

Vicarious Trauma—Organizational Readiness Guide for Fire Services

The Vicarious Trauma—Organizational Readiness Guide (VT–ORG) for Fire Services will help you to recognize and appreciate your organization’s strengths regarding supportive vicarious trauma-informed policies, procedures, practices, and programs already in place. You will likely also discover gaps that deserve attention; the VT–ORG will assist you in navigating the Vicarious Trauma Toolkit to locate relevant resources and tools to address these gaps.

Start by using the VT–ORG to determine how your organization can become a vicarious trauma-informed organization by improving its overall response to work-related trauma exposure.

How To Use the VT–ORG

You can implement the VT–ORG in ways that are unique to your organization’s size, structure, and needs, such as—

- distributing the VT–ORG agency-wide to staff at all levels;
- administering the VT–ORG first to only one division, to gather feedback before launching it organization-wide;
- having management use the VT–ORG to determine where to start;
- using the VT–ORG as a conversation starter at a staff meeting or other forum;
- convening a roundtable discussion with representatives from varying levels of the organization;
- creating an advisory group with staff representation from varying levels of the organization; and/or
- developing your own process for using the VT–ORG.

Then What?

After completing the VT–ORG—

- **share** the findings of your assessment of strengths in the five areas of organizational health;
- **discuss** gaps in your capacity to be a vicarious trauma-informed organization;
- **identify** the change agents who can best address gaps (e.g., senior leadership, human resources, union representatives, peer leaders);
- **prioritize** and map out next steps;
- **explore** the Compendium of Resources and locate tools to meet your needs;
- **collaborate** to put the plan into action; and
- **evaluate** efforts to become more vicarious trauma-informed.

Leadership and Mission

To address the impact of vicarious trauma, leaders in vicarious trauma-informed organizations proactively integrate strategies into workplace values, operations, and practices; maintain a clear vision that supports and articulates the agency's mission; and regularly model and promote open and respectful communication.

In answering the following questions, consider the past 6 months in your organization.	1 = Never	2 = Rarely	3 = Some- times	4 = Often	5 = Always	N/A
1. Leadership demonstrates a clear and decisive vision that supports and articulates the mission of the department.						
2. Leadership models, values, and promotes open and respectful communication among staff.						
3. Leadership communicates clear and specific information on decision-making throughout the department (e.g., resource allocation, deadlines, implementation of policies and procedures).						
4. Leadership proactively addresses vicarious trauma in the department's long-term vision and strategy.						
5. Leadership recognizes and values my role within the department.						
6. Leaders model a healthy work/life balance.						
7. Leadership communicates and enforces a no-tolerance policy concerning—						
a. sexual harassment;						
b. workplace violence, including bullying/hazing;						
c. intimate partner violence within or outside of the workplace;						
d. discrimination based on age, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, religion, ability, etc.						

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Management and Supervision

To fulfill their obligation to lessen the impact of vicarious trauma, managers and supervisors in vicarious trauma-informed organizations foster supportive relationships based on inclusivity, mutual respect, and trust; promote policies and practices that lessen the negative impact of the work; seek out and support staff following critical or acute incidents; and conduct performance evaluations that include discussions of vicarious trauma.

In answering the following questions, consider the past 6 months in your organization.	1 = Never	2 = Rarely	3 = Some- times	4 = Often	5 = Always	N/A
1. My department uses a protocol to address—						
a. critical incidents;						
b. departmental stress;						
c. line-of-duty deaths;						
d. specific concerning behaviors (e.g., low morale, substance abuse, absenteeism).						
2. My department sponsors a critical incident stress management team (CISM/CIST/CISD).						
a. My department’s critical incident team is well-utilized.						
3. My shift supervisors are readily accessible to support members following a critical or acute incident.						
4. I meet individually with my supervisor.						
5. Meetings with my supervisor provide a forum for addressing cumulative or critical incident stress.						
6. My supervisor reviews my job responsibilities and workload balance (e.g., variety of tasks).						
7. I am able to discuss concerns about the department or my job with my supervisor(s) without fear of negative consequences.						

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Management and Supervision (continued)

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8. Command staff encourage and respond to my ideas and input.						
9. Staff meetings are highly valued as a mode of team communication and collaboration.						
10. Staff meetings are an opportunity to address topics related to vicarious trauma and stress management.						
11. Command staff take steps to ensure that staff have access to adequate resources to perform their jobs.						
12. Staff members are provided adequate and equitable salary and benefits.						
13. Command staff ensure policies and/or procedures are in place to address member grievances.						
14. My department uses a formal performance evaluation process.						
a. My performance evaluation includes a discussion of organizational and individual strategies to minimize risk for vicarious traumatization.						
b. My performance evaluation includes a discussion of employee contributions to a positive work environment.						

