EXERCISE

Claiming My Triggers

OVERVIEW

All mammals experience triggers. Triggers are inner and outer cues of threat causing strong, powerful, neurophysiological reactions. From a nervous system perspective, a trigger resembles a previous situation or interaction from a time when the neural challenge overpowered your ventral vagal network, and a similar situation or interaction now evokes a chain of memories and thoughts. Instantly, you feel off-center, defensive, or shut down.

Perhaps your colleague Simon blames you for a mistake that you didn't make on a team project. If this resembles a past aversive experience, the blaming remark may activate protective states of your nervous system. Suddenly, your biological reaction is characterized by a quickened heart rate, sharp prickles on your neck, a flushed face, and a biting comeback to Simon. That's sympathetic talking. And unless you are able to gain a bit of *CAKE* in your revved up state, your verbal interactions with Simon can rapidly get heated, loud, and nonproductive.

Knowing your triggers is the first step to working with them and supporting your nervous system when events, interactions, and situations spark off a sudden, overpowering, physiological reaction that might surprise even you. Familiarity with your own triggers will give you agency to soothe them with resources and offer clearer responses, even in threatening workplace situations.

TAKING STOCK OF YOUR TRIGGERS

This exercise allows you to reflect and think back to times when a situation or interaction at work quickly knocked you into the bottom floors of your autonomic home, and you weren't quite sure why.

- To get started, download and print out the Claiming My Triggers worksheet from mammalsatwork.net/exercises. If you don't have access to a printer, just draw two houses with roofs on one side of a blank piece of paper.
- Before you start the exercise, take a big stretch up, shake out your hands, and let out a long sighing breath for 7 to 8 seconds with your belly muscles. One more time. And now... time to settle in.

Here are the steps:

1. Identify your triggers in the workplace. Typically, these interactions and situations will evoke a disproportionate physiological reaction. Most of us know what circumstance brings on a wild activation in our nervous systems. List actual, observable events that are triggering for you, such as, "Being blamed when I am not at fault." Continue writing your list of subtle and blatant triggers. In Example 1 below, you will see workplace triggers listed as observations.

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2. Determine the common thread of your triggers and chunk them together in themes. This is your opportunity to look for themes of your triggers and distinguish their underlying reasons. By recognizing broader themes, you can more deeply reflect how certain behaviors in the workplace may be in alignment or conflict with your values, beliefs, and attitudes, giving you a clearer perspective on them. See Example 2.

3. Gauge where you land in your autonomic home when triggered. Often, your triggers and their themes will send you directly to the lower floors of your autonomic home. In Example 2, the theme "workplace unfairness" may get you stuck on the sympathetic floor, frustrated and wanting to fight against any injustice you and others are experiencing in the workplace. Whereas in the same example, the theme "not being seen or heard" may land you in the neural basement—feeling isolated, helpless, and depleted.

Differentiating and claiming your triggers is key for transforming them.

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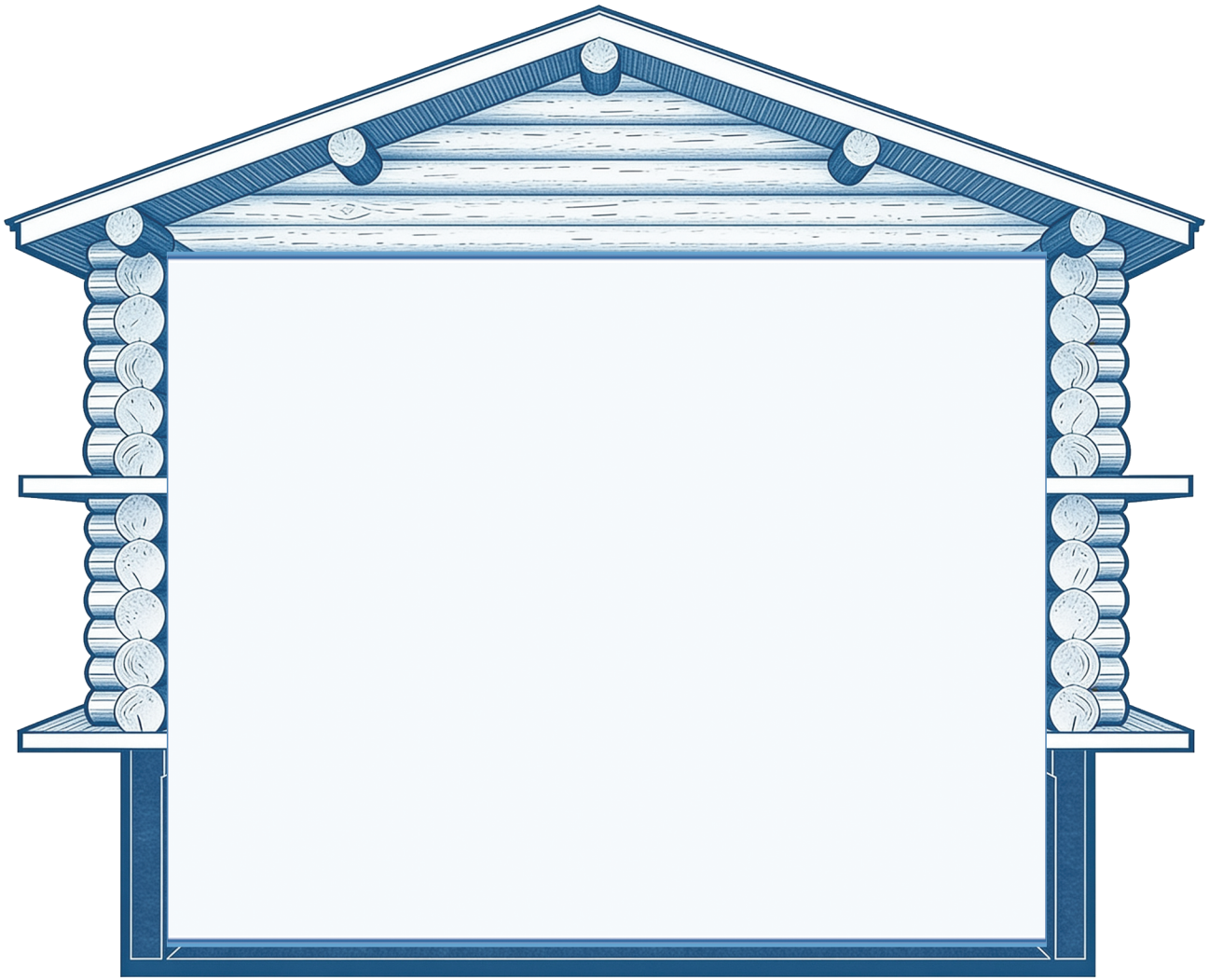
My Triggers at Work



