



Empathetic Leadership: Cultivating Resilience and Retention in Adult Education Staff

Elevation Educational Consulting Group



Framing

Empathy in leadership mitigates the stressors and cultivates resilience and retention

Agenda

- Welcome, Intros, Icebreaker, Framing
- Vicarious Trauma
- Active Listening
- Supportive Communication Strategies / Interventions
- Small Group Ideation - action plan
- Report out
- Reflections, Takeaways & Closing Comments

Thank you for dedicating this time to *you and your staff*.

Today is about empathy and resilience ... shoring up the foundation for sustainable, impactful work.

Icebreaker Activity



Think for a minute about your people... who you come from and who is with you at this point in your personal and/or professional life.

- ¿De quien eres? - Who are you from? Where are your people from?
- ¿Con quien andas? - Who's with you, supporting you?

Let's have a few volunteers to call out those names!

Vicarious Trauma

What are the signs of stress? How does the pressure of so much trauma in the world around you (and among those you serve) manifest in our bodies?

Where in your body do you feel the physical manifestation of stress?

→ *Talk to a neighbor about how stress shows up in our bodies.*



A Question of Repair

EECG qualitative research study with Workforce Development staff & leaders (similar/same clients, similar/same working conditions)

WFD staff reported that their colleagues and themselves have experienced **high levels of vicarious trauma**.

Staff desire **more mental well-being support** from their workplaces

Increase in psychological needs among their client base.

The Research Is Clear

Educators working in high-stress environments **experience rates of secondary traumatic stress comparable to first responders.** (STS - quick onset of trauma-related symptoms that mimic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after direct exposure to another's trauma.)

A 2025 study at the University of Northern Colorado found that **92% of school personnel reported some level of STS, with 45% experiencing severe levels,** as measured on a scale that maps to the DSM-5-TR.

The data shows that chronic workplace stress affects not just individual well-being, but also organizational effectiveness, student outcomes, and community stability.

The Real-World Impact of Stress

When stress goes unaddressed, the consequences ripple outward:

Burnout: Emotional exhaustion that depletes your capacity to care. *For example, feeling perpetually drained and finding it hard to connect with students or colleagues, even when you want to.*

Vicarious Trauma: Empathetically engaging with and absorbing others' pain without the ability to help them nor processing your own. *For instance, constantly hearing about students' difficult home lives and starting to feel anxious or hopeless yourself, even outside of work.*

Reduced Retention: Losing talented staff to unsustainable conditions. *This might look like experienced teachers or support staff leaving the profession entirely because the demands are too high and support too low.*

Decreased Efficacy: Struggling to show up as your best self. *An example is consistently missing deadlines, making more errors, or finding it difficult to innovate in lessons due to mental fatigue.*

Active Listening at Work

Reminders:



Full Attention

Eliminate distractions to focus completely on the speaker. Maintain comfortable eye contact. Put away devices and clear your mind. Focus your mind on the speaker, not your response.



Understanding

Acknowledge and confirm the speaker's message. Seek clarity before responding. Paraphrase to confirm understanding: "So what you're saying is..."



Communication

Use both verbal responses and nonverbal cues to show engagement and understanding. Resist interrupting. Wait for natural pauses.



Active Listening: Going Deeper

Ask Open-Ended Questions

Use "how," "what," and "why" questions to encourage deeper sharing.

What led you to that conclusion?"

"How did that change your thinking?"

Avoid leading questions that may sound like you are expecting a specific answer.

Reflect Feelings

Acknowledge emotions you observe: "It sounds like you felt frustrated when..."

"I hear joy in your voice when you talk about..."

This validates the speaker's experience.

If you are not certain of the speaker's feelings - ask - "Could you tell me how that made you feel?"

"What feelings are rising up for you?"

Summarize Key Points

Periodically recap main ideas: "Let me make sure I understand..."

"Could I recap what I have heard so far?"

"Some of the main points I heard here are..."

This ensures mutual understanding.

Paired Exercise: "Uncovering Hidden Strengths"



Partner A Shares (2 min)

Describe a non-work passion or skill that has unexpectedly influenced your leadership approach.



Partner B Listens

Practice active listening without interruption. Notice verbal and non-verbal cues.



Partner B Responds (2 min)

Ask 1-2 open-ended questions to deepen understanding. Reflect feelings you observed.

