

# TCM 119 - Erica Reed: Trauma Informed Leadership for Hybrid Workspaces

**Mitch Simon:** Welcome to another episode of Team Anywhere, where CEOs, leaders and experts at building teams,

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** companies,

**Mitch Simon:** organizations,

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** and amazing cultures, share how to lead from anywhere in the world. I'm your co-host on the East Coast, Ginny Bianco-Mathis.

**Mitch Simon:** And I'm your co-host on the West Coast, Mitch Simon, and we invite you to join us to Team Anywhere.

Hello and welcome to another episode of Team Anywhere. I'm your co-host on the West Coast Mitch Simon, and on the East coast we have our fabulous, magnanimous co-host, Doctor Virginia Bianco-Mathis.

And how are you doing today, Ginny?

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** It keeps getting more and more dramatic. I love it. Thank you.

**Mitch Simon:** It is a dramatic day here in Southern California, as it always. Why don't you go ahead, Ginny and introduce us to our guest.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Oh, I would love to. Our guest is Erica Reed. And Erica teaches at universities in the Maryland and Washington D.C. Area and is founder of ENR Training and Consulting. She brings 25 years of experience to help organizations build creative work environments where people don't dread the start of each workday. She's a workplace wellness expert, psychotherapist, emotional intelligence trainer, and has a specialty, which we're going to explore a little today, trauma informed leadership. Welcome, Erica.

**Erica Reed:** Thank you so much. I'm really excited to be here.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Great. Well, we're gonna start with sometimes a hard question, sometimes an easy question. What surprised you over the last two years?

**Erica Reed:** Wow. that's a hard and easy question. I think one of the things that surprised me the most, especially given the context of everything that we've been through, in this world, in this country, as an organization, as a community, just everything.

*It's how well and not so well people respond to change and the expectations that come along with that. For some reason, I am hearing too many leaders, too many people managers have this expectation of people will just go with the flow, just adapt. We have literally changed everything and it feels like every five minutes we've been changing.*

Just when we get settled, we're changing again. And you know, at the time of our conversation here, there's still more changes yet to come. *If we can help people to navigate change more effectively, if we can help people, managers, and leaders understand the stress, the anxiety, the triggering that takes place when people are going through change, I think we would be a lot better off.*

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** For sure. And it seems to have caused, at least I have seen two things on the one hand, because people have experienced all that change. They said, okay, if I do have to now live this way, what is really important to me? That might be the steady thing in the storm and see how that plays itself out.

Well, thank you. And indeed we all are moving through that. So, I'd like to jump to your specialty, which in a way fits this constant change, this trauma informed leadership. Could you first define what you mean by trauma and give us an example of what trauma informed leadership is about and how all of this might manifest itself in the workplace.

**Erica Reed:** Sure. I'm actually glad that we're starting with this question because I think there's so much, misunderstanding when it comes to what trauma is. So I like to help people understand trauma based on the definition of three E's, and it's actually SAMHSA's definition of Substance Abuse Mental Health Agency for the United States.

And it is basically the 1.) *First E is an event.* We all go through stuff, right? And you and I could have grown up in the same household. You and I could work for the same organization. You and I could live in the same city, but when

we experience this same event, that doesn't mean that we are going to 2.)  
*Number two, experience it the same way. Then 3.) The third E is the effect.* So  
when we take a look at a group of people sitting in a conference room and  
they're all listening to the same protocol changes or procedure changes that are  
being announced in that time, we all are in the same event.

But based upon our unique lived experiences, based upon what we bring into  
that space, we're gonna experience that change notification in a very different  
way. And even with that being said, some of us are going to go into the  
bathroom, freak out, cry, and need to leave right away because the effect has  
created so much angst within us.

