



THE LEADERSHIP CONTEXT

Reputation matters!

—
What I learned from podcast episodes with
Brian Hartzler and Warwick Fairfax

By: Pod O'Sullivan

“It takes twenty years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it.”

Warren Buffet

Waking up to find the media camped outside your house. A swarm of journalists following you and hurling questions while cameras are thrust in your face. Having your life dissected by people you don't know, and they don't really know you. This is the experience high profile people have when their reputation is being called into question sometimes from their own actions and choices and for others just as collateral damage. For others, it is a quieter, less public but no less painful, shameful experience. Regardless, the impact on the individual is the same, it is traumatic. They experience Reputational Trauma.

“he that filches from me my good name robs me of that which not enriches him, and makes me poor indeed.”

William Shakespeare, Othello

Even if you personally never experience reputational trauma, chances are you will know someone who will. Every leader will face a humbling moment in their career at some point. In recent [Leadership Diet podcasts](#) with [Brian Hartzler](#), former CEO of Westpac and [Warwick Fairfax](#), as well as in working for more than 20 years with executives, it is not uncommon that as the responsibility and accountability increases in roles the chances of an event occurring where the executive is negatively judged for their actions (or inactions) resulting in a hit to the reputation is experienced. The impact of this hit can vary as can and the tangible consequences but what is often not recognised is the personal impact - reputational trauma. How they respond and learn from that experience can make or break their future personal wellness and their professional success.

Reputation is universal, applying to all things - individuals, families, societies, nationalities, products and organisations. It is a measure of standing and value but it is relative as while we can desire to have a particular reputation, it is others who will be the judges. It can be a gateway or a barrier.



While we can influence our reputation through our actions and behaviours, these are not the only elements others use to form their views. Other inputs include company communications, the views of others (regardless of credibility and legitimacy), media, personal experience. We have very little influence over these other sources so the only factors in our control are our deeds.

“Your reputation is in the hands of others. That's what the reputation is. You can't control that. The only thing you can control is your character.”
Dr. Wayne Dyer

The impact of Reputational Trauma is the same as other traumatic events. It has physical and psychological impacts which can be overwhelming and devastating to the individual - impacting their quality of life for themselves, their families, and those around them.

Unlike the loss of a loved one, there are remedies available to address “injustice” associated with a reputational trauma e.g. financial settlements and apologies. While a hefty payout may be intended to cause pain to the guilty party, it does little to ease the emotional pain and suffering of the recipient. The work to restore physical and psychological wellbeing can only be done by the individual. While there is an increasing focus on restorative work in the other areas of trauma, there is little focus on Reputational Trauma. It is left to the individual to manage for themselves, for better or worse.

Through working and speaking with executives the following is a process that has been shown to be effective.

A process for working through Reputational Trauma

- 1. Recognise this is an actual trauma and that it will have the same impact.**

The responses will not be rational, linear, or timebound. They need to be processed the same way as any trauma.



Emotional & psychological symptoms:

- Shock, denial, or disbelief
- Confusion, difficulty concentrating
- Anger, irritability, mood swings
- Anxiety and fear
- Guilt, shame, self-blame
- Withdrawing from others
- Feeling sad or hopeless
- Feeling disconnected or numb

Physical symptoms:

- Insomnia or nightmares
- Fatigue
- Being startled easily
- Difficulty concentrating
- Racing heartbeat
- Edginess and agitation
- Aches and pains
- Muscle tension

“You can’t through an experience like that and not have any wounds or scars. It hurt.”

Brian Hartzler

2. **Give your body and mind time to rest and heal.**

Dealing with trauma, especially when public, takes a huge physical and emotional toll. This can take a few months to a year for your body and brain to adjust. This will not be rushed regardless of your own desire and sense of urgency. You will go through highs and lows. There will be bad days and better days and over time, the lows lessen and become less frequent



As for grief, you'll find it comes in waves. When the ship is first wrecked, you're drowning with wreckage all around you. Everything floating around you reminds you of the beauty and the magnificence of the ship that was, and is, no more. And all you can do is float. You find some piece of the wreckage and you hang on for a while. Maybe it's some physical thing. Maybe it's a happy memory or a photograph. Maybe it's a person who is also floating. For a while, all you can do is float. Stay alive.

In the beginning, the waves are 100 feet tall and crash over you without mercy. They come 10 seconds apart and don't even give you time to catch your breath. All you can do is hang on and float. After a while, maybe weeks, maybe months, you'll find the waves are still 100 feet tall, but they come further apart. When they come, they still crash all over you and wipe you out. But in between, you can breathe, you can function. You never know what's going to trigger the grief. It might be a song, a picture, a street intersection, the smell of a cup of coffee. It can be just about anything... and the wave comes crashing. But in between waves, there is life.

