

VULNERABILITY: GIVING AWAY POWER

WHAT IS VULNERABILITY?

Whenever I work with a team of people and ask them what comes to mind when I say, 'vulnerability', most of the responses are negative. Those adverse responses are magnified if there are any current or former military in the audience. Military folks tend to relate vulnerability to weakness and even something to be exploited in an opponent or enemy. So, when I suggest vulnerability as the first (and arguably primary) mindset of the servant leader, there is considerable pushback.

The definition of vulnerability (paraphrased) is *the quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed either physically or emotionally*. Well, no wonder there's so much resistance to this idea, especially from a leadership perspective. Generally speaking, we humans try to avoid harmful situations both physically and emotionally. And leaders are humans so they suffer from this same ailment.

Yet I keep coming back to this idea of vulnerability. I feel like it has to do with bringing our most real and true self to everything that we do, in a meaningful way. The dictionary defines authentic as "representing one's true nature or beliefs" but for me, my true nature and beliefs were not aligned with servant leadership. So if 'keeping it real' is a part of vulnerability, I need to be authentic – not just authentic to who I am (because let's face it sometimes I can be an authentic jerk), but an authentic servant leader. I don't want to *act* like a servant leader but rather I want to work and grow so that my authentic self becomes a servant leader. And this work requires vulnerability.

Also, vulnerability has to be meaningful. In other words, the way we connect with people has to be purposeful and significant. Oftentimes, we find it easy to be vulnerable with people that we like, know and trust but find it more difficult to be vulnerable with people that we loath. The servant leader exercises the mindset of vulnerability with all.

Brené Brown, in an April, 21 2013 article on Forbes.com, says,

"Vulnerability is basically uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure. I was raised in a get her done and suck it up family and culture. The tenacity and grit part of that upbringing has served me but I wasn't taught how to deal with uncertainty or how to manage emotional risk. I spent a lot of years trying to outrun or outsmart vulnerability by making things certain, definite, black and white, good and bad. My inability to lean into the discomfort of vulnerability limited the fullness of those important experiences that are rocked with uncertainty: love, belonging, trust, joy and creativity to name a few. Learning how to be vulnerable has been a street fight for me but it's been worth it."

It might be strange to think about love and belonging when you think about work, but knowing how much time each of us spends in the workplace and knowing how much every single human being really wants to be a part of something bigger than them, 'love and belonging' make a lot of sense. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could find more belonging and feel more attached to something bigger than ourselves at work where we spend so much of our time? Vulnerability is where it all starts.

Notice Brené Brown mentions "emotional exposure". I think this is the core of the issue for leaders. My guess is leaders do not fear for their lives physically but rather they fear *emotional exposure*. Baked into this fear, is a fear of failure. This is not about 'being emotional' at work. I am talking about the fears that come up when a leader thinks of being more authentic and creating meaningful connections. In essence, this is giving away some power because whenever you show more of who you are, you will feel exposed.

One of the key differentiators between the Traditional Leader and Servant Leader is the sharing of power. To share power, the leader must be ready and willing to become vulnerable.

The leader who simply cannot empower her direct reports because of fear they will mess up...she has a vulnerability issue.

The manager who chooses to never ask for input...he has a vulnerability issue.

The sales executive who refuses to distribute leads and keeps them all to themselves...has a vulnerability issue.

In each scenario, some sort of fear drives the leader. Maybe the fear is that the direct report will mess up the project and make the leader look bad.

Maybe that manager never asks for input because he unknowingly believes a leader should be seen as having all the answers.

And that sales executive? This is a classic fear of the results of someone else's poor performance.

PRACTICE

There are ways you can begin to practice adopting a vulnerable mindset and the first way is simply knowing and expressing your actual wants and needs versus what you think people think you want. I believe this is a simple truth, but not an easy one.

First, this requires you to actually know what you want! You may have to think a bit about your wants in certain situations. Then, this approach requires you to have some courage to say what you mean and to do so in a kind, effective way.

The importance of knowing what you want and expressing it is it keeps you out of the controlling zone. So often when you refrain from sharing your truest self it is because you are afraid of or wanting to avoid someone's reaction to your truest self. All my life I withheld what I really wanted and needed in the name of being nice and accommodating. But underneath it's rather aggressive because it's an act of control. I want to control the environment and your reaction to it so I don't have to deal with the fallout. As a result, my needs continue to go unmet and resentment grows.

Take time to know what you want, how you really feel about a thing and only respond honestly. If you can't respond honestly with kindness, decline to respond. I do this all the time.

The second way you can practice vulnerability now is you can ask for help. One of the biggest ways you can show vulnerability and 'share power' with those you lead, is to simply admit that you need help that you don't know everything.

Have you ever been in a conversation with a boss, were questioned and pretended to know the answer? Especially when inside you knew you did not know the answer? How about as a leader? I'm sure there are many times you've been put on the spot. Is the temptation high to have an answer...right away...every time...even if you don't actually know the answer?

Why do we do this? If you're like me then you unknowingly associated being a good leader with having all the answers. If you have to pretend that you know all the answers there is no way that you can show up as vulnerable which means you cannot create significant, meaningful and purposeful relationships. Besides, a know-it-all leader is perceived as closed off to new ideas and new approaches, which works against meaningful connection

Let's stop. Instead, let's say, "I need to get back to you on that – I want to be sure to get you an accurate answer." This response indicates you don't know it all, yes, but it also communicates that you care enough about the relationship to get them the best answer.

The third way you can practice vulnerability starting today is to simply listen to others without judgment. It is so hard to do this. I'll be honest; many times when someone's talking, I'm immediately thinking of how I can fix their problem, what's wrong with what they're saying and so on. Instead if I can listen with curiosity, I get out of judgment and find the opportunity to engage by asking meaningful follow up questions.