Whereas others are like, oh, right, yes, I cannot wait. This is gonna be awesome.  
*And I think if leaders can understand through that trauma informed lens, those  
three E's are gonna shape and shift the way people respond in the workplace.*

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Definitely. And I love the example, you know, of the  
person running into the bathroom. That's probably one of the more mild trauma  
things. Others might pick up a steel pipe and start hitting people. I have been in  
that situation, by the way, working with a construction firm. So why do people  
react that way? What's that trauma thing all about?

**Erica Reed:** Yeah, the thing about trauma is it changes us from the inside out,  
right? We don't walk around with name tags on and say, hi, I'm Erica, and I've  
experienced trauma. And so it's very much an internal process. Literally our  
brain gets rewired based upon our unique lived experiences. So, I mean, if you  
imagine you were in a car accident and it was at the corner of ninth and V  
Street.

And at that corner was a really bad experience for you. This event happened,  
you had a lot of injuries, and it's caused you not to be able to work. It's caused  
financial trauma for you because now you can't pay the bills. It's caused all  
these challenges. What do you think is gonna happen the next time you get to  
ninth and V Street?

Your brain is going to remember, it's going to have an automatic response.  
Because it's now been rewired because of that experience. And that's not to say  
that it stays that way. You know, our brains are amazing, it's neuroplasticity, it  
can change. *And if we can help people, managers understand that when you  
create a safe environment, you actually create healing for employees as well.*

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Yeah. I know that you had mentioned some things also you can have these traumas like the one you explained where you're in an accident, or there are trauma that a leader can cause by making you feel rejected or abandoned, or criticized or unsupported. And those happened every day, unfortunately.

**Erica Reed:** I actually am working with a client right now and she's a leader, she's a people manager, so we're doing leadership development coaching. But a part of that is understanding your own stuff, understanding what you bring to your role as a leader. And she's having a lot of challenges in receiving the feedback that she's getting from her boss, from her manager, and what we're uncovering is understanding a little bit about how her childhood experiences of feeling less than being constantly criticized, being made to feel not good enough, and even some physical and sexual trauma as well.

All of that is showing up each time her manager negates her perspective, throws her under the bus, so to speak, doesn't allow her to have a voice and undermines her with her own employees. Like the boss will say, I want you to do this in the heat of the moment. She then goes and tells her staff, this is what we're going to do, and the staff doesn't like it. So, they go over her head to her boss who says, no, nevermind we don't need to do that. So what?

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Yes.

**Erica Reed:** So all of these things are coming up for my client and trying to navigate her trauma and how the way her manager is responding to her is constantly triggering her.

**Mitch Simon:** You are a psychotherapist.

**Erica Reed:** I am.

**Mitch Simon:** And I'm not. And most of the leaders out there are not psychotherapists. And so they, you know, those people who don't have the benefit of that understanding. And then they're leading people the people that they lead also don't have that understanding of their own trauma. What is a manager to do?

**Erica Reed:** I love this question, and I eagerly embrace this question because, you know, I encourage people to stay in their lane, right? I have the training to be a psychotherapist, and I'm not trying to turn other people into therapists, right? I wanna help you be effective leaders of people and *you don't have to be*

*trained and go to school and get all the lovely training that we have to do that. But you can have empathy, you can have compassion. You can be mindful and intentional about the way that you respond to people.*

*You can have an understanding, and this is one of the core concepts of trauma informed leadership, of shifting your mindset instead of approaching a person from the mindset of what's wrong with you?*

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Yes.

**Erica Reed:** *Instead, like, what's happened to you?* I can't even say what's wrong with you without sounding judgmental.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Oh, yes, yes, yes.

**Erica Reed:** But what's happened to you? You know, you can't see me, but I'm leaning in because what it does is it changes your whole posture. Now I want to listen. Now I want to support. Now I want to understand. So, when we shift from what's wrong with you to what's happened to you, now we are, you know, showing up as a trauma informed leader without the benefit of the psychotherapy practice.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** I love that the trauma informed leader, and you mentioned a few skills and actions that a leader, you know, the empathy, asking, gee, what's happening here? I see you look uncomfortable or see you burst into tears or you're sitting there, you know, with your arms crossed.

