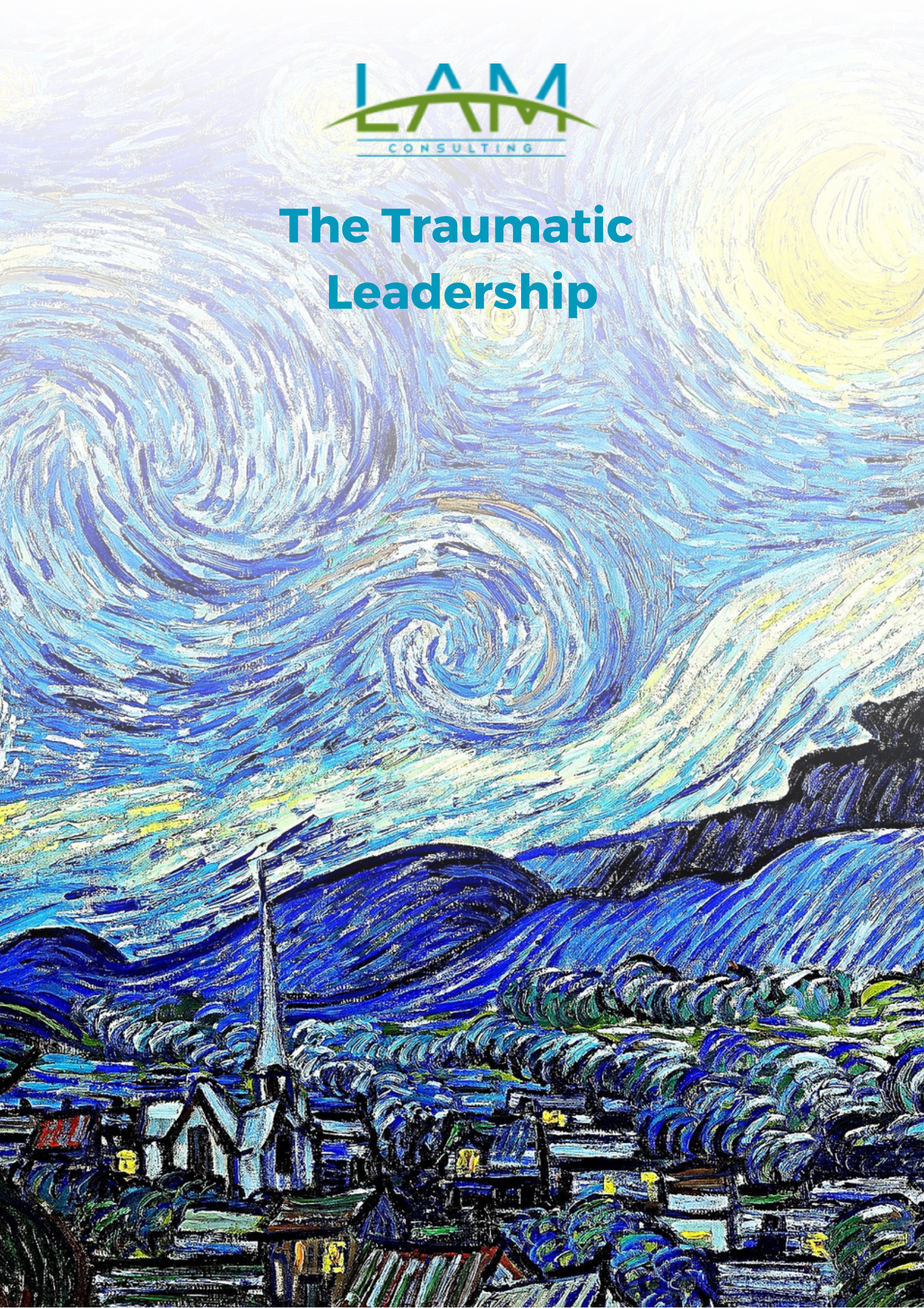




# The Traumatic Leadership







## **The Traumatic Leadership**

Those who play an Executive role in an organization have to manage complex and unpredictable contexts in the best way, and are subjected to a weight of expectations; they feel that everything depends on their effectiveness. To this complexity of external pressures, however, are added those coming from within; I would say more by multiplication than by addition.

