

Leadership Vulnerability: Courage in Action

One of the realities of leadership is that the higher you rise, the more others will pay attention to everything you do. In other words, leadership makes you inherently vulnerable to the observations, viewpoints, and critiques of others.

A common observation from new CEOs is that they're suddenly aware of how everyone seems to be watching and listening. To some degree, everyone is! Thus, CEOs believe they need to continuously exercise caution in their public remarks. They feel a tug to go underground and carefully guard what and how they communicate or show up.

Faced with that greater scrutiny, a leader essentially has two choices: either strive to accumulate greater control, as a shield against external analysis, or adjust and bring forward more of themselves—in other words, become more open, human, and yes, vulnerable. Leaders who choose the second path will discover that others more readily connect with and follow them.

Ideas for Action

“Vulnerability”—the word itself conjures up thoughts of weakness. But leadership demands courage, so how can a leader be both courageous and vulnerable? Isn't that an oxymoron? However, leadership vulnerability is anything but: it's about taking risks, stepping into new opportunities, and allowing others to get to know the real you.

In 2010 researcher Brené Brown gave a TED talk that gained more than 20 million views. Her topic, “Vulnerability,” highlighted how hard we work to make the uncertain certain or the risky safe. In a later TED talk, she made the point that it is a dangerous myth to conceive of vulnerability as a weakness—instead, she notes, “it is our most accurate measurement of courage.”

One of our firm’s leadership assessment tools, the Hogan Development Survey (HDS), measures a person’s tendencies when under stress, and uses 11 personality scales to help leaders recognize what could trip them up. Two of the HDS scales, Skeptical and Cautious, when taken to extremes, are the opposite of vulnerability. Overly skeptical leaders are distrustful, cynical, and highly protective of themselves. Overly cautious leaders are afraid to take risks, resist change, and hope they can reduce uncertainty.

Sometimes, a personal apology is exactly what is needed. For example, when the winter storms created major issues for JetBlue Airways, its founder and CEO, David Neeleman, delivered a personal apology with no excuses and with clarity about his personal disappointment in having not lived up to the company’s values of bringing humanity back to air travel. He delivered the message himself and went on to say what JetBlue would do to make things right.

Showing vulnerability is a choice, not a 24/7 state of mind. Seek to practice what I would term “selective vulnerability” with those who matter the most to your success, such as your team members, immediate peers, and close friends and family members. And when the situation calls for it, with your entire organization or its customers.



Leaders who embrace vulnerability have the courage to show their imperfections, the honesty to admit their errors, and the confidence to put their own ideas and observations on the table so others can scrutinize them. By exhibiting vulnerability, rather than turning inward, you publicly demonstrate your interest in a greater external good –your team’s task; the success of your company; the welfare of others. Who wouldn’t want to work with such a person?

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