

Pearls of Leadership Wisdom: Leadership Vulnerability

Welcome to my backyard and once more Pearls of Leadership Wisdom. Today my focus is on: Leadership Vulnerability. When I wrote a pearl on this several years ago, I focused on two things: being able to admit to mistakes, and being able to reveal feelings, both of which have very powerful ripple effects on those with whom we work. Today, when I look around our world at leaders, I see many examples of vulnerability. Some individuals really owning vulnerability and using it to their advantage, and others who would shun any pretext of anything that looks like vulnerability. I'm particularly thinking about three different examples:

Example number one is a video that I saw of Arne Sorenson, who's the CEO of Marriott International. In that video, he acknowledges that he'd been encouraged to only do an audio message. The reason, because having just gone through chemotherapy, he was now bald and people had not seen him bald, but he wanted to show up as his real self. That's part of vulnerability.

The second example is Satya Nadella, the CEO of Microsoft. He wrote in a memo to his entire team worldwide about his feelings. He said to them, and I'm going to quote from this, "we are in uncharted territory. There have been times over the past weeks where it is felt overwhelming and all-encompassing for me." How refreshing for a leader to speak to their own feelings.

The third example is the CEO and founder of Magnet Media, Megan Cunningham, who talked about how in the beginning of the pandemic she had spent time crafting careful emails to her team and saying exactly what she wanted to. But that over time she started having small group conversations and one-on-one, which she said was entirely out of her comfort zone. She said as an introvert it took a tremendous amount for me to be able to connect with people one-on-one and in small groups like that. It took courage, it was something I didn't know how to do, but it was the right thing to do.

Each of these leaders demonstrated vulnerability.

1. One, vulnerability of showing up as yourself
2. Second, vulnerability in revealing feelings
3. Third, vulnerability in trying something new or having the courage to do something that wasn't immediately comfortable

It seems to me that part of vulnerability is about admission. Admit like Megan Cunningham did, that you're trying something new, that you've never done it before. That it isn't necessarily easy. Admitting that it's the first. Admitting is part of showing up as real. Admit that you don't know it all. Actually, Satya Nadella when he took over as CEO, made a comment to the entire Microsoft employee base, "I don't want to be a know-it-all, I want to be a learn-it-all."



Admit that you don't know it all. The Governor Tim Walz of Minnesota actually has done that in saying there are pros and cons to this decision. There is one side and there's another side, no one can say the choice I am making is exactly right, but I am going to make one and I need your help in following through with it. Admit to feelings. While it may seem that some feelings don't belong in the leadership world, we are a kaleidoscope of feelings that are all helpful in this time.

If you as a leader can acknowledge what you're concerned about or worried about and you can balance that with optimism and hope, that is very powerful. Denying the kaleidoscope feelings only leaves you seeming inhuman or inauthentic. Finally, think about the word vulnerability for a minute. In this pandemic there are individuals who are being classified as vulnerable. I'm in one of those groups that would be described as vulnerable. But in a way as leaders aren't we all vulnerable? I hope that we each find ways to own our vulnerability and admit how we are using it to better lead. Thank you.