

Workplace Stability for Employee Retention and Performance

by Ruth Weirich



[Ruth Weirich](#) has been a management professional in the publishing industry for 30 years. She has experience in leadership, marketing, training, sales budgets, and financials. She holds an MBA from Colorado State University and a BA in Business Administration from Goshen College. With a love of maximizing an organization's operating performance and achieving its financial goals, Ruth focuses on building workplace stability to ensure businesses' productivity and longevity.

I have been working for aha! Process for about 15 years, and this work about diversity, looking at it through the lens of economic class, really works across all sectors. [A Framework for Understanding Poverty](#), the first book by aha! Process CEO Dr. Ruby Payne, was written for K–12 educators, and then Ruby bumped into Phil DeVol and Terie Dreussi-Smith, who were using *Framework* in a drug addiction rehab program. And they said to Ruby, “This stuff really works. The core information in it really works for the work that we’re doing in our drug rehab.” That’s when they came together and wrote [Bridges Out of Poverty](#), and that’s the same kind of thing we’re doing: We’re taking core aha! Process concepts and we’re reframing and retooling them for the business sector. aha! Process’s Bridges Out of Poverty family of concepts, trainings, and products helps employers, community organizations, social service agencies, and individuals strengthen the workforce and build more prosperous and stable communities.

This work brings people from all sectors and economic classes together to improve job retention rates, build resources, improve outcomes, and support those who are moving out of poverty. In this article, I’ll give an overview of [Workplace Stability](#), the day-long or half-day professional development training that we are doing with business leaders in which we show how aha! Process concepts can help improve retention, productivity, and the bottom line.

I recently read a great article where Fred Keller, CEO and owner of Cascade Engineering, said that once he was exposed to *Framework*, he knew he had to shift the corporate culture from within. He knew he had to be more inclusive of diversity, looking at it through the lens of economic class. Keller also said he knew he had to train everybody—whether they were a new employee or an existing employee, entry-level or an executive—on the diversity of economic classes in the workplace. He also said he needed outside partners so that he could have resources for his employees that he didn’t typically offer as a business, or that he could not offer. From these needs grew collaborative resource networks for employers, which I’ll discuss later.

Some years back, Cascade told us that turnover used to cost them \$3.6 million, but once they implemented aha! Process principles and started doing business differently, turnover costs were down to \$500,000. Just think about everything that you can do with that \$3 million. We believe that businesses can be profitable, and competitive, and treat employees well. And we believe that employees make businesses profitable and competitive.

One thing that we do with businesses is talk to them about stability. Stability of employees and creating stability for themselves as a business. This creates the opportunity to look at stability and how it is affected by economic class. We review mental models (pictures or

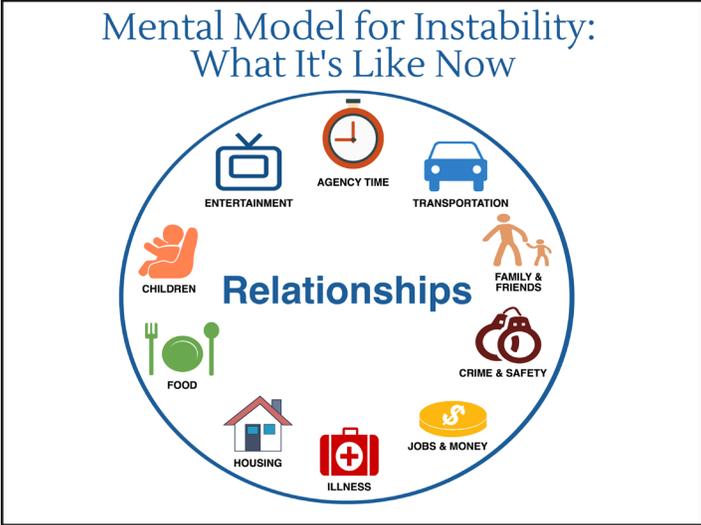


stories) that help us understand poverty and what resources look like, and we talk about the ability to do without resources. We also discuss the hidden rules (those unspoken cues and habits of the group) and the language experience of individuals coming from daily instability.

Employers do a lot to stabilize us. They offer us vacation, 401(k), paid time off, holidays, maternity leave, and all of those things stabilize us. Not everybody gets those benefits, though, and so we're looking at ways to talk with employers about stability that will stabilize our employees and improve retention and profits.

Driving forces are different for everyone. When we're working in a non-profit, we're talking about how to reduce poverty, enhance community self-sufficiency, and improve our community for the long run, for many generations. When we are in business, our driving force is net income, improving safety, being competitive in our sector, and being an employer of choice. We're concerned with net income and investments. There are businesses out there that are interested in being "triple bottom line" employers, but I have spoken with executives who say, "Look, I'm not a social service agency here. I'm a competitive business." Others say, "I'm not concerned with the retention of my entry-level employees; I can hire them all day long." What they don't realize is that turnover costs \$3,500–\$11,000 depending on the research you look at, and depending on the hard and soft costs that you put into your calculations.