As I have already pointed out in the previous article *The Embodied Leadership*, the key factor for Leaders is not so much the possession of certain skills but the ability to reposition themselves in a sphere of self-efficacy where those skills can be executed to their full potential. In this article, I would like to focus on how our inner experience, especially the unresolved aspects of ourselves, can heavily interfere with our success and professional happiness.

So what does the theme of trauma have to do with leadership? Let's start by defining the term: trauma is not what happened to us in the past that generated a wound in our soul, it is not even just the wound itself that we continue to carry with us, but it is the defense we have generated to defend ourselves from that pain. The key point to understand is that our career path has been powerfully influenced by these defensive schemes. We have built our success on the rubble of our past by leveraging those unresolved armors. At the same time, those armors are also the main source of our limitations, of the inability to fully enjoy our success, of our inability to expand in directions more harmonious for ourselves and for others.

Trauma is linked to our professional life (and, of course, to other aspects of our existence). On the one hand, it represents the motivational engine for achieving success, and on the other, it constitutes the core of our greatest limits. In this article, I will try to dissolve this ambiguity.



## **How Trauma Shapes Our Leadership**

As I have already said, it is not the traumatic event itself but the coping mechanisms that tend to crystallize and determine automatic responses that stiffen and trap our self-efficacy.

Thomas' father was a truck driver and in order to support the family and the school paths of his three children, he accepted endless trips abroad. The mother soon developed depression. Little Thomas grew up in this state of absence and, like every child, not being able to understand the reasons for the physical absence of the father and the 'energetic' absence of the mother, he poured the cause on himself: "It is because I am not worth".

In order not to feel this pain, he built his own path, first within the family, becoming more responsible than his age to take care of his two younger brothers, then at school, and finally in his career. At the age of 30, he had already played important roles in two multinational companies with experiences in the Far East and the United States.

This professional versatility made him sought by an investment fund as a key figure to be put at the head of a controlled company. Fine, but where is the problem? It seems that everything is going well. The answer can only be given by a more careful reading of the details. There are, basically, three macro-copying strategies, each of which makes it clear how these automatic schemes imprison us.

### **Avoidance**

The first route of coping style is avoidance. One way not to feel pain is to anesthetize oneself. A very common route is that of addiction: drug addiction, gambling, or becoming a workaholic. But here, I would like to show another possible way of entering avoidance with an impact on the relational dimension.



Thomas had reached his position of success in order to avoid that sense of 'not being enough'; consequently, he surrounds himself with people he can easily control, who do not question him, who do not surpass him in ability but admire and seek him. He will always be the junction of any decisions, also taking on himself the responsibilities that he could delegate. A problem that will easily arise will be that of not being able to build an excellent team. Questioning, conflict, and authentic feedback represent very important levers for the generation of business results. Thomas, not aware of his inner pattern, will probably end up blaming the fact that there are no more valuable, accountable, motivated people to hire.

### **Challenge**

The second way of coping is exactly the opposite, instead of avoiding the problem, entering into a challenge with it; running towards the tiger. In this scenario every success achieved immediately loses interest, immediately follows a sort of depression and then the need to look for new adrenaline. And the adrenaline comes when you face the chance of feeling again that you're not enough and strive to prove it false.

The ambiguity is still evident: on the one hand, one might wonder if Thomas would have achieved so many results if he had not chosen the most difficult school before, if he had not accepted the challenge of working in Japan then, etc. Actually, the challenging path seems to be very powerful. On the other hand, one can wonder if the stress generated and the health problems that follow were worth it; if in a medium-long term perspective, such a spasmodic leadership represents an asset for the company and its employees.

