

Building an Effective Leader Through Vulnerability

Cesar S. Caballero

Southern Utah University

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Professor Stuart Jones

Winning Collaboration: Vulnerability & Trust

This week's assignment dealt with vulnerability and how it positively affects trust. Stating this module was eye-opening would be an understatement. It was beyond interesting to see how speakers such as Patrick Lencioni, Dr. Brene Brown and Emma Seppala had valid points that made me understand that many of my ideals could be traced down to the research they have done.

What is the Meaning of Vulnerability?

After watching the videos by Dr. Brene Brown and Patrick Lencioni, one thing is clear: Vulnerability should not be optional when leading. It should be a must have for any leader who expects to be successful and effective. Their research clearly shows that vulnerability will yield great results when leading not only at work but at home as well. They both discussed how to be a successful leader, you need to embrace vulnerability. So, this brings us to the question: What does vulnerability even mean? Vulnerability as explained by Brown and Lencioni simply means that we as leaders need to be relatable to our employees or to the people we are leading. These people (call it family or employees) need to see us as flawed human beings who are trying their best to be successful by collaborating with them. So, in other words, being vulnerable means we need to work together (Collaboration is always key as well), be responsible and trust each other while also being accountable for our actions. In addition, we cannot forget about being able to hold crucial conversations, which directly tie to vulnerability and trust. We as leaders cannot ask as if we knew everything or if we were always right; we need to show that we are vulnerable and can make mistakes just like anyone else. However, the fact that we make mistakes does not mean we will continually make them on purpose, it just means, we will grow and learn from them to continue to excel at our leadership role.

Four Myths of Vulnerability

As pointed by Dr. Brown, the four myths of vulnerability are as follows:

- **Vulnerability is weakness-** This can be seen as one of the most dangerous myths. Think of how when we say we love someone before that someone tells us, we become vulnerable to whatever they will say next. What if they do not feel the same way? What if they make fun of us? What if they leave us? What if they say they were not looking for love? There are so many emotional variables and thus being vulnerable can be easily perceived as being weak. Dr. Brown at one point refers to this as feeling as if we were naked onstage hoping for applause and people instead of clapping for our performance would laugh instead.
- **I do not do vulnerability-** Many people tend to think that they have to force themselves not to be vulnerable because they do not like to show their emotions. Many feel that this is just optional, and they can turn a switch on and off so that they do not feel or are emotionally exposed to the actions of others. In addition, plenty of leaders can also feel that by being vulnerable with their employees or peers, they are exposing not only themselves to them but also the organization they work for.
- **Vulnerability is letting all hang out-** Another misconception would be that leaders think being vulnerable means you have to show all your emotions all the time. This is not the truth. Being vulnerable works if there are mutual boundaries and trust. This takes us to the next myth of vulnerability.
- **We can go at it alone-** Once again, being vulnerable does not mean that we are all alone being the only ones admitting to our mistakes. It does not mean we should be crying in front of people when something goes wrong. Being vulnerable as a leader means that

we will show that we are human and that just like anyone else, we can make mistakes. People will respect us for it, this of course including our collaborators (family members, sons, daughters, significant others, co-workers, and employees too). We cannot be vulnerable or hold effective crucial conversations just by ourselves, it is all about a collaboration with others.

Personally, I feel it is common sense how these myths need to be debunked. In my case, I feel that many times I have told myself that I do not do vulnerability. I tended to think of myself as ‘strong’ and did not want to show emotions. I wanted to be ‘perfect.’ With that being said, I need to say that few years back, my frame of my mind changed completely. This thanks to a movie I watched that resonated with my life and with my career (I was a bilingual elementary/middle school teacher for 13 years). The film, I am talking about is called ‘Inside Out.’ This movie talks about how the emotions of a young girl work in her brain. The movie received rave reviews and boasted plenty of awards.

