LEARNING TO LEAD WITH VULNERABILITY

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“There is nothing to leadership. All you do is stand up in front of a group and bleed.”
- Me, co-opting Hemingway

Leadership can sneak up on you. We read the books and take the classes and get the coaching. And then we get the job. Not the leader behind the scenes, but the leader out in front, putting our neck on the line every day. Because “everyone’s a leader” (which is true, if cliché), we don’t always fully appreciate that there are different shades of leadership. With each shade comes different expectations. And when we move from one shade to another, we might not be prepared for the shift in increased visibility and vulnerability.

We’ve gotten contradictory messages over the years about what makes a strong leader, two of the most prevalent being “never let them see you sweat,” and “vulnerability is strength.” It’s fortunate that the latter seems to be outperforming the former in popularity. The vulnerability conversation has reached the mainstream, thanks to persuasive messages coming from researchers such as Brené Brown (whose TEDTalk has garnered almost 27 million views).

As long as you’re in the informal leadership role, you can imagine what a powerful leader you would be (“If I were in charge…!”) without the vulnerability of the truth.

When we step into formal leadership, everyone finds out how good we really are, including ourselves. How do we handle being front and center, especially if we’re used to being behind the scenes? What if we have the strong desire to lead, but feel repelled by the white-hot spotlight that goes with it?

To be vulnerable means to really let people see and hear you for who you are. It’s about not just feeling discomfort, but sometimes leading with discomfort. You don’t hide what you’re feeling. Instead, you let the feelings become information that influences the big picture. And you are willing to put those internal thoughts, feelings, and beliefs out there in the open in service of moving things forward.
Introverts in particular are aware of the shift that happens when the internal is called to be external (which is another way of looking at vulnerability). What was private is now public and open to scrutiny. Here are a few ways we can walk that line without feeling completely drained and exposed by the demands of leadership.

**Be compassionate with yourself.** I use an expression, “space and grace,” to remind me of how I want to treat myself when I’m in a sensitive place. It’s an invitation to give yourself space to feel everything you feel and to decide what’s relevant to share and what remains private. Grace manifests as forgiveness. It’s reminding yourself that you’re not perfect and releasing judgment about every little decision, every little word you say. It doesn’t mean you never apologize for sticking your foot in your mouth, but rather you can offer that sincere apology without forever carrying around the accompanying shame.

**Define success in such a way that doesn’t depend on outside measurements.** As leaders, we’re always going to have to work according to benchmarks and accountability measures that are determined by others. But there’s strength in having your own definition of success, one that is more about living and leading in alignment with your core values. That personal definition can help you ride the waves of external success and failure with more ease. No matter what’s happening around you, you know you acted in accordance with your priorities.

**Honor your energy and rhythms.** Leadership is always going to be demanding that you step outside your comfort zone. For that very reason, learn to spend ample time within your comfort zone, so you have the energy to step outside of it (or better yet, stretch it so that it encompasses more experiences). Even – and especially – if you are comfortable with vulnerability, there’s always a risk of a vulnerability hangover. Know where the line is and establish your personal boundaries. Just like every other strength, there are expressions of healthy vulnerability and unhealthy vulnerability. If you find yourself moving over into the unhealthy side, which leads to less resilience against inevitable criticism and more self-doubt, find a way to return to center (such as your personal definition of success) and use your comfort zone as a launching pad for a pivot.

**Let go of your expectations and attachment to outcomes.** One of the reasons we feel so vulnerable is that we’ve set ourselves up with particular expectations. Often those expectations are much more rigorous that what others project onto us. Our ego wants us to do well, to succeed in whatever way we’ve defined that. So if we can honor and respect what our ego hopes for while releasing attachment to it actually happening, then we are also loosening the pressure valve that causes stress and burnout.

**At the end of the day, it’s not about you.** I’ve found a lot of inspiration in a tweet that was shared by actor Jim Carrey earlier this year. If you didn’t know it was him in the picture, you wouldn’t recognize him. It was a simple black and white photo, and at the top it said “I am nothing.” At the bottom, it continued, “What a relief.”

Being a leader can cause us to believe our own hype. We come to think the sun rises and sets on our performance, and the way people respond is our responsibility. In reality, there are a million (probably literally!) factors that influence outcomes and reactions. Embrace the idea that in the scheme of the universe, you are nothing. You are doing your best to make a positive contribution, to make people’s lives a little bit easier. Whatever happens isn’t about you; it’s a reflection of the system within which you work and lead. Do your best, then let it go.

There’s freedom in realizing that being vulnerable doesn’t equal walking around with your heart on your sleeve and a box of tissues. It simply means that you’re willing and able to lead with more openness and creativity. You’re more resilient because you make the human connections necessary to nurture a culture of
empathy. When you let them see you sweat, they’ll let you see them sweat. Transparent communication is more likely to happen in a culture that values healthy vulnerability. And think of how many crises could be averted if people just learned to tell the truth to one another.

That’s the power of vulnerability and why it’s worth embracing.

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Beth Buelow, PCC, is the author of *“The Introvert Entrepreneur: Amplify Your Strengths and Create Success on Your Own Terms”*. She is the founder of The Introvert Entrepreneur, a space where introverts gain insight, support, and empowerment. Beth helps introverts (and those who live, work, and play with them) understand and appreciate what it means to be an “innie” in an “outtie” world. Not sure if you’re an introvert? Find out by taking our [Innie or Outtie Quiz!](https://www.legalleadershipinstitute.com/innie-outtie-quiz)