Dr. Payne says that knowledge is a key form of privilege, as are social access, race, and money. To a large extent, how you spend your time determines your knowledge base. So the next thing we look at with employers is the mental model of daily instability. It graphically represents how people with low incomes have told us they spend their time. It's interlocking:



We're in survival mode, living in the tyranny of the moment, not having a future story, and the driving force is relationships.

How long does it take you to do laundry when you're living in this daily instability? In stability, you throw a load in, you go and fix dinner, you throw another load in, you take your child to baseball practice. When you're in instability, you may have to get on the bus, maybe with your children, go to the Laundromat, wait for a couple washers and then dryers, and then you have to pay for it too; it's expensive. And then you have to hurry so you don't miss the bus home.

What does it look like to an employer when someone lives in daily instability? A group of hospital executives we work with in Schenectady, New York, decided they would ride a city bus in to a scheduled appointment at the hospital. What happened? They missed the appointment. They had to take multiple bus lines, one bus broke down, and they had to walk for a period of time without a sidewalk. As a result of that experience, they added walk-in days at the hospital's clinic. What does that do? It helps stabilize the instability.

So when we look at the mental model of poverty, we wonder, "What is the employee pain that is caused in this mental model, and how does that affect work and the job?" Cars and transportation are a huge piece of the puzzle. The price of gas and the unreliability of older cars that need constant upkeep are factors. Or maybe you have to walk to a bus stop half a mile away. The buses don't run at the correct time, and you have to take multiple buses.

Employers, businesses see that car and transportation problem as turnover, tardiness, absenteeism. Helping employees stabilize transportation can have a huge impact in the workplace, and that's just one piece. Housing, safety, and childcare are other issues where relationships are going to trump work because



relationships are the driving force. These are some of the pains for employees that we can address.

We then look at the mental model of achievement because we know that's the mental model that businesses operate from. We are, in business, about achievement, about growth and expertise; we often think abstractly, and we are many times asking our employees to be like us, instead of us seeking first to understand. We are thinking, "Why can't they just buck up?" So we talk about the mental model for stability as well.

The reality is that there is a contrast between the mental model for stability at work and the instability of many entry-level employees. We generally have concrete thinkers as entry-level, low-wage employees who are coping with daily instability, and we usually find longer-term, abstract thinkers in higher-wage positions. So we have this juxtaposition of less predictable and more predictable. (On the other hand, I've worked with some pretty unpredictable managers, so we might be able to debate that one!) We have the tyranny of the moment on one hand and long-view planning on the other, which leads to either reactive problem solving (for many of our entry-level employees living in the tyranny of the moment) or proactive problem solving (for professionals in long-term stability). Each group is solving problems, they're just doing it differently. And when you're living in daily instability, the math doesn't work. It doesn't matter how many hours you work at minimum wage, it just won't pay for minimal accepted living expenses, so it isn't sustainable. That's in stark contrast to the business, which is

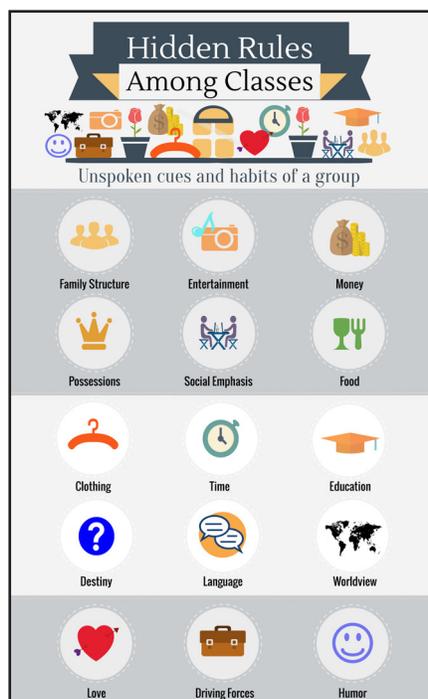
working from financial stability. People coming from daily instability have a lot to bring to the table. They're passionate, they're thinkers, they're problem solvers, they have will power, they're strong, they're persistent. The key is in creating a workplace culture that best uses those talents.