When I first watched the movie, it dawned on me that I could use it to fix some behavior problems I was having in my classroom and personal life (more on that later). I was right, soon enough, I started using this movie to show my students about emotions and how they could be characterized. My classroom became a learning environment where it was perfectly acceptable to talk about our emotions and feelings through different assorted activities. I would devote the first fifteen minutes of my class to do an ‘Inside Out Circle,’ where students would discuss their feelings using different objects (plushies from the characters, balloons, post its’ and others) – all with the different colors from the characters and their emotions. The second year not only did I receive the best state test scores I had ever received but I also saw that I did not have as many behavior referrals as previous years. My second year, I started connecting everything to Inside

Out. Every single activity we did in my class (I taught Reading and Language Arts) was always somehow tied to the movie. By my third year of using this model, my students were the best-behaved students in the school and my scores had increased dramatically to almost 100% passing rate. I was being a very effective leader to my students.

The model started to be replicated by other leaders (teachers, principals) in my school district, but the results were not the same. I saw then that just with what I learned here, being vulnerable was part of it. I showed my students that I was vulnerable, and I was flawed. I was willing to admit that and because I did so, they respected me, and they followed suit and showed me they were vulnerable too. After all, I always modeled what I expected from them in an authentic way. We collaborated and we were successful together. Other leaders expected the students to be vulnerable without showing vulnerability first and that was their mistake. So, this brings me back to the fact that you cannot say that you do not do vulnerability. You absolutely must if you want to be an effective leader and be successful. As a matter of fact, to be successful leading, you need to demolish all these myths altogether.

How Should Leaders Demonstrate Vulnerability?

Leaders absolutely must show they are vulnerable so they can be effective. So, now that we know this, how do we demonstrate that vulnerability? I would say and as pointed out by the excerpt from the book and the videos, we show vulnerability by being human. Life is difficult and things are bound to not work out at some point. Instead of staying focused on what goes wrong in our life, we need to learn to let go. We need to learn to accept that we have failed and to show that we are okay with it. We will not love failing but we need to be able to acknowledge that we cannot succeed all the time. This in turn, will help us succeed soon as this becomes a process, and we will continue to learn from our mistakes. We as leaders cannot just blame the

mistakes on someone else and then expect that things will go right. We must show that just like everybody else, we are human. By no means, we are saying that is okay to fail every time. That is not it. We can fail sure, but the bottom line is that we must do so to succeed. If you read memoirs or biographies of figures such as Walt Disney, Alfred Hitchcock, Barack Obama, Ronald Reagan and others, the common thread will be that they continually failed on different things until they finally became successful in their field. The misconception that being vulnerable is bad could not be farther from the truth. Being vulnerable will help us be the best version of ourselves.

In my personal experience with vulnerability, I could cite the example of my classroom and *Inside Out*, but since I covered that; I want to talk about something in my personal life. I had a twin brother that passed away a few years back. His wife was not fit to raise their son, so I ended up taking care of him. Because my nephew spent about two months with no real adult supervision, he started to misbehave and even had some drug problems. I ended up bringing him to my house to live with me and my two sons. I had recently gone through an extremely painful divorce and I was taking care of my sons on my own. I was doing fine but yes; I did not want to show vulnerability in front of them. I was the man in charge; I had everything under control, and I could not falter in front of them. For all intents and purposes, I was their leader. At first, I tried to be stern with my nephew and it did not work. He kept challenging me. This was about the same time I watched the movie *Inside Out*. Just like in my classroom, this movie connects to everything. I decided to use the movie to my advantage. In a way my sons and nephew were my guinea pigs for what I would do in my classroom later. One night, my nephew got home late and I was waiting for him. He was in very bad shape so I helped him to his room and did not say anything else to him.

The next day as we had breakfast, I announced we would not go to school or work that day. We spent the day at Six Flags (a theme park) and then watched a movie. The day was great. We got home and instead of going to sleep, I told them I wanted to talk to them. I asked them about their favorite part of their day. The catch was that they had to use one of the emotions from the movie *Inside Out*. Obviously, all their emotions were ‘joy’ and ‘fear’ when it came to rollercoasters. From there, I took them to their emotions for the week. I offered the added incentive of receiving some money or no chores if they participated. I started by saying in the last month I had experienced the emotion of ‘fear’ when my nephew did not come home early or when I knew he was doing drugs because I did not want to lose him just like I had lost my brother. I became vulnerable in front of their eyes. My sons looked worried, but I had to show how I felt because at this point, I was at risk of losing them too if I did not show that there were consequences to my nephew’s behavior. My nephew participated after my sons and I did. He explained what he felt and why. We started doing this every night after dinner.

