

Being *Vulnerable*

"Water is fluid, soft and yielding. But water will wear away rock, which is rigid and cannot yield. As a rule, what is fluid, soft and yielding will overcome whatever is rigid and hard. This is another paradox: what is soft is strong." Lao-Tzu (600 BC)

People often think of courage as having the strength and bravery to go into battle (conquering kingdoms and slaying dragons along the way). Instead, in my work coaching leaders of organizations, I see the most courageous clients as being those who set down their shields and display their vulnerability. This is when great work happens!

Think of the times when asking for help may have left you feeling vulnerable or when you may have experienced regret after admitting a weakness or disclosing a need for personal development to others. This is very natural in a society that teaches that vulnerability represents weakness.



Yet, time and again I've seen employees walk over hot coals for leaders who

express vulnerability versus those who convey omnipotence. It is difficult to hook in at an emotional level with a leader who wears an armour of perfection. Much of my coaching work with executives involves supporting them in removing the Teflon layer of self-protection that gets in the way of their ability to lead from a place of true power. They are inevitably seen to be stronger leaders when they are willing to demonstrate vulnerability. This takes true courage!

Leaders who are able to effectively request support are seen as resourceful and strong individuals. When they demonstrate the humility to ask for help, they earn the respect of others. In turn, the leader who asks for help is strengthened by the very support that is provided.

When I start with a new client organization, I have little more than >

a sketchy agenda and have to work to build a high level of trust between the clients and myself. We are vulnerable with one another, and it requires willingness to work through considerable ambiguity to arrive at clarity. I love nothing more than working with courageous teams that are eager to look below the surface.

Don't get me wrong; it's not all about creating "Kumbaya" moments. One of the companies I've coached was recently named one of Canada's 50 Best Managed Companies. Four years ago, the owners realized that they needed to do things differently and they weren't sure what that would look like. They tried a nontraditional approach to business planning and did not have a

defined path. It paid off in spades. As they now embark on a path of growth and acquisition, they know that vulnerability is a key success factor to pack in their kit bag. They have learned that negotiating from this stance, rather than one of bravado, is the ticket to forging the most powerful and enduring business relationships.

So, how can you let down your guard and create your best impact? •

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