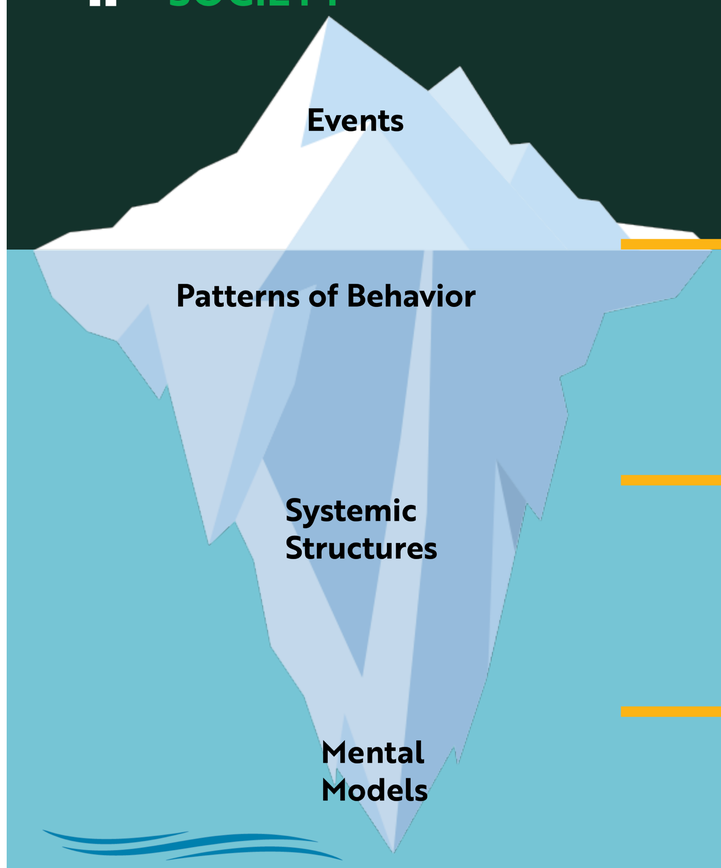
Our Journey of Unlearning:

trellis SOCIETY

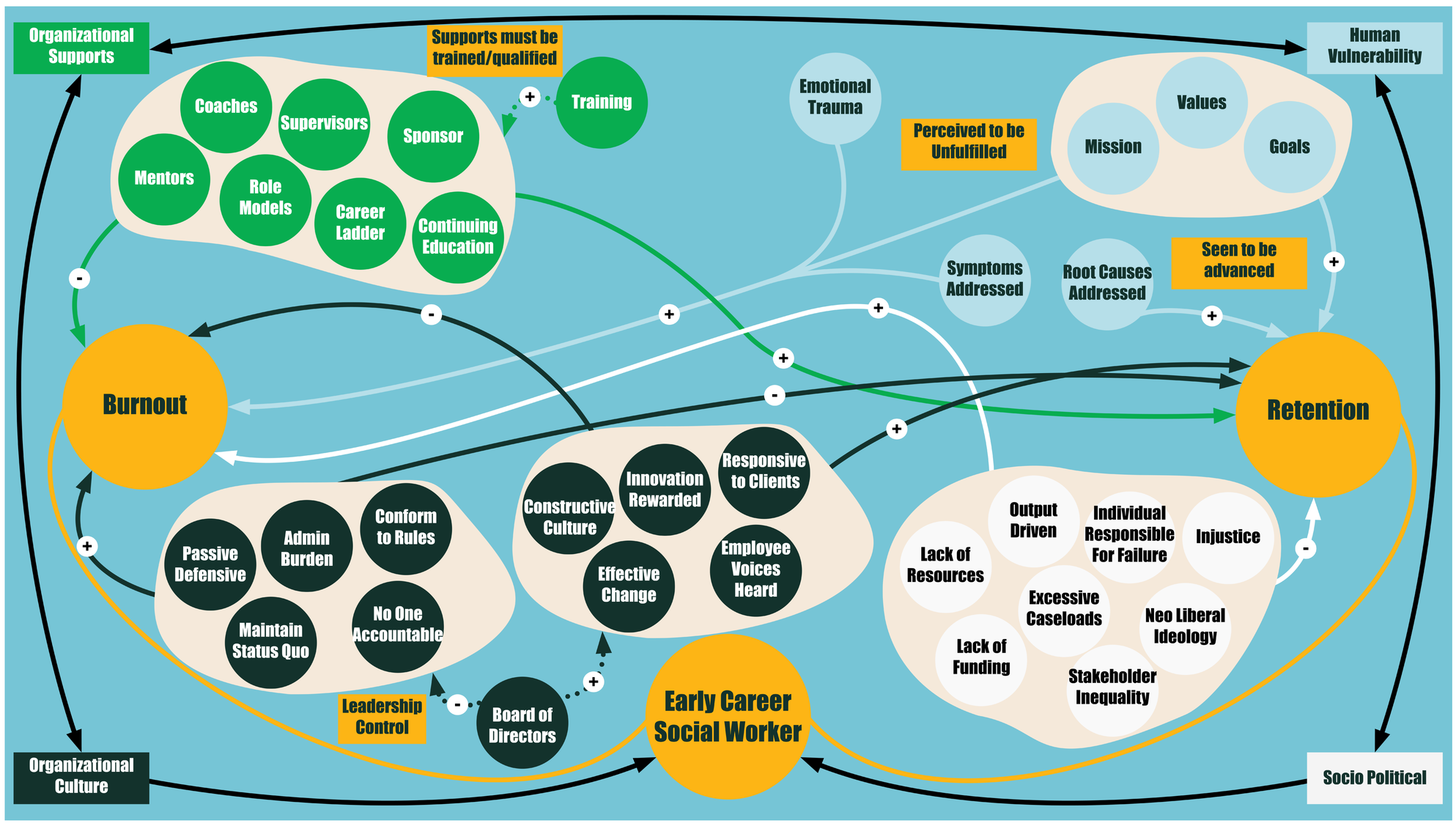
How might we effectively support early-career social service workers in developing skills needed to work with youth and families and to thrive, grow and be retained in the sector?