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Employee Empowerment and Work Environment

To promote and maintain a healthy work environment, vicarious trauma-informed organizations foster teamwork; encourage collaboration both within and outside the organization; create formal and informal opportunities for staff to connect with one another; and offer opportunities to diversify job tasks.

In answering the following questions, consider the past 6 months in your organization.	1 = Never	2 = Rarely	3 = Some- times	4 = Often	5 = Always	N/A
1. My department provides opportunities for all staff members to provide input into the—						
a. development of programs, practices, and policies;						
b. evaluation of programs, practices, and policies.						
2. My department shows appreciation for employee efforts in meaningful ways (e.g., public recognition, note in personnel file, promotions).						
3. My department evaluates staff satisfaction, including job duties, department policies, etc.						
4. When needed, my department uses a written procedure that provides guidance for quick, effective, and confidential resolution of staff conflict.						
5. My department shows that respect for each person is highly valued.						
6. Diversity is welcomed, respected, and valued.						
7. Disparaging comments and other demonstrations of disrespect are not tolerated.						

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In answering the following questions, consider the past 6 months in your organization.	1 = Never	2 = Rarely	3 = Some- times	4 = Often	5 = Always	N/A
8. I experience a genuine sense of positive teamwork in my department.						
9. My department provides formal and informal opportunities for building a sense of community and teamwork among employees.						
10. When needed, my department uses effective methods to address employees who are not able to contribute to a positive atmosphere or act as team players.						
11. Employees feel safe coming forward to discuss issues of workplace discrimination based on age, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, religion, ability, etc.						
12. My department encourages use of time off.						
13. My department provides employees with a private, comfortable, and safe workspace.						
14. My department provides opportunities for me to diversify my work tasks.						

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Training and Professional Development

To strive for professional competency, capacity, and staff retention, vicarious trauma-informed organizations promote continuing education, professional development, and networking opportunities; provide thorough orientation and ongoing training; enable access to resources; and support staff participation in on- and offsite learning opportunities.

In answering the following questions, consider the past 6 months in your organization.	1 = Never	2 = Rarely	3 = Some- times	4 = Often	5 = Always	N/A
1. My department orients new members to their job role and tasks.						
2. My department provides training and education to all employees on—						
a. work-related vicarious trauma and its impact on work performance;						
b. strategies on how to address work-related stress and vicarious traumatization.						
3. My department provides onsite opportunities for training and professional development.						
4. My department supports attendance at outside meetings and trainings.						
5. I am prepared to cover for coworkers who are absent.						
6. My department informs staff about expectations, opportunities, and steps necessary for advancement, including additional training and/or certification requirements.						
7. I am encouraged to network and collaborate with coworkers and other organizations.						

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Staff Health and Wellness

To maintain the health and wellness of their staff, vicarious trauma-informed organizations recognize links between health/wellness and staff satisfaction and productivity; devote time and resources to promoting staff well-being; encourage and provide health and wellness activities; and incorporate wellness into policies and practices.

In answering the following questions, consider the past 6 months in your organization.	1 = Never	2 = Rarely	3 = Some- times	4 = Often	5 = Always	N/A
1. During the hiring and orientation of new firefighters, command staff demonstrate their understanding of the risk for vicarious trauma and the importance of both individual and organizational strategies to address it by—						
a. asking final job recruits to articulate their own coping strategies;						
b. making final recruits aware of the department’s strategies to reduce the negative impact of the work.						
2. My department offers services that support individual staff members (e.g., employee assistance program, chaplain services, mental health providers).						
3. My department has a peer support program.						
a. My department’s peer support program is well-utilized.						
4. My department conducts exit interviews that include questions related to vicarious trauma and the department’s response.						
5. Differentiation between work and non-work hours is recognized and respected.						

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In answering the following questions, consider the past 6 months in your organization.	1 = Never	2 = Rarely	3 = Some- times	4 = Often	5 = Always	N/A
6. My department's policies—						
a. support mental health and wellness;						
b. support physical health and wellness.						
7. My department provides wellness activities (e.g., fitness program, mindfulness/meditation, yoga, gym access).						
8. My department encourages wellness activities (e.g., fitness program, mindfulness/meditation, yoga, gym access).						
9. My department's policies and/or practices support family members of employees.						

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