LEARNING TO LEAD WITH VULNERABILITY

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Resilience:

1: the capability of a strained body to recover its size and shape after deformation caused especially by compressive stress
2: an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change

Over the past 40 years, there has been a growing body of research about resilience. The definitions above capture what most of us imagine resilience to be. But what are the traits that make someone resilient? And are there any particular traits that are especially important to introverts as leaders?

I recently attended a presentation on resilience and as part of it, we all took a quick self-assessment to gauge where we fell on the spectrum. I scored high on the areas of self-belief, emotional control, flexibility, and purpose. Those results didn’t surprise me; my introvert tendencies for introspection and focus serve me well in those areas. My area of weakness was also not a surprise: support seeking.

We know intellectually that when we are in a tough spot or facing a challenge, it’s beneficial to reach out to others for help. There are a couple of things that get in the introverted leader’s way, however. First, we process internally. We introverts tend to do our best thinking when given space and solitude. We definitely take other people’s ideas and opinions into consideration, but we prefer to synthesize and process the information alone and without interruption.

This might appear to others like the introverted leader isn’t consulting with others, or will emerge with “The Answer” without buy-in from those involved. It can appear that we are working in isolation. Without clear and transparent communication, employees might feel left out of the process and like leadership is not telling the whole story.

Second, our independent streak cuts both ways. It means that as leaders we can take a stand and be the confident designated representative of the whole. It also means we might think we must do it all ourselves.
When confronted with a problem, our default is often to try to figure it all out alone. It takes a lot of energy to bring others into the loop, so we will go it alone sometimes longer than is practical. In the most extreme cases, asking for help is the last resort.

Our independent tendencies can lead to introverted leaders feeling more acutely the saying, “It’s lonely at the top.” Who can you turn to? Who can you trust? Who can understand the challenges you’re facing? Who can support you but not drain your energy?

As I said, we know intellectually and rationally that asking for support is essential. It’s a key contributor to our resilience. But for some leaders, asking for help can be perceived as energy draining (by introverts) at best, or weak (by all) at worst.

Resilience coach and researcher Carole Pemberton developed a Resilience Questionnaire that measures the levels of one’s resilience in eight different areas. Of interest to us is her definition of the trait of “support seeking” as the availability of emotional support, as well as the opportunities to offer support to others.

There isn’t necessarily a safe, built-in network of peer leaders in the workplace. Too often, the leader is viewed as apart from the group and not welcome in the bonding that happens through commiseration, healthy gossip and storytelling, venting, problem solving, and brainstorming. Therefore, leaders must be intentional about finding – frequently outside the office – trusted friends and colleagues who will listen during times of change.

In the normal course of business, extroverts naturally might have cultivated those networks that provide the support they need. Introverts might only realize they wish they had one – or a more extensive one – when they’re under pressure. Regardless of your energetic type, it’s important to be aware of the degree to which you reach out to others during times of stress or change. If you find yourself wishing you had “someone to talk to” or “someone who understood,” but no one comes to mind, it’s worth the effort to start identifying people that would fill that need.

There are a few places we can start. Supporters could come from your professional association locally or nationally. You might be more intentional about maintaining relationships with former colleagues who find themselves in similar leadership positions in other organizations. You may reach out to leaders in related sectors (such as politics, education, or consulting). Even being part of a virtual group has its benefits; you might form or join a mastermind group (this could be in person or online), become an active participant in a private discussion group of peers on LinkedIn, or simply schedule regular video conferencing calls with peers and mentors that keep you connected in conversation and sharing. Partnering with a leadership or executive coach also gives you a safe, consistent space to bring challenges and learn about resilience practices.

These are all preemptive measures that will set up the support system to catch you when you feel yourself start to fall. By forming your network before you need it, you can lessen the isolation you might feel. You have someone else who will say “I know what you mean.” You get a reality check when things are going topsy-turvy. You have a brainstorming partner for tough problems. You hear about the other person’s challenges and have an opportunity to offer your own hard-won wisdom. You can ask for advice or seek coaching. You can trade resources and share learning.

For some people, forming these relationships isn’t the hard part; that’s reserved for remembering to call on them in the heat of the moment. This is the special challenge for any introvert who likes to go it alone for as long
as possible. Do whatever you need to do to remind yourself of their availability. Make a “support network” contact list. Ask them to touch base if they haven’t heard from you in a while, just to say, “how’s it going?” And do the same with them! Reciprocity will strengthen the relationship and keep it top-of-mind. Make staying connected to these special people a habit and a priority.

Finally, while these suggestions focus on finding a support network outside of the office and your immediate team, there’s value in doing what you can to build mutual trust within your team so that you become one another’s day-to-day support. A culture of trust and respect will enable you to proactively say to your team, “I need your help” when a challenge arises. You can work together to co-create a solution, rather than feeling pressure to “be the leader” and fix it all yourself. This requires a bit of vulnerability, yes... but being real with your colleagues is an essential leadership practice if you want to build trust.

It can be lonely at the top, especially when times get rough. But it doesn’t have to be. Notice your own tendencies for reaching out or isolating. Reflect on your default tendency, and ask without judgment: How does that behavior serve me? How does it not serve me? What resources (mostly people) do I have available to support me? Am I connecting with them enough? If not, what can I do to strengthen, even formalize, those connections? How can I build more trust with my internal team so that we are willing and able to turn to one another for support?

We are all people who need people... even us introverts. Stretch yourself in service to developing your resilience. Do it for the sake of your own sanity and sustainability, as well as for the benefit of those who care about you.

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Beth Buelow, PCC, serves as a guide to introvert entrepreneurs who want to amplify their strengths and build sustainable, energetically aligned businesses. She is a professional coach, author, podcaster, and speaker, is based in the Pacific Northwest and serves introverts worldwide. She’s contributed to articles in The Wall Street Journal, Success Magazine, Inc, Entrepreneur, The Telegraph, and Psychology Today, among others. Beth is the author of “The Introvert Entrepreneur: Amplify Your Strengths and Create Success on Your Own Terms” (Penguin Random House, Nov 2015), which was named one of the 100 Best Business Books of 2015 by Inc.com.