

WHY VULNERABLE LEADERS ARE BETTER LEADERS



FACTSHEET

Exploring how vulnerability leads to connection, innovation and better business performance



Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change.



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Inspirational leaders show their human side. They quickly build rapport and trust. They're happy to talk about what they're good at and where they're weak.

They're comfortable with being vulnerable.

Unfortunately leaders often feel that they need to put on a facade in order to lead – they think that being vulnerable is a weakness and that should always appear confident and have all the answers. This 'perfect' leader persona is one reason why there is so little trust and engagement within many organisations – people can quickly tell when others are not being authentic, and this creates distrust.

With vulnerability, comes genuine respect and trust. It's those leaders who are willing to show vulnerability who have the biggest followings – and in business, that makes sound commercial sense.

What does vulnerable leadership look like?

Showing vulnerability as a leader is not about oversharing and hanging out your dirty laundry for the world to see. Vulnerability without boundaries is attention-seeking behavior that appears to others as desperate.

Vulnerable leadership is about letting go of the notion that you have all the answers and admitting where you need help – and allowing others to give you that help. It's about embracing the possibility of failure – making it OK to fail, personally and for the team. And it's about being open to receiving feedback from others – and using that feedback to learn and develop.

Overall, vulnerability is about being seen and being authentic.

The business benefits of vulnerable leadership

- **Innovation and creativity** – In order to innovate leaders need to be open to the possibility of new ideas not working. If leaders are not open to and willing for things to fail, then there will be no innovation or creative sharing of ideas. It is the job of the leader to get comfortable with failure and to make it OK for others to make mistakes without fear of punishment.
- **Trust** – People do not trust others when they can sense that they are being fake or putting on a facade. For leaders to inspire trust in their teams, and therefore the loyalty that comes from trust, they must be truly authentic. This can be a very vulnerable place for leaders.
- **Engagement and buy-in** – If people don't trust their leaders they won't buy in to their plans. If vulnerability can improve trust, it can therefore improve buy-in to plans and engagement with the company and its strategy. Additionally, a leader who is able to admit that they don't know what's going to happen or where they will end up during tough times, and that they need the help of everybody in the team, may find that people are much more willing to rally behind them and help them through the difficult patch than if they were merely told what to do.
- **Empowerment** – The ability for a leader to admit that they don't have all the answers and that they need help from others is incredibly empowering to those that they are asking the help from. This empowerment leads to greater fulfilment and well-being within teams.



Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage. Truth and courage aren't always comfortable, but they're never weakness.



Brené Brown

Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead

- **Efficiency and productivity** – The ability to ask for help also means that decisions may be reached and actions may be taken much faster than if the leader tries to go it alone. This results in greater productivity for the business.

How can vulnerability be learned?

So this is all great if your leaders are all naturally open, authentic and vulnerable, but what if they are not? What if your leaders are so stuck in their ways that they could not even entertain the idea of being vulnerable? Can it be learned? And if so, how?

It can be learned, but it requires hard work and stepping out of comfort zones. In order to make these significant behavioural shifts, leaders need to have an experience that enables them to examine their behaviours and that gives them the inspiration to change where needed. In order to do this they need a to have a development experience that enables them to do the following:

- **Raise self awareness** – The first step in becoming vulnerable is for a leader to understand and recognise what is currently going on with them – they need to know who they are, how they behave, how they communicate with and relate to others and what their personal impact is. With greater consciousness comes greater choice and behavioural flexibility.
- **Build self compassion** – Self compassion is vital to being vulnerable in a constructive way. "Because self-compassionate individuals do not berate themselves when they fail, they are more able to admit mistakes, modify unproductive behaviours and take on new challenges" (Neff, 2009, p 213). Being able to fail without self recrimination is key to being open to failure and therefore the innovation and creativity that comes from that.

- **Practise mindful techniques** – People naturally want to avoid unpleasant experiences and feeling vulnerable can be particularly unpleasant. Mindfulness is about accepting the good and the bad and bringing a 'calm neutrality' to all experiences. This enables people to get comfortable with feeling uncomfortable.
- **Reflect deeply** – To create the depth of self-awareness that leads to lasting behavioural change, leaders need to be able to reflect deeply on their learning. In order to do this it is important to create a 'safe' psychological space that helps to ensure that leaders are not operating in 'threat' brain where they may feel anxious or stressed, and are therefore willing to be more open, curious and vulnerable. It is also important to find environments that are inspirational and that allow leaders to temporarily disconnect from distraction and be fully immersed in the developmental experience. The suspension of action that comes from being away from the office and in an intriguing or challenging environment, creates an opportunity for leaders to reflect and inquire more deeply.

References

Neff, K. D. 'The Role of Self-Compassion in Development: A Healthier Way to Relate to Oneself'. *Human Development*. 2009;52:211-214

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