So how does this play out in this new hybrid or virtual environment?

**Erica Reed:** I think that asking that question actually is number one, right? It's acknowledging that things are different. Everyone has changed. Expectations, have, you know, shifted. So being intentional is really key. Acknowledging that the environment, the expectations are not as they used to be. *So how about you check in with folks. Be intentional about checking in.* I know you have a busy schedule. I know you have to make sure X, Y, and Z gets done by tomorrow.

But it's okay to say, Hey, you know, how are things going? Is there anything I can support you with? Especially since you're not literally seeing people every day. If that means that you make a note on your calendar, if you send yourself a reminder.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Love it.

**Erica Reed:** Yeah. Just to say, Hey, what's going on? How are things going on a scale, I love scales. Scales. Put things in a very concrete term here. On a scale of one to five or one to 10, how comfortable do you feel with what's on your plate right now?

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** That's good.

**Erica Reed:** Do you feel overworked? Do you feel overwhelmed? Does it feel manageable? And what it does is it gives them that opportunity to pause and reflect and then communicate what's going on with you, the leader, and now y'all can work together on whatever that response was.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Yes, the asking of questions and creating a conversational tone where you are creating moments of reflection. Hey, it's okay to answer that question. It's okay to share that, you know, but you just said scared the hell outta me for this reason or that reason. You actually had this on one of your blogs or website that 60% of absences off the work is from psychological problems and, you know, 51 folks are not engaged. 75% say that there seems to be more stress than a generation ago. You know, 60% are psychological.

**Erica Reed:** Just think about when you get stressed like we all get stressed, right?

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Yeah.

**Erica Reed:** And I like to put stress and trauma somewhat on a continuum to help normalize it to a certain extent because we can go stressed and then we can go up to toxic stress, which is, you know, ongoing stress. And then we can go to trauma. So, I think when we put it on that continuum, it makes it more understandable because we can all relate to experiencing stress.

So, if you have experienced stress, we know how we respond. We know that our brain gets a little fuzzy. We know we have a harder time concentrating. We know that we're sitting there listening to them talk, but our brain is saying, whoa, whoa. We're hearing like that Charlie Brown teacher going on, right?

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Erica Reed:** But we're not able to clearly be engaged and focused. Now, if we were to magnify that with the weight of trauma, with the weight of toxic stress,

it's that much more difficult to get yourself out of the bed, to get yourself to the office, to get yourself to perform to the best of your ability.

And it becomes easier just to say, you know what? I can't today. Literally or mentally, and you check out or call in. And if people can understand that the stress, the toxic stress, and the trauma, that is experienced on a daily basis is really helping people to not be present, they can actually learn that we need to address it more than it actually is done.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Right. And an interesting, dynamic happened with one of my clients where a group, a subset of people that worked with this organization realized part of it is there are some organizations that are actually set up to cause trauma in your first few years. That's how they do it. That's how they always done it.

And people now are becoming more aware about this, maybe because they're reading more or because they're going virtual and there's more of these self-help things that they can join. You have a decision to make. You don't have to stay there. Which perhaps is a little bit of what's happening with, you know, people now wanting certain things before they take a certain job and the flexibility has embedded in it a healthier environment.

So when someone calls you in and you sense that there's this stress and maybe some of this trauma going on. What do you bring? What do you do? You stand up and give a lecture? Don't be this way.

**Erica Reed:** Well, you know. I definitely don't think that we should stand up and lecture. It's actually really important to be intentional about the space that you create as a leader. Being intentional about when and how you have these conversations. If you notice that in a meeting, if you're all on little squares on the screen, or if you're all sitting in a conference room and you see one particular employee who just doesn't seem to be present, and maybe they're not contributing, maybe they're not sharing ideas.

That probably is not the best opportunity to call them out and say, hey, we need everyone be a team player here—

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** which we tend to do, right?

**Erica Reed:** Yeah. So maybe instead, what might work better is after the meeting you connect with that person and you say, I noticed today that you

were a bit more quiet than usual. I would love to hear is there anything I could support you with?

