

Could a Little Vulnerability be the Key to Better Leadership

By Carley Sime, 27 March 2019

Brené Brown is the go-to vulnerability expert. Her [books](#) are bestsellers and with her latest offering, [Dare To Lead](#), she turns her attention to the world of work. Vulnerability sometimes seems out of place when dropped into the work sphere but it really is powerful stuff. Vulnerability, as a resource in leadership and within the workplace, can impact the entire culture and creativity of a team. It can increase output, it can create a place for courage and is a strength that should be harnessed. Because of that, a whistle-stop recap on Brené's research with regards to the power of vulnerability in relation to the workplace is always helpful. Especially when it really might be the key to better leadership.

Brené defines vulnerability as uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure. If you replaced vulnerability at the beginning of that sentence with the word leadership it would define that quite well too. That is one of Brené's points, vulnerability and leadership go hand in hand. Both require us to take the risk of stepping forward and showing up in a forum that exposes us. When we're vulnerable and when we lead there aren't any guarantees that we will succeed. Risk and uncertainty are things leaders weather every day. Being vulnerable and leading while owning this vulnerable is brave work and you can't be courageous without being vulnerable. Perhaps it's fair to say that courage, vulnerability and leadership all go hand in hand in hand. If that's the case then vulnerable leaders are by far the most courageous.

Hopefully, looking at things from this lens will help eradicate the (at times) seemingly unmovable idea that vulnerability is a weakness. Brené discusses seeing vulnerability as courageous and strong in others but as a weakness in ourselves. An unhelpful double standard which prevents leaders from reaping the reward vulnerability brings to the workplace. What is the reward? Far greater creativity and innovation. Your team members are more likely to take risks, to try something new, to deal with the discomfort of failure being an option. Vulnerability can create space for "productive failure", as Brené terms it. A tricky thing for people to buy into but a way of thinking and working that turns failure into an opportunity to learn. When you know productive failure is a possibility you may be more inclined to be courageous and try and create something bigger and better despite the risks. When a workforce sees vulnerability named and shared by their leaders, and where they also acknowledge risks of failure but see it as an opportunity for learning they are likely to believe they can mirror some of that themselves.

For this to happen you're asking your team members and yourself to get rid of comfort though. Brené shares her thoughts that our tolerance for discomfort has been lost. She discusses the fact that for vulnerability to be an option then comfort has to be taken off of the table. This is because she doesn't see courage and comfort as being able to coexist. You can't be comfortable and courageous.



Brené suggests that leaders create a culture where discomfort is synonymous with moving in the right direction because it means we're all growing and challenging ourselves, our leaders and one another in a productive and beneficial way. Leaders can go on to normalize this for their workforce and also share their own discomfort too. Brené does acknowledge that the transition from comfort to discomfort asks a lot of people. However, she also points out that innovation and learning - both professionally and personally beneficial things - are often uncomfortable but so worth having.

Vulnerability isn't about letting all facets of ourselves show. It's not about exposing our deepest and darkest fears. Brené is very clear about vulnerability not being about letting it "all hang out". Leadership vulnerability is about sharing what's appropriate in the workplace and having some boundaries around what is helpful and apt and what isn't. This is because, as she explains it, vulnerability without boundaries is not vulnerability. Of course, every leader needs a place where they can "let it all hang out" and harness some sympathy or self-help. Vulnerability in the workplace isn't about that though.

Vulnerable leaders are ideally motivated to use and share their vulnerability to develop and grow into better leaders, to model the power of vulnerability and courage and create an environment where the workforce is able to do the same. Overarching this is hopefully a desire to progress and develop the organization and workforce.

Brené discusses challenges around leaders showing vulnerability as sometimes being different for female and male leaders. In her research, she has found that female leaders find it harder to be imperfect as when they are imperfect, are seen to sweat or openly find things challenging that it can fuel shame. For men, a perceived link between vulnerability and weakness is what makes it difficult to show. There is, in Brené's experience, less space for men to be vulnerable while still feeling worthy and good enough. She shares that vulnerability should never feel like something that demonstrates a person's lack of worth. For leaders who are able to be vulnerable and create a culture of productive failure, discomfort and ultimately great courage the personal and professional rewards are there. That doesn't mean it's an easy place to get to but it certainly seems more than worth it. To hear Brené discuss all of this in person you can find a short video [here](#).