Somewhere down the line, and it's different for everybody, you find that the waves are only 80 feet tall. Or 50 feet tall. And while they still come, they come further apart. You can see them coming. An anniversary, a birthday, or Christmas, or landing at O'Hare. You can see it coming, for the most part, and prepare yourself. And when it washes over you, you know that somehow you will, again, come out the other side. Soaking wet sputtering, still hanging on to some tiny piece of the wreckage, but you'll come out.

Take it from an old guy. The waves never stop coming, and somehow you don't really want them to. But you learn that you'll survive them. And other waves will come. And you'll survive them too. If you're lucky, you'll have lots of scars from lots of loves. And lots of shipwrecks.

An excerpt from an article by [Tim Ofield](#)



3. **Reconciliation.**

Do this phase well requires objectivity - from yourself and from those from whom you seek insight. This cannot be done well until the mind and body are rested and healed. Again, it cannot be rushed and may take 6 months or more.

It involves asking people to “tell me the truth about this” so I can begin to understand. At this time there is a high need to be heard and reminded of who you are outside of this trauma. Sometimes it is helpful to engage a professional at this time. You have been wounded in a way that even friends and family may find difficult to understand. Those close to you may struggle to support you effectively as their emotions are tied to yours. As much as they care for you, you may need more than they can provide.

Your focus should be on coming to grips with the questions of:

- What actually happened?
- How much is about me and the things I need to learn an own?
- What was my contribution?
- How much is part of the randomness of life? The randomness can feel very personal at the time but it is with perspective and time it can be seen for what it is.
- What stories am I holding about this that is no longer true?
- What can I learn from this experience?

4. **Rebuilding.**

This is a time for reimagining the future. It is about exploring things that are genuinely interesting, dropping things that are not, setting a new agenda, and figuring out what to do next.

“Healing doesn't mean the damage never existed. It means the damage no longer controls your life.....”

Akshay Dubey



Support Strategies

Self Care: Having a healthy body can increase your ability to cope with the stress of trauma. These things are within our power to manage. It is important to take control of what is within your power to support yourself.

- **Good Sleep.** Worry or fear may disturb sleep patterns. However, lack of good quality sleep amplifies a negative state and makes it harder to achieve and maintain emotional balance.
- **Avoid alcohol and drugs.** While it can be tempting to dampen or numb your state, their use can worsen your trauma symptoms and increase feelings of depression, anxiety, and isolation.
- **Eat a well-balanced diet.** Fuel yourself well to maintain energy and minimize mood swings.
- **Reduce stress.** Try mindfulness meditation, yoga, or deep breathing exercises. Make time for activities that bring you joy - music, art, dance, craft, gardening, going to support your favourite team.
- **Move.** Trauma creates hyperarousal and fear. Exercise/movement burns off adrenaline and releases endorphins which make us feel good and helps repair the frayed nervous system. Try for 30 minutes or more, of rhythmic exercise, most days. Or if it's easier, three 10-minute spurts of exercise per day are just as good. Great options are walking, running, swimming, or even dancing.

Connect: Make an effort to maintain your relationships. Start with those who will treat you with kindness. Comfort comes from feeling engaged and accepted by others. You don't have to talk about the trauma. Friends bring more happiness into our lives than virtually anything else. If you've retreated from relationships that were once important to you, make the effort to reconnect.

Give: As well as helping others, volunteering or performing selfless acts can be a great way to challenge the sense of helplessness that often accompanies trauma. Remind yourself of your strengths and reclaim your sense of power by helping others.

Get help: While you don't have to talk about the trauma itself, it is important that you have someone to share your feelings with face to face, someone who will listen attentively without judging you.

In our discussion in advice to his younger self, Brian Hartzler said he would tell himself, *"It's good to desire to be wise but understand that the way to it is through the pain"*.

If you feel you have trauma of any kind including reputational trauma then we recommend you consider speaking to a trusted friend, to a medical professional such as your family doctor or to a support organisation such as [Lifeline](#) or [The Black Dog Institute](#).

Pod O'Sullivan is a partner with [The Leadership Context](#), a boutique consultancy that works with CEO's and leadership teams to help them scale their leadership to enable the organisational strategic imperatives, particularly during complex times. His podcast, [The Leadership Diet](#) is widely regarded as an intimate and insightful look at senior leadership for all its aspirations and realities.





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