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My Triggers at Work (Sample)



- Redoing someone else's work (routinely)
- Teammate blames others for any project setbacks in front of leader
- Lack of clear system or work process
- Client ignores my emails
- Boss dismisses my idea (regularly)
- Coworker who underperforms is rewarded
- Teammate doesn't give me credit
- Barrage of emails, DMs, interruptions

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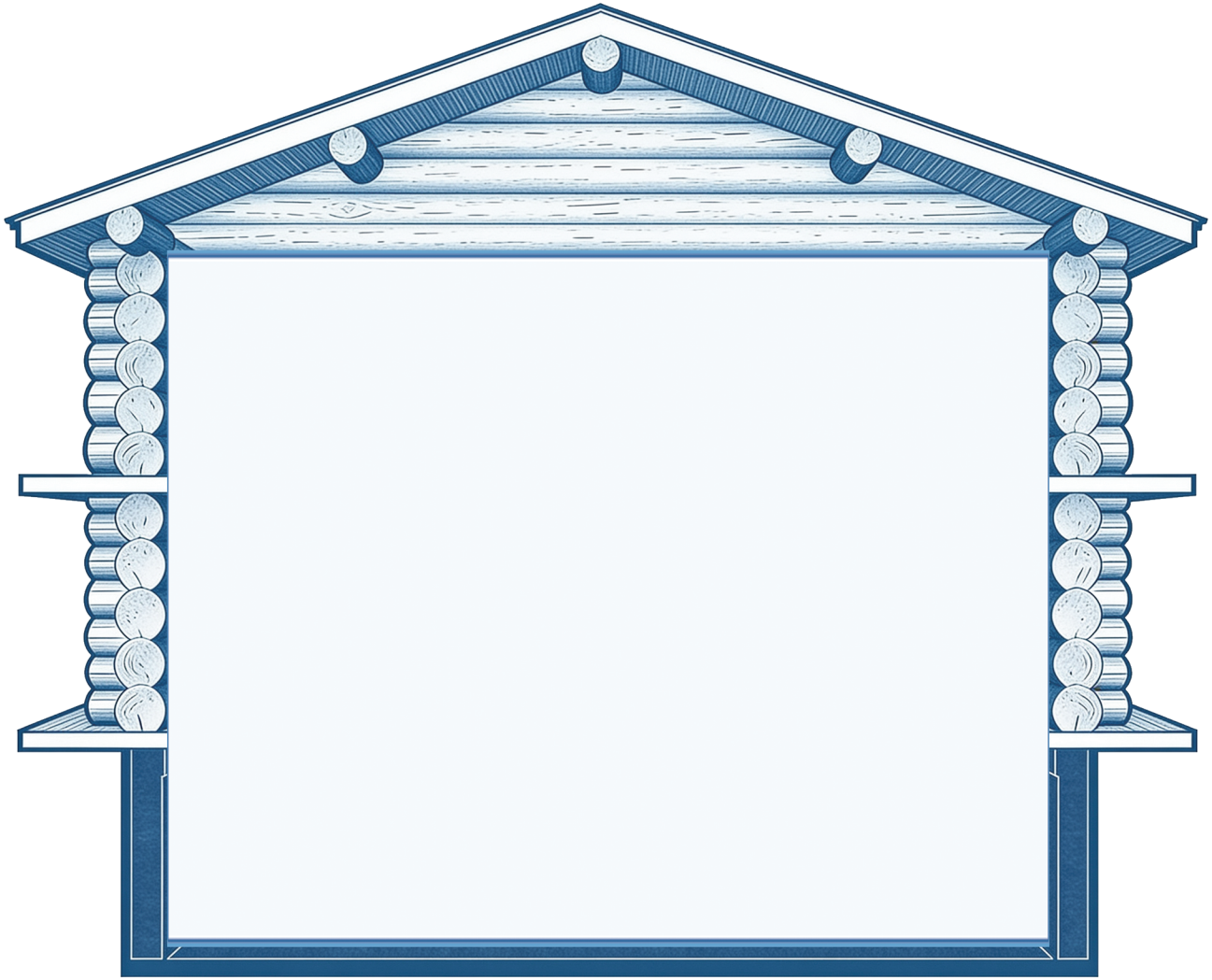
My Workplace Trigger Themes