After we talk about the environment with businesses, we talk about hidden rules, the unspoken cues and habits of any group. How many of you have had a boss that you did not respect? But you respected the position because you were operating from the achievement-based mental model of

stability. The hidden rule of power in business is that you respect the position. What hidden rules do you hear about from your clients in the workplace? When I was president of aha! Process, and I had a new hire,

I always told them the top 10 hidden rules of aha! Process. That might seem a little humorous to us, but it would have been even better if those hidden rules hadn't been hidden, if they had been in the employee manual. All rules in the workplace, hidden or otherwise, operate from middle class norms of people living in daily stability. What do the hidden rules do for us in business? They help us navigate difficult situations. They help us design more effective policies, procedures, employee manuals, and training programs. Each economic class has different hidden rules about basically everything. Some of the major areas of concern for every economic class are listed in the chart at left.

Language can be a huge barrier for people coming into the workplace as low-wage employees. Researchers Hart and Risley, based on their observations, pos-





ited that children in poverty had been exposed to just 13 million words at home by age 4. In professional homes, children had heard a total of 45 million words by age 4 (Hart & Risley, 1995). If you have employees whose families have been living in daily instability for generations, the language experience they bring with them just doesn't compare to the language experience

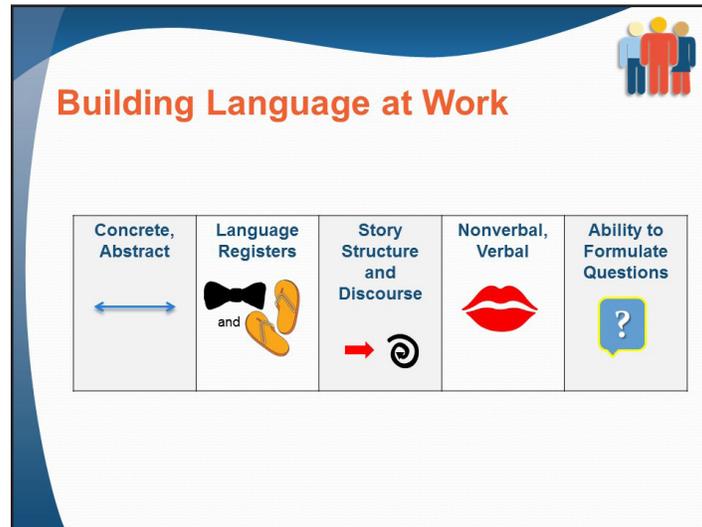
of those raised in professional or even working class households, and it may not include enough abstract words used for negotiation. Businesses can use this knowledge to retool our onboarding and our training—we can even take it back to our applications, our step sheets, our directions. So with businesses we talk about the language features of daily instability: casual register, circular story structure, and the importance of nonverbal communication. Nonverbal communication is a language in which we all need fluency. Building common language in the workplace is an important focus of the work we do with businesses.

I have a client who owns fast food franchises, and after she went through the Bridges material, she created very concrete onboarding videos for her entry-level employees living in daily instability. She got great results and better retention. In 2012, President Obama's State of the Union Address used an eighth-grade comprehension level. It wasn't meant to insult anyone, and most of us probably didn't notice. The idea was that more citizens of the country would be able to understand what he was saying. Language is a key piece that we talk to employers about because it's important in the workplace if you want to see increased productivity and retention.

Daily instability is the extent to which an individual does without resources. Knowing the resources of your employees provides ways to mentor them. It provides a way to promote from within or keep somebody on the job where they are. We know that turnover can

cost anywhere from \$3,500 to \$11,000. Promoting from within, a researcher from Wharton says, can save you 18–20% because you already have a relationship, the employee is loyal to you, and there is less downtime (Bidwell, 2011). The person can step into that role a lot more easily than a brand new hire.

In the Workplace Stability training, we talk about



the environment, the hidden rules, about language, but we know there are still going to be retention issues. It's still about stability versus instability of resources. The more resources we have, the more ability we have to be stable. And we know that the driving force is relationships when we're living in daily instability. This can also create issues with promotions. The organiza-

tional demands change at different levels. I may not need to look beyond daily requirements at my entry-level job, but when I'm in a different position at the company, I may need to plan monthly, annually, or 3–5 years out.

Changes of identity that may occur in the workplace can come with loss of relationships. Maybe I ride the bus with my best friend, and she gets promoted and becomes my boss. She's telling me what to do now during the day, and I'm thinking she's getting a little bit big for her britches. So we see a change of relationships accompanying a change in identity, but if we understand and anticipate that, we can mentor those individuals that we're promoting from within and help them maintain relationships. We work with a business in Texas that uses this information as they train supervisors they have promoted from within. Additional resource growth is often needed as you go from hourly positions to supervisory roles, and we work with businesses to support people making those transitions.