### **Re-staging**

The third way is that of overturning, that is, re-staging the wound by projecting it onto others. As when, in order not to feel the inner emptiness, one becomes a workaholic and expects others to be too. Thomas commented badly when his collaborator took a morning off to go to his daughter's play. These comments do not go unnoticed within the team. They tend to lower the level of openness, trust, and sharing. They lead people into hiding. Or even worse, they tend to attract people who share the same trauma.



## **Familiarity and lack of freedom**

To understand the measure why copy styles are a problem, we shouldn't just look at the dynamic itself. The problem is not what one does or the result he gets but the lack of freedom and flexibility: with rigid defensive styles there is no choice. One can become a Tennis champion for pleasure, fun, and passion rather than for the rage or the pain that's depleting his soul.

Reading these three examples, it emerges that, paradoxically, none of these strategies really distances Thomas from the nerve center of the problem. To better understand this phenomenon, I refer to the concept of 'familiarity' expressed by Jack Lee Rosenberg: we do not seek our own good and we are not even predisposed to achieving the goals we set ourselves rationally; rather, we are unconsciously inclined to seeking what is familiar. What has constituted our evolutionary experience becomes an attractive pole that we seek or even try to reproduce, perhaps without realizing it, perhaps blaming others or Fate.

Not surprisingly, Thomas found himself at the age of 35, as CEO, struggling with the referent of the shareholder fund, a tough, disqualifying person, who tended to downplay the extent of problems and who constantly challenged him: "So you will solve it, right? You won't disappoint investors...". Thomas, despite being young, had hard skin and had already managed tough situations. He could have turned that table quite easily. But unfortunately, that attitude touched his deepest wound and literally hijacked him into an emotional regression to an age when he could not possess the cognitive tools to respond; he only felt a sense of helplessness. He began to suffer from insomnia and to be less and less lucid in making decisions.

## **Overcoming mental patterns through the body**

In my previous article *The Embodied Leadership*, I tried to show how the conscious activation of our neurophysiological system through somatic practices is a highway towards our self-efficacy. The bodily experience is also decisive for overcoming deep conditioning like Thomas'. The process of liberation from these patterns typically occurs through two moments: the awareness of them and the corrective experience that allows them to be modified. For both phases, the body plays a fundamental role.



## Using the body to recognize inner 'saboteurs'

The first moment in a process of inner growth is to become aware of one's own patterns. It's not necessarily an easy step. In fact, the first basic defense mechanism that is triggered to defend us from suffering is denial. We can do things to distract ourselves (as we do with the mindless scrolling of our cell phones) or we can even cut off our feelings. Our body becomes rigid and numb (like the scar that forms around a wound). Our mind shifts its attention to something else: it builds a fantastic world to cling to, tries to fill itself with other distracting stimuli, and tends to remove connections. So, as adults, when we find ourselves living our automatic reactions, we can end up diminishing their magnitude, blaming others or situations, trying to eliminate them from our horizon, defend ourselves with phrases like: "I am like this".

That's why reconnecting with the body is a critical factor to regain presence in what's true instead of following all the lies that we can make up with our minds. Moreover, we should say that many of our traumatic events are hooked back in our primary experiences which are purely somatic: when we are very little, we just have feelings and our mind doesn't have tools to understand connections and even to remember facts. As Bessel Van Der Kolk says, reporting several scientific studies, the body keeps the score. And we really have to dive into those feelings if we want to really understand what's happening to us. Reactivating the body in its vitality, for example, through the IBP practices described in the previous article, represents a facilitating condition to be able to recover the common thread that links the problem we live in the present to our past.

Rosenberg, the founder of Integrative Body Psychotherapy, devised a tool called the Primary Scenario: a sort of map of our family up to the generation of grandparents, which highlights the characteristics of people and the relationships between them. Once you reconstruct this map, through a body-centered work, it becomes much easier to identify the similarity between the present and the past. For example, it was evident for Thomas to recognize, in that disqualifying attitude, his father's behavior towards his mother.