Events	Patterns of Behavior	Systemic Structures	Mental Models
Framing of Early Career Struggles- Struggling staff are formally or informally labeled as under performing, overwhelmed or unprepared or wrong fit, using the lens of personal responsibility	*Cumulative Impact of Stressors*- ongoing exposure to stress and trauma accumulate when organizations are unable or choose not to provide the tools to process, recover, or adjust to file related stress	*Commercialization of Non Profits*- adopting for profit managerial practices that emphasize outputs and risk aversion may conflict with relational values, reflective learning goals and professional and developmental supervision	*Personal Responsibility*- early career struggles, stress and failure are viewed as individual weakness and masks what may be inherent outcomes of organizational design, workload, and resources
Service Continuity Impacted by Staffing- staff departures and vacancies result in reassigned files, delayed interventions, trust reduction, increased risks to clients	*Learning Plateau after Onboarding*- perception of limited skills development in relational, emotional and applied practice skills as supervision shifts from development to goal completion and file management	*Education and Practice*- the necessary foundation of theory, ethics and values may not effectively bridge the transition to relational and emotional regulation and organizational and administrative skills needed in early career practice	*Client Needs First*- social service programs may prioritize the needs of the vulnerable, respond to crisis, and achieve service outputs leaving few resources for social worker learning, development and professional growth
Expression of Disillusionment- the early career social workers commitment to the social mission is overtaken by scarcity of resources and organizational supports	*Dissonance Between Practice and Mission*- job dissatisfaction, moral distress and turnover may increase if early career social workers perceive a disconnect between the organization's mission and their professional practice	*Job Demand and Resource Imbalance*- the complexity and demands of caseloads, emotional labour, risk, and administrative burdens without the resources to supervise, train, reflect and recover leads to burnout	*Professional Identity of Emotional Struggle*- exposure to trauma is culturally framed as inherent in social work which reinforces an identity of stoicism, endurance and self sacrifice
20% to 40% Attrition Rate- The cumulative impact is that 20 to 40% of early career social workers will leave the field of child and family services or the profession of social work entirely within three years	*Disproportionate Attrition from Child and Family Services Practice*- early career social workers disproportionately exit high intensity fields where the emotional demands of practice exceed available organizational supports	*Employment Shaped by Funding*- nonprofit funding models shape the labour strategies, contract employment, low wages, limited opportunities, creating workforce instability, especially in early careers	*Ethical Scarcity in Social Missions*- operating with minimal resources is accepted as an inevitable cost of pursuing a social mission, rather than political and free market decisions to underfund systemic issues

Catamount
A Fellowship for Emerging Changemakers

Creating a New Understanding



Through a Systems Lens

20 to 40% of early career social workers, in child and family services, will leave the field/profession:

- Exposure to trauma and human crisis leads to secondary trauma, stress, and compassion fatigue
- High ethical demands and low prestige lead to feelings of invisibility and devaluation
- Treating symptoms of social problems and not root causes leads to mission/vision misalignment
- Increasing case loads and role confusion impacts psychological health

The result is stress, burnout and turnover, often within the first three years of the social work career

This problem is likely to continue due to:

- Culture of blame where failure is due to individual weakness
- Passive defensive organizations that focus on achieving outputs. assessing risk, fulfilling administrative duties
- Emphasis on self care without supporting resilience
- Supervision becomes an administrative function
- Chronic underfunding and resourcing of social programs
- Employment instability and job precarity

The research has identified tools to build resilience but how do we inspire and motivate leadership to implement the tools

Building resilience in both the individual early career social worker and the organization from top to bottom may be effective but may be resisted by organizations:

- Learn to identify and then support at risk social workers
- Organizational policies that balance workloads, recovery times and even employee recognition
- Constructive organizations that focus on tackling the root problem, front line led innovations, and autonomy
- Emphasizing professional development and career advancement opportunities
- Mentorship between senior and junior social workers
- Intensive and structured induction and onboarding
- Caseload protection for at least two years
- Reflective supervision separate from administrative supervision or management
- Creating safe places to engage in reflective thinking and practice between early career social workers and reflective supervisors
- Proactive assessment of stress and initiation of conversations to address issues
- Building relational practice skills

Mistakes and successes at all organizational levels are tools to improve practice

Connect individual resilience to organizational resilience

Educate leaders on the personal benefits and gains of mentoring and supervising

Retention of employees improves client service and organizational metrics

Career long learning develops specialization valued by organizations

Effective collaboration improves clinical practice, job satisfaction and retention