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Vulnerable Leadership: Breaking Down Walls to Build Up Firms

Gabrielle E. Gordon

According to the Harvard Business Review, 58% of employees trust strangers more than their bosses.¹ In a corporate leadership sense, keeping up with the Joneses has caused leaders across companies to lose authenticity. Vulnerability is a vital leadership trait that increases company trust and profitability. Leaders can increase in vulnerability as they delegate authority, express emotion, and share mistakes.

Trust is Key

“Work hard, be professional, and do not show your weakness.” The current business culture in America requires strict professionalism, and such environments discourage a close sense of trust in a company. Why is trust important? When trust resides in a company, the company performs better. Employee performance quality and efficiency increase as employees gain trust in their leaders.²

In order for employees to feel their bosses are genuinely trustworthy is through vulnerable leadership.³ Consequently, a *lack* of vulnerability quickly diminishes any trust an employee will have in her boss, thus filtering into company processes.

The positive effects of increased trust are numerous and each provide attractive benefits. Trust is linked with closeness. Teams of employees who build trust with their leaders will also likely be more diverse. The level of trust within a company makes itself evident in the exterior functioning of a company. Additionally, trust strengthens a company’s credibility to outsiders.⁴

What is Vulnerability?

Traditionally, bosses are expected to be the perfect face of a leader for their employees to see. However, the need for perceived perfection comes with a price to pay. Instead of this fragile strength that comes with fake perfection, vulnerability is sincere openness. In corporate terms, to be vulnerable as a business leader is to have stripped-down dialogue with employees, which creates an environment that is comfortable, understanding, and safe.⁵

¹ Twaronite, Karyn. 2016. Harvard Business Review. July 22. Accessed October 28, 2020.

<https://hbr.org/2016/07/a-global-survey-on-the-ambiguous-state-of-employee-trust>.

² Brown, Sarah, Daniel Gray, Jolian McHardy, and Karl Taylor. 2015. "Employee trust and workplace performance." *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 361-378.

³ Nienaber, Ann-Marie, Marcel Hofeditz, and Philipp Daniel Romeike. 2015. "Vulnerability and trust in leader follower relationships."

⁴ Younie, Louise. 2016. "Vulnerable leadership." *London Journal of Primary Care* 37-38.

⁵ Couris, John D. 2020. "Vulnerability: The Secret to Authentic Leadership Through the Pandemic." *Journal of Healthcare Management* 248-251.

Some think vulnerable leadership and strong leadership are not mutually exclusive—but that is not the case. In fact, leaders who can maintain strong visions while being open tend to be the best at creating environments where employees flourish.⁶ Although vulnerability is a trait, it can be cultivated over time. Vulnerable leaders exhibit these three practices: share burdens, express emotions, and communicate mistakes.

1) Sharing Authority

Delegation is key to vulnerable leadership. Leaders are known to be in control and carry the observed fate of a company on their shoulders, but this can be detrimental to success. As leaders begin to rely on their employees and give away control, they begin to gain employee trust. Two main types of authority vulnerability exist: disclosure and reliance.⁷

Disclosure vulnerability is a leader's willingness to communicate with her employees regarding pertinent company information. Parents and children discuss important information with each other to build trust—mentors are forthright and honest regarding truths of the real world with their novices. Employees are encouraged and inspired when bosses discuss the important information.

Reliance vulnerability is a leader's willingness to share her burden of responsibility. Bosses are an active part of a team and thus have a golden opportunity to rely more heavily on their teammates. As leaders discuss crucial responsibilities with employees, opportunities are created for employees to demonstrate competency and reliability. Employees will feel empowered and confident after being given important obligations.

Leaders who openly increase the delegation of responsibilities will create trust throughout a company. Included in reliance vulnerability is the sharing of outcomes. Leaders need to be willing to let go of complete responsibility for both positive and negative company outcomes.⁸ The result is a united, confident cohort of employees who will be motivated to take greater ownership of their work.

2) Expressing Emotions

Expressing emotions might be the vulnerable leadership trait met with the most resistance. In today's world, the conversation around mental health is rapidly increasing. Here, however, the topic of expressing emotions comes from business reasoning.

⁶ "Vulnerable leadership"

⁷ "Vulnerability and trust in leader-follower relationships."

⁸ Lasater, Kara. 2016. "School Leader Relationships: The Need for Explicit Training on Rapport, Trust, and Communication." *Journal of School Administration Research and Development* 1-8.

A leader and employee with emotional bonding are much more likely to foster a trusting relationship in company affairs. Personal, one-on-one interaction is necessary for building trust between a leader and her employee. As employees are engaged in isolated moments with their bosses alone, trust will grow.⁹

Emotional expression is centered around visions and concerns. If a boss keeps relevant opinions tucked away in her office, her employees miss out on important direction. In order to perform efficiently, employees must understand how their leader feels about company operations, progress, and outcomes.

Communicating about concerns helps companies move through problems more swiftly. Leaders must express their emotions regarding company progress to help employees redirect in an efficient manner. Additionally, as leaders show openness in communication about concerns, employees will follow.¹⁰ A company's turnaround rate after problems will be quicker as open-dialogue environments are created.

3) **Communicating Mistakes**

Leaders are not perfect, leaders have never been perfect, and leaders will never be perfect. Hiding the imperfections of leaders creates a company culture that shames mistakes. However, just as any intern, parent, student, athlete, and human has learned, significant lessons are learned from mistakes. A key component to vulnerable leadership is openly sharing and discussing personal mistakes.¹¹

Employees follow the communication patterns of their bosses. Think of a new intern or hire at a major firm. If she perceives the firm to be mistake-free, she will likely cover any error she makes. In doing so, major learning opportunities are lost and residual impacts of the mistakes remain unattended. However, if the new intern or hire knows that mistakes are common, she will be open with communicating her errors.

As leaders teach employees to communicate about mistakes, employees will learn more, save the company money, and innovate at a faster pace. Open dialogue around mistakes will invite knowledgeable people to the conversation. Once an employee is taught the correct method, costly mistakes will be avoided. Knowledge acquires knowledge. An employee who learns from a mistake is likely to innovate.

Now What?

⁹ "Vulnerability and trust in leader-follower relationships."

¹⁰ Meyer, Frauke, Deidre M Le Fevre, and Viviane MJ Robinson. 2017. "How leaders communicate their vulnerability: implications for trust building." *The International Journal of Educational Management* 221-235.

¹¹ "How leaders communicate their vulnerability: implications for trust building."

As with any goal, plans are necessary to attain highest performance. Bosses must allocate time to plan out the beginning stages of vulnerable leadership. Employees can give open, honest feedback to employers about the current state of a leader's vulnerability. From there, leaders must intentionally incorporate vulnerability. Such plans look like vision trainings, one-on-one meetings with employees, and increased delegation.

Vulnerability is open communication between leader and team. The openness created as a result of vulnerability drastically increases productivity. Productivity drives profitability. When properly prioritized, vulnerability offers premium benefits—including increased profitability—to leaders of every kind. Regardless of company size, leadership position, or industry type, vulnerability is the key to success.