

Vulnerability: The Secret to Authentic Leadership Through the Pandemic

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I live by two key hallmarks of successful leadership: authenticity and vulnerability. Over my 30-year career, leading authentically and practicing vulnerability have helped me become a highly effective, accessible, connected, and honest leader. Most important, these attributes have helped me create a culture of open communication, collaboration, and innovation at Tampa General Hospital where I serve as president and CEO.

Author Brené Brown, PhD, LMSW, defines *vulnerability* as “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” (Brown, 2012, p. 34) and *authenticity* as “the daily practice of letting go of who we think we’re supposed to be and embracing who we are” (Brown, 2010, p. 50). But how are these traits—widely seen as signs of weakness—so important in business, especially in a time of crisis?

Emma Seppälä, PhD, codirector of the Yale College Emotional Intelligence Project, explains: “Brown describes vulnerability and authenticity as lying at the root of human connection. And, human connection is often dramatically missing from workplaces. . . . As leaders and employees, we are often taught to keep a distance and project a certain image. An image of confidence, competence, and authority. We may disclose our vulnerability to a spouse or close friend behind closed doors at night, but we would never show it elsewhere during the day, let alone at work” (Seppälä, 2019).

Embracing vulnerability did not come naturally for me. As a Boston native, I tended to be aggressive, extremely ambitious, and unemotional. At age 32, as vice president at BayCare Health System in Florida, I was driven by results and success, not culture or connection. I did not equate vulnerability or authenticity with strength or confidence.

Thankfully, I have matured over the past 20 years, and I attribute much of this personal growth to my journey toward vulnerability. The change did not come about consciously. I simply started to challenge myself to admit when I was wrong, I began to allow people to coach me, and I encouraged criticism and feedback. Over time, I discovered value in exposing my inequities and idiosyncrasies to my team. As I became kinder and more authentic, I started to realize the power of vulnerability in my leadership style, even when I made mistakes.

Gary S. Kaplan, MD, chairman and CEO of Virginia Mason Health System in Seattle, Washington, makes the following point: “If we create an environment in which managers

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and care team members are afraid of failing, we are not doing our jobs as leaders. We need to provide a supportive environment so that team members can feel safe when discussing their mistakes and lessons learned.” He explains, “A lack of transparency and, worse, a lack of accountability in leadership weaken an organization. As senior leaders, we must hold ourselves to the same or higher standards of accountability than we set for our management teams” (Kaplan, 2020, p. 15).

I have learned to coach my team in private and praise them in public. Of course, there have been stumbles along the way. A few years ago, I led a meeting with 350 team members, and the audio-visual equipment did not work. I became frustrated and called out my chief of staff in front of everyone. A few reflective minutes later, I stopped the presentation to apologize. Why? Because it was the right thing to do. Leaders often think they are above admitting their mistakes. I believe that when you are wrong, you must say you are wrong. That is where truly authentic power lies.

LEANING INTO VULNERABILITY

Culture comes from the top, so when you open up, your team opens up. At that point, you muster a force to meet any challenge.

Jeff Polzer, a professor of organizational behavior at Harvard University, describes the power of vulnerability. “People tend to think of vulnerability in a touchy-feely way, but that’s not what’s happening,” he suggests. “It’s about sending a really clear signal that you have weaknesses, that you could use help. And if that behavior becomes a model for others, then you can set the insecurities aside and get to work, start to trust each other, and help each other. If you never have that vulnerable moment, on the other hand, then people will try to cover up their weaknesses, and every little microtask becomes a place where insecurities manifest themselves” (Coyle, 2018, p. 104).

Fostering a supportive environment that values and cares for its team members is the necessary foundation for a thriving and engaged organization. By demonstrating vulnerability, with kindness added, you are creating a safe space for others to communicate and collaborate, and in some cases, coach up.

At Tampa General Hospital, I try to put vulnerability into action every day and show my own willingness to learn. I shadow my staff four times a month. I clean floors and toilets, transport patients, make beds, deliver meals, and shadow physicians on rounds. I ask for feedback, welcome criticism, and work with my team to find solutions to make their jobs easier and improve processes across the organization. During one of my shadow visits, for example, I was alerted to a problem with fitted sheets on patient beds. It was a fixable issue that created unnecessary challenges every day for the team. Together, we tried out many options until we found a more comfortable and compliant sheet that better served both patients and staff. Sometimes, a little thing makes a big impact.

My team needs to know that I care about them. Each and every job in the hospital matters. I am always willing to be authentic, vulnerable, and fully open to learning, failing, and everything in between. How can I ask them to be vulnerable if I am not willing to do the same? To get to that point, it is important for team members to understand their leaders.

That is why I host regular meetings with my team to share thoughts and show them what I am working toward. At the end of the day, your team should never have to guess where you stand.

Empowering team members means making them feel confident enough to take the initiative and make decisions. There is no better way to breed this confidence than by recognizing and rewarding team members who step up. They must know that their contributions, ideas, and opinions are not only valued but also linked directly to their success and the success of the organization.

VULNERABILITY IN CRISIS

Healthcare has experienced its share of change and disruption in recent years, but nothing exactly like a pandemic. COVID-19 provides the ultimate test to vulnerable and authentic leadership.

When a hurricane bears down on Florida, we have time to get ready for it—we can see it and feel it coming. From experience, we know the drill to prepare and protect. The arrival of COVID-19 was different. We could not fully foresee or truly imagine what was coming. Would we get sick? Would we put our own families at risk after caring for patients who are fighting for their lives against a mysterious new foe?

Caregivers must stay strong. That is what our communities expect. As the region's leading safety-net hospital, Tampa General Hospital has been on the front line of the pandemic battle from day one, providing specialized services for Florida's neediest populations and as a Level 1 trauma center. We are strong, but if there ever is a time to be scared, this is it.

It is important for us to acknowledge that we are all afraid of the unknown—of what has come, and of what may come over the weeks and months ahead. We need to own the fear, and it is the responsibility of healthcare leaders to listen to the fears of their teams. If I do not have an answer, I say so. If I get emotional, I show it. If I feel fear, I own it. We are in this together, and we must be as open and honest as ever.

COVID-19 has underscored the importance of being vulnerable and showing authentic compassion for others in the workplace. In the early days of the crisis, a nursing colleague approached me in the cafeteria about a particular situation related to nonessential staff working from home. I shared her feedback with my team, and we instituted a policy change to address her concern. This individual felt empowered to come to me directly because I had shown myself to be a leader who was willing to listen and respond.

Whether little or big, challenges are opportunities to grow and learn, and the pandemic has reminded me to always be willing to show kindness as a person and as a leader.

CONCLUSION

Like many leaders, I used to fear vulnerability. But as we face the pandemic together, the rewards of authentic trust, innovation, collaboration, and connection that come from embracing vulnerability in our work become clear. Although there is no secret playbook to becoming vulnerable, the essential elements are as follows:

- Be transparent and honest.
- Let go of your ego.
- Ask your team for feedback. Encourage them to challenge you.
- Connect with yourself daily and express emotions.
- Have a sense of humor.
- Encourage vulnerability among your team members.
- Admit mistakes. Be willing to learn.
- Show kindness and empathy.

Brown (2018, p. 12) sums up these points very well. “If we want people to fully show up, to bring their whole selves including their unarmored, whole hearts so that we can innovate, solve problems, and serve people,” she writes, “we have to be vigilant about creating a culture in which people feel safe, seen, heard, and respected.” Her perspective certainly provides a model to live and lead by throughout this global pandemic, and I hope it serves as the legacy for my leadership.

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