

VULNERABILITY IS A VIRTUE

Authenticity is an endearing and enduring characteristic that leaders should adopt – **Merilee Kern**

When it comes to leaders demonstrating vulnerability, executives are understandably concerned about optics. If you google the definition of ‘vulnerability,’ the very first result presented is ‘susceptible to physical or emotional attack or harm...’

With this decidedly ominous and predominant denotation, it’s no wonder that it has taken a seismic shift – namely a threat to humanity itself in the form of a global pandemic – to prompt the C-suite to get out of its comfort zone collectively and reveal more of its true self...

Fortune does favour the bold, and those leaders who’ve taken that leap of faith to reveal a humbler and more human part of themselves have hit perception pay dirt. Famed neurologist Sigmund Freud predicted as much, having famously mused: “Out of your vulnerabilities will come your strength.”

This is a notion with a few interpretations and applications for business leaders. One is the intimation that the very act of exposing one’s true self inherently builds strength of character, proffering valuable self-improvement.

Another elucidation, which can certainly exist in tandem with the first, is that operating in a more revealing manner will have an emotional impact on others who will then regard you more favourably and fortify your support base.

The idea here is that by demonstrating vulnerability in your actions and choices, you as a person will be deemed courageous, approachable, relatable, honest, optimistic, transparent, grounded or a litany of other highly coveted personal image pursuits.

Leaders who unabashedly show their vulnerable side are also often believed to be honourable. In this day and age where heroes become zeroes with the click of a mouse, there are few greater virtues than being considered someone who is fair and does the right thing always – and not discretionally.



Honourable leadership presents many opportunities to function in a more positively vulnerable way.

For example, by asking more questions (and valuing inputs) rather than dictating, as well as forgiving mistakes rather than punishing, and then parlaying these situations into learning and growth opportunities for all involved, leaders gain invaluable respect and trust.

Of course, a leader who is willing to own wholly and acknowledge his or her mistakes is upheld by many as being noble and can proffer major dividends to the people. But doing so can feel as if he or she is going against the grain for leaders who are used to presenting a more polished and perfect front.

However, embracing this discomfort is advisable since doing so can spur opportunity.

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“People and organisations don’t grow in a zone of comfort; we grow, progress and evolve in a zone of discomfort,” notes Founder of Giant Leap Consulting Bill Treasurer. He adds: “So a leader has to role model courage by doing hard, scary and challenging things, and then help the rest of us do those things too.”

And a leader conceding to fear or anxiety in the face of adversity can also be endearing to constituents. “The more transparent a leader can be, the safer, more secure and more trusting those being led will feel,” notes Founder of Wayne Technologies Mike Cohen.

He explains: “A leader who can share with their employees where they are, for better or worse, will be able to connect with their employees, gain that crucial buy in to the mission and establish a sense of trust that will oftentimes increase retention even in the face of adversity.”

When a leader makes mistakes, it presents an opportunity not only to score popularity points by admitting the same but also showcases an aptitude for being agile and knowing how to adeptly pivot as obstacles present themselves. In fact, failure at large can make a leader that much more relatable, serving as a salient silver lining.

“I think it is courageous to fail,” says CEO of Women Presidents Organization (WPO) Camille Burns.

“A leader’s ability to change after mistakes or failures inspires trust and motivates a team. It is particularly important to be able to reset after a disappointing setback. You need to own what is not perfect. You also need to own that what you learned is a result of failure,” she observes.

This kind of admission and ownership also speaks to authenticity, which is another key perception point gained by leaders aptly displaying vulnerability. They are often regarded as being ‘real.’

It involves operating (speaking, presenting information and making decisions) in a way that may not necessarily reflect well on themselves or their past decisions when taken at face value but upholds their spirit of honesty and integrity even at the risk of undermining their own self-interests.

Being willing to take that proverbial bullet for your people can perhaps inspire loyalty like none other. Founder and CEO of MonetizeMore Kean Graham concurs that vulnerable leadership requires honesty even at your own expense. He proposes that it’s a form of authenticity that “breeds followers who would die for their leader.”

Meanwhile, the CEO and Founder of Live Authentically Pamela Savino says: “If people witness a leader’s willingness to step into vulnerable territory, harbouring a spirit of authenticity and growth, they will be more willing to do so themselves ... a leader’s actions set the tone and pave the way for others’ behaviours.”

Chief Acquisitions Officer of Core Spaces Andrew Wiedner explains that “when you’re unafraid to expose your own flaws and weaknesses, it inspires others to do the same and allows trust to be built within your teams and organisation.”

Some assert that the kind of authenticity these vulnerable behaviours breed trumps bravery. “I think it’s important for leaders to



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appear courageous but being credible and authentic are at least equally important... but arguably more so,” asserts CEO of enterprise software developer IFS Darren Roos.

He elaborates: “I think it’s important not to be afraid to show vulnerability at times like these because people want honesty and transparency more than they want bluster and bravado. It’s inevitable many will realise that you don’t have all the answers, and acknowledging this and retaining their trust will be more important than appearing infallible.”

“A leader who is prepared to show his or her vulnerability and still show up to get the job done is more likely to be perceived as being courageous than a leader who presents as a fearless idiot,” Roos adds.

Executive leadership trainer – and author of Level Up Leadership: Six Factor Leadership – Dr. Michael Provitera notes: “Leadership courage may fail and it’s important to be an authentic leader, understanding that failure is an option. It happens and leaders must deal with it frankly and in an open manner... The key is to be an authentic leader that knows his or her courage limitations.”

He clarifies that when leaders know their authentic selves, not only do they project courage and honesty but also become more humane in doing so: “The key is to practise the habit of not having to be right all the time. In my own experience, this is sadly a difficult feat for all too many business leaders.”

When it’s genuine, showing vulnerability can foster a magnificent melange of respect, admiration, empathy and loyalty that cultivates the strength of leadership that simply cannot be achieved or emulated any other way. It’s mass bonding in a highly pure form, which is what makes the effect so powerful and indelibly worthy of pursuit.