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** That's great. What can I do?

**Erica Reed:** Yeah. What can I do to support you? And once again, this is not about making you a therapist. I don't want you to go all up getting your business as we like to say. And this is not about trying to fix. That's another thing that's really important to be clear. My goal is to help leaders learn how to support and step away from the desire to fix.

You're amazing. You're awesome. You got that job because you know how to make stuff happen. You know how to dot the I's and cross the T's, but you are not here fix every problem. You're not here to fix your people. You're here to acknowledge that they have some stuff that's impacting the way they show up.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Yeah.

**Erica Reed:** And your role is to support them and help them to be a part of the solution.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Do you feel it's okay for a leader to share his or her own traumas?

**Erica Reed:** I would never advise someone to do something they're not comfortable with. And I think every space has a different, vibe, so to speak, of what would be healthy and what would be toxic to share, especially if you don't know what the other person's lived experience is. So I can be with you and I can feel like I want to be transparent by sharing with you what I've experienced.

And that's me trying to be a healthy leader. I don't know how you're gonna receive it, right? So I think it's important for leaders to be real people, and I think it's important for leaders to be transparent. But there is a line. I think you can acknowledge, hey, you know, I know that a lot of us have had some challenges.

The way that we've lived our lives definitely shows up and the way we interact with right now. I even just now was thinking about something that happened to me. And you can keep it very broad.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Yes, yes, yes.

**Erica Reed:** And I know that's impacting the way that I'm showing up for you right now.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Totally.

**Mitch Simon:** I wanted to talk a little bit about, you know, not trying to fix, cause I love the way you said that. I think that when you look at a leader's abilities to empathize and to show compassion. I do think that for a lot of us, we were trained, you know, we were managers before we were leaders, managers fix things, solve problems, empathy and compassion is not about fixing. And so, I just wanted you to talk a little bit more about that because, because if I've got my manager head on and I just need to fix stuff, and if I'm already knowing that asking you how you're feeling or asking you what's working or not working, and I don't know what to do with that information.

I might not even ask in the first place. So, I wanted to see if you can address that and give some you know, advice or empathy to our listeners on how do you even frame this whole theme around being an empathetic and compassionate leader who quote-unquote doesn't have the answers as if there should be answers.

**Erica Reed:** I love that because it acknowledges, you know, where we are as far as our strengths and where we are as far as this is just not where I excel. If a leader were to say to their staff member, their team member, hey, you know what's going on? I can see there's something happening, and then whew, all this stuff comes at you and you don't know what to do with it.

*The thing that I would encourage you most to focus on is the connection. Your role is not to fix the things that they just shared with you that may be going on in their life. It's to connect with them as a person. Acknowledge the feeling, hey, wow, I had no idea that was going on.*

I can definitely hear how that is hard. I could see how that's impacting the way that you're feeling. This makes much more sense to me now. And the way that you're showing up. So, you're connecting with their emotion, you're normalizing their experience and then you're asking them, you know, as, because we are still in the workplace, right?

How are we shifting this back to work? Given everything that you've shared with me, what do you think would be helpful for me to support you with the things that you have on your plate here at work?

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Erica, I love how you just took so much stuff into one word. Concentrate on the connection. My God, if you just do that, all that other stuff falls away, or what am I gonna say next? The connection and then you just ease it to, so what can I do to support.

**Mitch Simon:** So, what is that connection between working with people who have, or either in stress or toxic stress or trauma and connection, how does connection support people in the states of stress to trauma?

**Erica Reed:** Well, once again, we talked about how our brain is wired, right? But we as human beings, we are made to have healthy relationships. And just when you are in a space where you feel supported, where you feel validated, where you're not, made to feel less than or made to feel judged for your lived experiences, then you're able to get grounded and emotionally regulated.

