

# ©Trans-faire: A training protocol for strengthening unions and others' care of workplace mental health injuries

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**Mélanie Dufour-Poirier, Ph. D., CRIA, Associate Professor, School of Industrial Relations, Université de Montréal, walks us through ©Trans-faire, a training protocol for strengthening unions and others' care of workplace mental health injuries**

The neologism ©Trans-faire was devised by me (Dr. Mélanie Dufour-Poirier, PhD) and a former colleague, Dr. Francine D'Ortun, to serve as a term for the transfer of knowledge, expertise and soft skills among peers in the same working community (for further references, see our webpage).

The name couples the prefix 'trans,' expressing the idea of 'change or transfer' (Merriam-Webster) and the French verb 'to do.' It was conceived within a longitudinal research program conducted in partnership with the Social Stewards Network of the Fédération des travailleurs et des travailleuses du Québec union Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ) and the FTQ's Conseil régional du Montréal Métropolitain (Greater Montreal Regional Council), which we have been working with for over ten years.

As a reminder (for further details, see our article in the April 2024 issue of Open Access Government), in 1983, the FTQ set up a network of sentinels working with their peers in workplace settings. Social stewards, regardless of occupation, age, gender, or background, voluntarily use and share their knowledge and experience. They advocate a non-professional approach available at any time directly in the workplace.

## **Workplace mental health injuries training**

The invention of the ©Trans-faire concept dates back to March 2020, during the time of the Great Lockdown related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The premise that fuelled our thinking then was that such a unique and unprecedented experience in the history of humankind had transformed the job experience (situation at work), personal life (relationships with loved ones) and professional and social life (relationship with colleagues, society, regulations, etc.) of social stewards in the performance of their duties.

In theory, despite the pandemic, the social stewards' approach and roles (active listening, peer-to-peer mutual assistance, acting as sentinels in their workplace settings, guidance or referral to appropriate resources such as psychologists, implementing follow-ups) remained the same. In practice, however, the pandemic had seriously compromised social stewards' capacity for actions on behalf of workers (some of whom were affected

by the expansion of telework or already experiencing problems before COVID-19 and were seeing their difficulties increase daily) due to social distancing, scarcity of resources (for example, a decrease in the number of addiction treatment centres) and, on the part of some, psychological distress (loss of meaning, uncertainty, and loneliness).

Given the urgency, many social stewards have found quick solutions to such problems to create (or maintain) caring support through listening, encouraging, and directing toward assistive services remotely – in short, deploying local union action and vigorous activism in the field.

Some of them have even taken the initiative of meeting their training needs independently (through self-training) to continue in their role.

## **A protocol for sharing experiences**

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In light of the extent of these innovations, we felt it was essential to set up a protocol for sharing experiences amongst peers to enable the social stewards who had voluntarily chosen to take part in the process to present to their colleagues what they had learned and implemented, how they had set about doing so, the obstacles they encountered, the solutions they put forward, the receptiveness of their colleagues and that of their work environment to these innovations, and so on.

In so doing, we were focussing on the development of a sharing of expertise that, among other things, would foster social stewards' awareness of what they had learned during that transitional period, enhanced control in respect to their training needs, concurrent exploration within the network of potential training topics; increased strengthening of relationships of trust within the social steward community; and bringing attention to the problems social stewards experienced and resolved in the field.

Over and above the desired reinforcement of social stewards' capacities for action and the paradigm shift in the FTQ's training apparatus that such initiatives suggested (since the focus was now on the pooling of knowledge and experience and the development of a community of practice), four main principles guided (and continue to guide) ©Trans-faire:

1. Recognizing and promoting social stewards' expertise, interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence.
2. Targeting the knowledge, expertise, and soft skills, that is, the entire range of social stewards' procedural knowledge and leveraging it to strengthen the chain of human solidarity among peers in workplaces and within the FTQ network.
3. Fostering the continuous improvement of social stewards' capacity for action among their colleagues.
4. Reinforcing the deliberative and participatory vitality within the Social Stewards Network, as well as in the workplaces concerned, to cement an esprit de corps contributing to the improvement of the interpersonal dynamics at play on a daily basis.

## **©Trans-faire benefits**

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Overall, the enhancement and sharing of such transversal knowledge about life and the working experience, as well as the issues characterizing them, form the basis of how social stewards interact with their peers. This caring availability is informed by the tenet of paying it forward. In keeping with that, the socio-constructivist spirit and workplace socialization objective guiding the ©Trans-faire protocol also aims to create a major channel for the mutual assistance and empirical knowledge transfer essential to human activity in any work environment.

By extension, ©Trans-faire fosters the formation of a collective intelligence firmly implanted in space and time; in that way, it is in a position to nurture a capability for demonstrating proximity in an appropriate manner and at the right time. From that perspective, social stewards' store of expertise and procedural knowledge (and that of workers more generally) can only be viewed as invaluable and inexhaustible sources of learning, innovation and deliberation amongst workplace actors wanting to ameliorate their working environments and, more broadly, society as a whole.

### **©Trans-faire: Preventing workplace mental health injuries**

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Finally, it is worth remembering that ©Trans-faire's peer support approach lies in inclusion, the intention to look after one another, the duty to remind people of the importance of doing so, and locally based caring support in workplaces. That ethos is in itself a true agent for preventing mental health injuries, one that should spread to as many workplaces as possible. An ideal and a dream – perhaps utopian – that we help nurture through our work.

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