As a child, that continuous disqualification created a state of distrust that subjected him to a state of anxiety. Every time he was in front of the Fund's representative, his mind went hijacked back into regression at the age of 9 when his mother sank into a deep depressive state; each time he was reliving that state of helplessness. A hint of that similarity was enough to trigger a reaction in his nervous system exactly like the one he had at nine years of age. His intellectual abilities were literally seized from the emotional side.

### **Changing through awareness**

What is this awareness for? In some cases, when the reactions are not too strong, it can be enough to give us the necessary push and free ourselves from the trap; for example, we might find ourselves thinking, "Ah, it's just that his behavior reminds me of my father's. But he's not my father and I'm not 9 years old", and with this, we can emancipate ourselves from the automatic answer. But the process of unveiling goes even deeper than that.

A strong emotional event of our past is capable of influencing our future, fundamentally because we have not processed it. For example, Thomas repeatedly experienced that sense of helplessness and inadequacy, but he had no chance to feel seen and understood by anyone, and of course to receive needed emotional support. With an absent and disqualifying father, he was even afraid to open up and express what he felt. And his mom wouldn't be able to bear it. In order to maintain at least a shred of connection with his family, he renounces his authenticity. And above that rubble, in order to be seen and appreciated, he begins to build the false self of the successful person; but this is precisely the drama: that inner child has never been seen and will always be increasingly hidden by the shining armor built on it.

The profound change begins when Thomas allows himself to reveal that vulnerable part, first of all to himself and then to the person who guides him in this process. In that revelation, he experiences real authenticity. But often, as in the case of Thomas, the reaction was too strong: awareness alone did not eliminate the unwanted behavior.



## Finding a new familiarity in the body

The law of familiarity says that, contrary to what we might expect, each one of us unconsciously goes to seek precisely those situations drawn in his Primary Scenario. It doesn't matter if those situations bring suffering. Changing means, in a sense, creating a new familiarity: when the nervous system will face a similar situation in the future, it will go down that thread and end up with a different reaction. To create this change, the body comes into play again.

Gabor Maté says that: "Every Human Being has a genuine authentic true self; the trauma is that disconnection from it and the healing is the reconnection with it." A disqualifying father who ends up threatening the mother's mental health shatters his son into thousands of tiny pieces. Literally, the child loses the feeling of well-being that comes from a unified sense of his own body. The breath stops, a lump is created in the throat, and the mouth of the stomach is as if hit by a heavy mallet. And to protect this fragmentation, layers upon layers of armor are created that distance us further and further from our true self. Somehow healing happens when we allow ourselves to return to being 'whole', complete, and true. This wholeness is first and foremost a bodily sensation. Rosenberg identifies in the lasting feeling of completeness and well-being the meaning on which our identity rests and his series of body exercises are designed to bring us to that wholeness.

In the individual sessions of IBP, we do just that, through bodily practices that activate the nervous system differently, we recover a deep contact with ourselves, and while maintaining that feeling we try to relive the family scene. It takes repetitions of course, but when Thomas experiences being able to witness the scene of his father while remaining in touch with his inner centering, anxieties, emotional short circuits, and panic cease to constitute a familiarity.





## **Conclusion**

There are many fashionable Leadership models. These indications are often useful and at least they bring a different perspective. The real problem is that each of us finds it difficult to put them into practice when the stress generated by the events does short-circuit our neuro-physiological system.

This is why in my work with Executive clients I consider the type of work described in this article to be privileged. It is true that any leadership problem can be managed on the surface through a more cognitive approach: identifying objectives, using step-by-step strategies, and reinforcing results. It is also true that the body-mind approach allows us to solve issues at a deeper level and to free up energy that, until then, we had directed to protect, control, and suppress parts of us; and that energy becomes available again to pursue our goals.

A change at this level of depth is extremely generative. Surely for Thomas, the urgency was to save the relationship with the investment fund. But once he got rid of that feeling of never being enough and the consequent need of being admired, even the relationship with his collaborators became more effective and authentic. As I said in my previous article, nervous systems are contagious, so having such an impact at the Leadership Level can have a cascade of positive transformations in other people's lives.

  
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