So, if I am with someone and I'm feeling more and more connected, that enables me to manage myself better. You know, usually, if you think about it when you get upset and you just had a bad day and you go home to your significant other and you're just woo, you let them have it, you just dump everything that just happened.

You could feel yourself reliving everything from the day, right? You get wound up more and more and more, and if your spouse, if your significant other, she's like, wow, that sounds rough. I can definitely see why you're so upset by that. And then they just pause and they let you breathe. What happens to you? What happens to you?

Do you feel like, oh, okay, that was good. I'm glad I got that out. Or do you feel like this person doesn't understand me. So, it's really about, now I have the space, it's a safe space for me just to be me.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Right. So the others, let's say it's a team at work, are also seeing you as a leader react in that kind of way.

**Erica Reed:** Yes.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** And so your role modeling. This is how we deal with difficult situations, feelings, ideas. That's wonderful.

**Erica Reed:** And when we're as a team, you can show them why and how you are normalizing this need for space. Like if you think about it, the workday is just full back to back stuff, one thing after another. And unfortunately a lot of

that is meeting after meeting, after meeting. So if you left one meeting and you immediately jump into the next meeting. Just go forth with your agenda. Then people are still disregulated from the last meeting. If you were to say, Hey, I wanna be a trauma informed leader, Hey, I wanna acknowledge the impact that stress has.

Hey, I wanna encourage people to have good mental health. If you start your meeting the first minute, just one minute. I know you got a lot on your agenda, but if you just take the first minute and say, Hey everyone, let's just sit here for a moment. Give ourselves a minute to breathe. Catch our breath before we move on.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Yeah.

**Erica Reed:** And that's it.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Yeah.

**Erica Reed:** You don't have to guide that minute. You just allow people to regulate themselves. Transition from the last and then you move on. Just that short, simple thing models what good mental health looks like.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** That's fabulous. Well, we would have to be on for another hour if I were to explore some of the other things. I am gonna ask you one last in there. What is one of the elements of emotional intelligence that you feel leaders and teams today really need to pay attention to?

**Erica Reed:** Self-awareness. I mean, that's number one. You cannot do anything if you're walking around in the dark. You have to turn the light on. You have to be able to see what's going on internally.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** I love it.

**Erica Reed:** Even if it is like difficult conversations, if you know you have a difficult conversation coming up, 60% of us get higher levels of stress and anxiety.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Absolutely.

**Erica Reed:** So you walk into that space of that difficult conversation with your heightened stress, with your heightened anxiety, and now you gonna talk to somebody? They're feeling that you're feeling that. So, Self-awareness. What

am I thinking? What is the narrative I am saying to myself about what this conversation is going to look like? How is it gonna flow and what the other person, what am I anxious about? Yeah. What have I already told myself to be true? And then breathe. Be aware and then breathe.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** And then I also be aware of why you're having the conversation that you're about to have. Well, how can people find you?

**Erica Reed:** Well, I would love for folks to connect with me on my website, ericanreed.com, social media, of course, Erica N. Reed, LCSW. And if anyone has a need and they wanna have some resources available to how to have those difficult conversations, they're welcome to download my free guide by going to [bit.ly/enrguide](https://bit.ly/enrguide).

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Fabulous. I found them and they're wonderful. Thanks for the value that you're adding and the lens that I think is an important one today, Mitch.

**Mitch Simon:** Yes. It's been phenomenal to really hear your perspective and also just to get clear on, you know, the role of a leader in dealing with so much stuff that's coming up right now. Given that so many of us are virtual hybrid alone. And still struggling with a full plate, or two plates or three plates of work to do. So I really like that.

So I've thoroughly enjoyed this and I wanna thank you, Erica, for being on the show. I wanna thank you Ginny, as well for, co-hosting and bringing such a lovely, amazing guest. And I wanna thank our listeners here at Team Anywhere. If you've loved this podcast, which we have, please share with your friends, your family, your colleagues, and for anybody else feeling a little bit of stress these days. And we look forward to seeing you next time on our next episode of Team Anywhere.