The extent of the organization's resources matters as well. You may have a company that's living in its own tyranny of the moment, so stabilizing at all levels is im-



portant. Almost always, the policies, procedures, benefits, training, it's all developed by somebody living in daily stability or long-term stability, but our employees often engage in destabilizing problem solving. Chief among these problems is high-interest payday loans and paycheck advances. So one stabilizing strategy is to develop and implement a small-dollar loan program as an employee benefit that helps build resources and encourage stability. We also look at policy changes, management practices, training programs, and individual interactions because we must work in a relationship-based achievement model if we want better retention and productivity. When we work with business leaders, we ask: What can you do differently in the benefits, the policies, and the management to help stabilize the environments of your employees? How can you think outside the box? And one of the best



outside-the-box developments is the creation of a resource network for employers. A group of employers comes together and works to provide retention services, work supports, and training opportunities for entry-level employees. They keep employees on the job, and it reduces the demand for HR. Often the resource network model includes a resource specialist. Each company purchases shares of that person's time, and the resource specialist spends 2–6 hours per week within each business working on stabilizing issues with employees. Larger businesses may need two days with the resource specialist. This kind of support keeps the employees on the job and the lines functioning.

We work with many groups that have formed these resource networks, and often the network works with a credit union to provide the low-interest income advances I mentioned above. For example, if an employee has been with a company 90 days or more, and they experience a destabilizing life event, they can get a \$750–\$1,000 advance that comes back out of their

paycheck each week through the credit union.

What are businesses in your community doing that stabilizes entry-level, lower-wage employees living in daily instability? Benefits might include an onsite health clinic, tuition reimbursement for ESL or community college, and we all want to provide a livable wage. Some examples from businesses that I've been working with or that I've heard about include a client in south-east Indiana that has an onsite health clinic. They have a lot of front-line staff, and individuals who are sick can go down to the clinic, see a health professional, and get back on the telephone within 30 minutes.

If you partner with a credit union to offer micro-loans and bank accounts, consider the prior banking experience of your entry-level employees. When we live in a stable environment, and somebody fails to do our direct deposit on time, we feel as though we've been harmed! But if you have never banked in your life, and you have a bank account for the first time, you'll also need a little financial literacy and training, which is something the resource network can be tailored to provide.

Tuition reimbursement is a helpful benefit to offer, but remember to include reimbursement for programs other than just a master's. I mentioned ESL, GED, and community college above, and those are important tools for many people who are trying to achieve more day-to-day stability. We definitely want to see a livable wage and health insurance for employees, but if that isn't possible, other factors can help stabilize as well. Getting Ahead is great for groups of employees to do away from work, without a supervisor or HR person hanging over them, so they can investigate their own economic reality. I had a client tell me that they've started doing topical book clubs with their employees. The first one they did was about anger management, and the second one they did was about bullying. Flex time is often misunderstood, but when it's used as a



benefit, it is about an employer and an employee coming together to figure out what is best for the employee, and it has to work for the business as well. That might mean coming in at 9 a.m. instead of 8 because the bus route's better, or it may work to accommodate childcare or elder care issues. Maybe lunchtime is at 1 p.m. instead of 11 or 12 because the traditional lunch hour is when low-wage workers need time off to visit other agencies.

Other businesses have focused on individual interactions, implementing a "call before you quit" policy, and creating relationships of mutual respect. We have a client that was doing three very intense, very abstract days of onboarding. And after doing Bridges they went to more "just in time" training where the new hire was doing the concrete pieces of the job, and they saw their retention rates improve just because of that. Another business owner told me about a daycare alternative where they negotiated a \$15 rate with daycares in the city, so if their employees' daycare fell through, they could take their child to one of these approved daycares for \$15. In New Mexico there was a manufacturing company that wanted their employees there at 6 a.m., but daycare did not open until 7. So the employer went to the daycare and said, "If you can open at 6 a.m., I have 10 employees, and I will do a payroll deduction to pay you every week." That relationship stabilized 10 employees and two employers. When we do the day with businesses, we spend a lot of time on return on investment, because it pays to stabilize, and we know that money talks in the business world, so early on in the Workplace Stability training sessions we spend time working through a return on investment calculator. We want to stabilize that employee base and in the meantime stabilize the company. The company will net more income, the company will increase productivity, and the company will have happier employees. These are

ideas that work.

In the Workplace Stability trainings and in the con-

text of resource networks for employers, it's very exciting to bring together so many different sectors. As we all work in our different silos, it's important that we get together and share our best practices and strategies. I was talking to a poultry farmer, and he told me how they keep their different grains stored in separate silos. But then they have this expert nutritionist who

comes and blends those grains to make the right combination for the chickens, and that's absolutely what we're doing in our communities. We're all working in our different silos, but we come together to create sustainable communities where everybody can live well.

Ruth Weirich gives an expanded version of this overview in this free webinar.

For more information on providing a [Workplace Stability training session](#) at your site, please email workshops@ahaprocess.com or call (800) 424-9484.

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