At first, I offered incentives and then after a month, I stated I would not do it anymore. By then, they were used to it and they continued to do it on their own. I could hear them watching television or using their phones and discussing their days with the use of the movie and mentioning their emotions. Soon enough, my nephew invited me to participate again. This became a family tradition. By then, I started using it in the school too. Soon, *Inside Out* was all over my life; I was using it for everything I could to great results. My nephew started talking more to us and to this day, he is doing much better. We collaborated to make sure that he was successful; He recently finished high school against all odds, and he is a happier version of himself. I tend to joke that *Inside Out* saved my nephew’s life but now I know that vulnerability did too.

Benefits of Vulnerability Leadership

As stated by Emma Seppala, Vulnerability has positive benefits in leadership. I enjoyed reading about the example of CEO Archana being ready to give up her company and lay off most of all her employees since the company was failing only to discover that her employees were loyal and saw her as part of her family. Together, they all collaborated and managed to save the company and have Archana continue to be a successful effective leader. Seppala went on to explain how vulnerability is at the very root of all human emotion or connection and how we need to be vulnerable and authentic.

Bringing this back to my examples. I was vulnerable at work as my students' leader and I was vulnerable at home as my sons and nephew's leader. I was authentic and what I did resonated with them. It made me not only be a good leader for them but helped me help them be successful. That is what being a leader is all about. That is why collaboration is key. We want to be successful leaders and achieve exceptional results, but we want the people following us to also be successful and also achieve their own exceptional results as well. Being a vulnerable leader will do exactly that: It will help us be successful, together.

I want to speak about another personal example from my current job. I am currently serving as the Social Media and Engagement Manager for an online educational organization. When I first got the job, many people were upset because they felt I did not deserve it. My CEO gave me the job after I had a conversation with her about our lack of social media presence. She did not give me the job; I phrased that wrong: she created the job for me. Before that, I was a Student Success Advisor, helping students with their career paths. My CEO explained that she needed someone to supervise the Student Success Advisors so she would make me their manager and combine that with social media.

Once I started with my new job, I was directly supervising all the other Student Success Advisors and they did not react well to it. A few days before, I had just been one more of them, Now, I was their supervisor. They were not happy. I knew I had a huge obstacle to overcome. Again, the movie Inside Out came to my rescue. I started incorporating the movie in our weekly meetings. I started making mistakes on purpose (without even knowing about vulnerability). These were not huge mistakes that could get me fired; simple mistakes to get their attention. When they notice, they would point them out and then I would use the emotions of the movie to tell them that I was overwhelmed. I explained to them I needed their help if we wanted to be successful. I showed my emotions and the fact that I was making mistakes because I was working on my own and alienated from them. Little by little, they started to volunteer to help. We used the emotions of the movie and I started to delegate activities they could do for me while I also took some of their duties away and absorbed them into mine. We started a successful collaboration, and I would always tell them I wanted to stay out of their way and that I was not their boss. I was their supervisor yes but having been one of them, I knew they did not need me babysitting them. Instead, I would focus on the social media aspect of my role and just hear their reports during our weekly meetings. This has worked in my favor. They are their own managers. We created a set of guidelines to follow; we all collaborated. I took some of their duties that were more pertaining to social media and I pretty much let them do their own thing. They meet with me once a week, but everything has been working out. They trust me and I trust them; we are not afraid of crucial conversations either and are always honest with one another. My CEO is happy with what I have done and as of right now, things have been almost perfect. I wanted to speak about this because when I decided this was my path, another manager advised against it. He stated he would never ‘relinquish’ power like that and that managers were supposed to

manage and decide for others. Well, I decided to trust them and to show them how vulnerable I was, and it worked better than expected. Finally, I must say this happened before I even knew about the power of being vulnerable as a leader. This is one of the reasons why this module has resonated with me as much. I can see that vulnerability truly is a must for any effective leader.

Conclusion

I honestly believe vulnerability should be a requirement for any leader. We should never assume that being vulnerable means being weak. Being vulnerable means being human and by being human we connect with the people we lead. We are not relinquishing power or giving up our duties, we are collaborating with them and making sure that we achieve something, together. By being vulnerable, we are trusting each other to do what it takes (together) to be successful in whatever our crucial endeavor is.

References

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