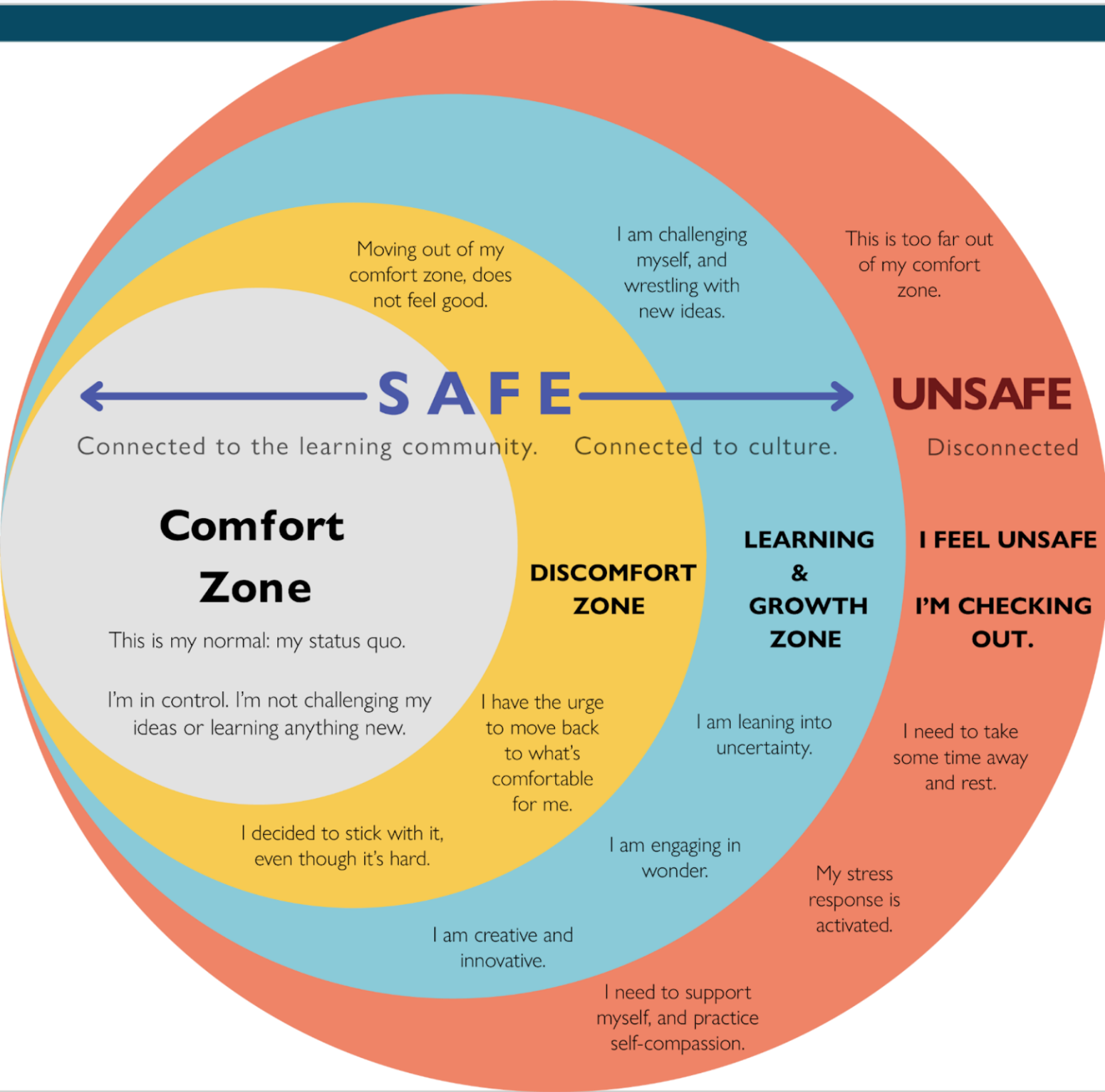


Switch Roles (4 min)

Repeat the process with Partner B sharing and Partner A listening.

☐ Practice those active listening techniques:

- **Open Ended Questions**
- **Reflect Feelings**
- **Summarize key points**



In which zone
are we?

and our team
members?

Supportive Communication Scenarios



Discussing performance reviews or growth opportunities

Addressing staff burnout and vicarious trauma symptoms

Supporting staff through challenging organizational changes

Mediating conflicts between staff members respectfully

Another communication strategy: Coaching not Correcting

From **telling** to **asking**

Effective coaching shifts the power dynamic from directive leadership to collaborative growth. When we lead with questions rather than answers, we honor the expertise and potential of our colleagues.

Consider Asking:



What strategies can you try to better support your students' learning needs?



How can you build on your strengths as an educator to overcome classroom challenges?



What professional development opportunities are you interested in to grow your teaching practice?



Building a Stronger, More Respectful (and Resilient) Team

Growing Trust

Active listening creates psychological safety. Team members feel valued and understood.

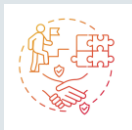


Deepening Empathy

Regular practice with these prompts builds understanding of diverse perspectives.

Strengthening Collaboration

Every conversation is a chance to learn from each other and build respect.



Small group ideation: routines for resiliency

Wellness

- ❖ reducing vicarious trauma effects & burnout

Ideas:

- Physical activity routines

What would work for YOUR team?

Empathy

- ❖ humanizing policies & protocol in the workplace

Ideas:

- Structured breaks

How could you build resilience with empathy?

Communication

- ❖ active listening & coaching vs correcting

Ideas:

- Open ended questions

What small shifts would make the biggest difference day-to-day?

Small Group Report Out

What are the choice ideas from your lists?



Each group:

Share ONE strategy you brainstormed to implement when you're "back in the office" next week?

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Small group ideation: routines for resiliency

Wellness

- ❖ reducing vicarious trauma effects & burnout

Ideas:

- Physical activity routines
- Social connection
 - Menu of options (Walk and Talk) - every month
 - Music playing
- Meditation at the beginning of the day
- Food

What would work for YOUR team?

Empathy

- ❖ humanizing policies & protocol in the workplace

Ideas:

- Structured breaks
- Cultivating psychological safety
- Support to do what you need to do... OPTIONS!
- Staff meetings - Open ended questions for **community building** -
- Food

How could you build resilience with empathy?

Communication

- ❖ active listening & coaching vs correcting

Ideas:

- Open ended questions
- Boundary setting
- Tech (email/text communications - not during a meeting)
- Round table colleague sharing
- 1x1 Check ins - daily -
- Food

What small shifts would make the biggest difference day-to-day?

Closing

- Observations
- Questions / Reflections
- Final comments

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Active Listening Guide With Prompts



Active listening at work:

Active listening transforms workplace relationships.

It builds trust, improves teamwork, and fosters mutual respect.

Which can mitigate vicarious trauma and other workplace stressors...

This guide provides practical skills for more respectful, effective collaboration with your colleagues. Use the prompts and follow-up questions as guides, yet adjust them for deeper authenticity.