. And I think there's two kinds of leaders. There's leaders that have it by the essence of their job. They're a supervisor, a manager, an anxious whatever they are. And then there's also other leaders who don't have a leadership job, right?
Dr. Shari Dade	Those informal leaders. Yeah, but.
Paul Harman	That can make a change. And I so I think the key is is really saying, you know, all of us really have the ability to step up and make change and all of us have, but we need to do it. We just have to look at our sphere of influence and say, you know what, I'm going to make change here.
Dr. Shari Dade	Absolutely.
Paul Harman	And I'm going to create that culture that wants to change and I'm going to create a community that we care.
Dr. Shari Dade	I know one of the things that you mentioned is, you know, when when looking to become trauma informed, the first step is to recognize and acknowledge how the compounded effect of trauma, whether organizational or historical or current trauma, impacts our workforce. Are there other things that a leader who is saying, I want to be more trauma informed? Are there other things that that leader can do beyond kind of recognizing and acknowledging?
Paul Harman	Yeah, I think there are I mean, there are lots of things, but I think, you know, that first piece is is building a relationship with your staff.
Dr. Shari Dade	Yeah. Yeah.
Paul Harman	So that that you can communicate with them and they can communicate with you that they can, that they feel safe to come and talk to you when something's going on. I think I think one of the experiences when I first really started digging into trauma informed care and organizational trauma and all of this, I was really thinking about this and I saw something.
Paul Harman	I saw a directive come down from the central office, and it was very interesting to me that I looked at it and I said, you know, there was a congressional hearing and then out of that congressional hearing came this, and it really was a trauma response. And so I was able to have some discussions with leadership above me to say, wow, and just really kind of looking at this as a trauma response and not saying that that it changed the directive.

Paul Harman	It didn't The directive still came down and it still was good. But I think the piece was it helped me to have a different reaction to the directive. Sometimes it's so easy to get frustrated and think, Oh, they don't understand us on the front line and they're giving us all these rules and these things and it's impossible. But but when I was able to step back and sit in the trauma and realize, you know, that this is a reaction, then I was able to say, okay, let's look at how do we take this and make this something effective for us.
Paul Harman	And so and so instead of reacting and making and allowing it to traumatize me and then me feeding it down the line, we were able to take that and say, Hey, let's let's do something different for sure. And so I think that's the key is being able to sit with it and then look at it. How do we how do we change the narrative and how do we not continue to traumatize down the line?
Dr. Shari Dade	MM I like this piece about building relationship, building the connection with staff so that they can feel open and comfortable and supported enough to feel, to be able to come and say, Hey, this is really impacting me, or hey, this structure or this new policy or this new procedure that's being rolled out, it's really changing the way that I do work and it's impacting my and my peers and all of these different things.
Dr. Shari Dade	The relationship is so vital. One of the things that is a part of your role that you carry is you're a national coach for Voices, and I really look at voices out of our office as a program that really works to facilitate the connection and the understanding of one another in a really deep way. And I believe that it aligns with trauma informed leadership.
Dr. Shari Dade	It helps leaders to become trauma informed. Can you speak more about voices and how it does align with trauma informed leadership?
Paul Harman	I'd be happy to. It's one of my bucket fillers, so it's something that I love. But I think the piece is, is it's one of the few programs that the VA has rolled out that truly builds community. And I think that it's such an amazing program that allows leaders in a facility to truly get to know people in their facility and help spur and change community and change a culture.
Paul Harman	And, you know, I've watched voices, among other things, of course, but I think that has been a catalyst for some of the culture change in Montana. And I've seen it in other sites, too, that this time that we take and it is a it's a two day training that you step away from work, but the dividends that come from it are outstanding.
Paul Harman	It's it's an amazing tool and it gives people skills to be able to build community and communicate better. So I think shameless plug, but I think anybody that has

	the opportunity should take the opportunity to to go to a voice session at their facility or if they don't have it, you know, talk to their facility leadership and see if they can get it started.
Dr. Shari Dade	Mm hmm. For sure. For sure. So, Paul, we're almost at the end of our episode, but I like to leave a little morsel for our listeners. And so if there's one thing that you could share with the leader that is really working to create the best environment for their staff, what is one thing you'd say, you know, start here, do this thing, and that can help your staff thrive and provide the best for the veterans.
Paul Harman	I think if I were to say the most important thing is humility, and why I would say that is is really don't make it about you really get to know your staff and look at every opportunity to praise them and not praise yourself. And so I think that's really the key is is being humble and being that servant leader of really looking at how do I build up the people around me and making sure that, you know, the staff that you work with know what's important to them, know if their kids have baseball games or whatever, and knowing their name, things like that, that really make a difference.
Dr. Shari Dade	Yeah, And I think that really drives home that point of building community within our organization, building community within our teams. Right. I want to know about my neighbors. I want to know about my coworkers. You know, I want to be able to be supportive and create a workspace that is supportive for myself and for them. And so that's that's awesome.
Dr. Shari Dade	Paul So before we close, I want to play a game, a word association, which I know as a social worker you are all too familiar with, but I'm boy, three phrases here and I just want to get your first reactions to those phrases. All right. Are you ready?
Paul Harman	I'm ready.
Dr. Shari Dade	All right, here we go. So the first one is Healthy Workplaces.
Paul Harman	Vital to Success.
Dr. Shari Dade	Mm, Yeah, Vital to success. Yeah. Trauma informed leadership.
Paul Harman	Something that not very many people do.
Dr. Shari Dade	But so vital to success. Right. And then lastly, audacity to fail.

Paul Harman	I think what I what the word that comes to mind is fear, because I think a lot of people are afraid of failure. But I can tell you for myself that my greatest successes have come after I have failed.
Dr. Shari Dade	Absolutely, utterly. And that reminds me, like we we had an episode that talks about the fear in leadership, Right. And what that means and what that looks like and how, you know, sitting in the fear, succumbing to the fear or even just accepting that, you know, there are things that are scary and that's a part of the journey allows us to be more well-rounded and whole and authentic leaders.
Dr. Shari Dade	And so that ability to say sometimes this is scary and sometimes we fail and we learn from all of those experiences. So having the audacity to do all of that, all the things that come with leadership is so important. It just makes me think of that. Well, all right, Paul, this is been a good episode. Like I said, I enjoy talking about organizational trauma.
Dr. Shari Dade	I enjoy talking about trauma informed leadership. It is one of my favorite topics to sit down and chat about, especially when you and I get together. So I appreciate your time and your ability to share some gems here with the listeners. Thank you.
Paul Harman	Thank you for the time.
Dr. Shari Dade	Awesome. So we've come to the end of another great episode of The Audacity to Fail podcast. Thank you for tuning in to learn how missteps can lead to growth and success, Be sure to check out the key lessons in the show notes for a refresher. To request services from the National Center for Organization Development, check out our website also linked in the show notes.
Dr. Shari Dade	Remember, if you missed the target 100 times, you had not failed Instead, you've simply found 100 strategies that did not work. Be well and continue to go forward until next time. Thank you.