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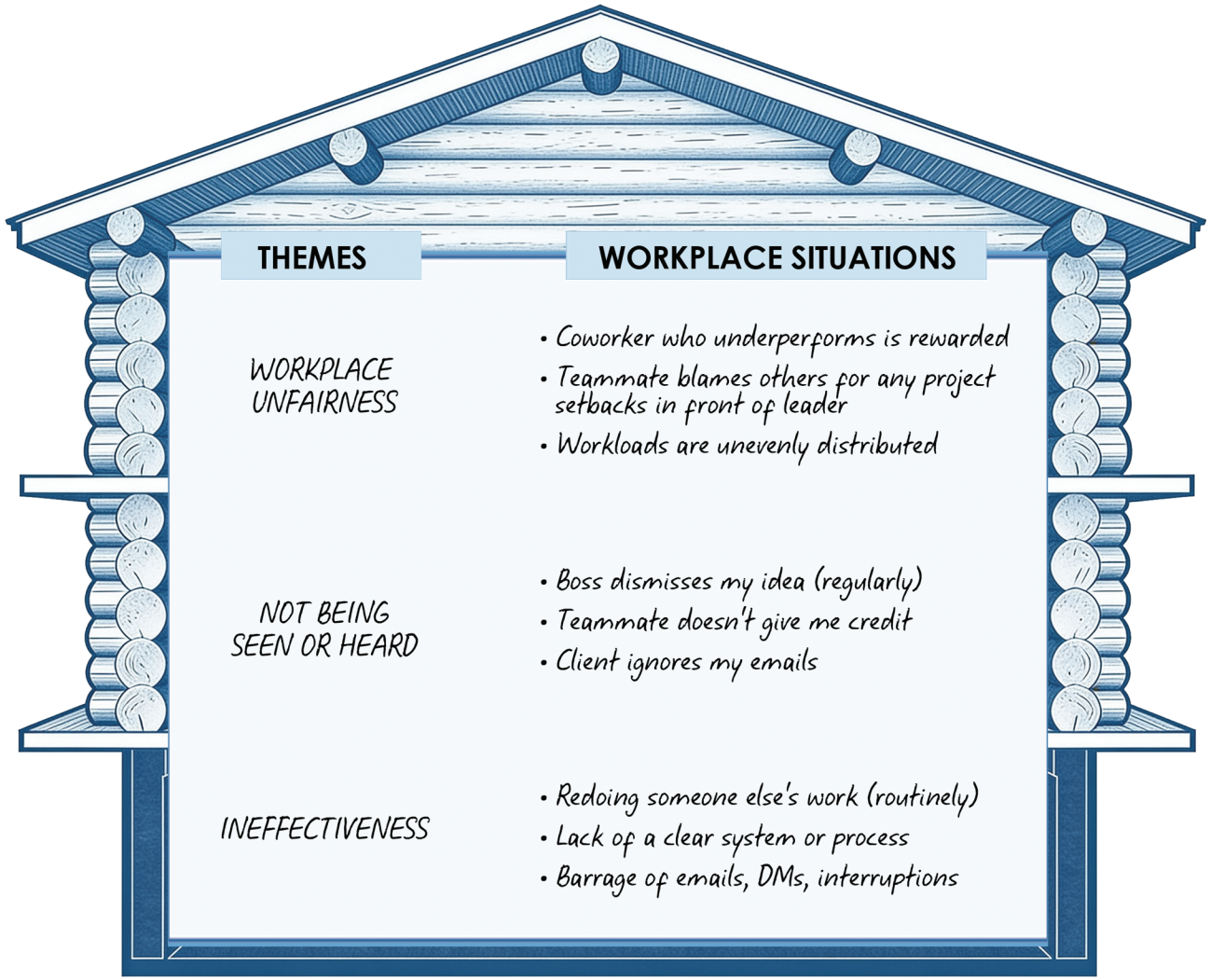
My Workplace Trigger Themes (Sample)



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