

Leadership: Strength through Vulnerability

“The deeper our faith, the more doubt we must endure; the deeper our hope, the more prone we are to despair; the deeper our love, the more pain its loss will bring: these are a few of the paradoxes we must hold as human beings. If we refuse to hold them in hopes of living without doubt, despair, and pain, we also find ourselves living without faith, hope, and love.”

Parker Palmer—A Hidden Wholeness

As Parker Palmer states, it is through our vulnerability to doubt, despair, and pain that we are able to fully experience the joys of faith, hope, and love. Imagine how shallow life would be if we were unwilling to accept the risk inherent in our vulnerability.

I would venture to say that most people define vulnerability as weakness. If we consider the term in the context of warfare or even business, vulnerability would imply that we have somehow failed to protect ourselves from harm. Whether harm comes in the form of a hostile business takeover or an enemy attacking an unprotected flank, the final analysis is that we, as business or military leaders, have failed. If we look for synonyms for the word vulnerable in a thesaurus, we find that they include the words weakness, defenselessness, and helplessness.

Contrary to this standard interpretation, vulnerability can also be a source of great strength if we are willing to see it differently. Recall the vivid image of an unidentified, unarmed, Chinese student standing alone while blocking the path of a Chinese military tank in Tiananmen Square during the Chinese worker and student uprising in 1989. This was a display of ultimate defenselessness and helplessness, but the message was one of incredible strength for people

around the world. Other great people like Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi have changed the course of nations by the strength derived from their willingness to be vulnerable.

Vulnerability is seldom discussed in relationship to leadership. Yet, a leader who refuses to be vulnerable will never fully achieve the strength and depth of his or her leadership potential.

There is no doubt that vulnerability, as displayed by the student in Tiananmen Square, involves risk. At times it involves great risk. As a business leader, being vulnerable may even put your professional career at risk. Some of us may be unwilling to suffer the harm that risk can bring. Others understand that the rewards derived from our vulnerability far exceed the potential risk. For exceptional leaders, it is their commitment to their core values and purpose that enables them to seek these rewards while enduring the risk.

Consider the issue of trust as it relates to leadership and vulnerability. Books on leadership mention trust as one of the critical factors in the leader-follower relationship. Most authorities would agree that without trust, leadership is at best ineffective, if not nonexistent. But trust involves a considerable degree of vulnerability on the part of a leader and follower. Trusting others can be potentially harmful, particularly if it proves to be unwarranted.

Those of us that have been emotionally harmed by trust feel violated. Our natural tendency is to disappear within our emotional selves and never to trust again. With time, as we recover from our deep cynicism, we ask the key question: "Will I ever again know whom to trust?" The answer is a disappointing Probably not! This may be a bitter pill to swallow, but if we are to develop a culture of trust, we, as leaders, must willingly trust others so that they may, in return, trust us. This is one of the paradoxes that, as Parker Palmer states, we, as human beings, (and leaders) must resolve. There are other, similar examples of the strength of vulnerability.

Choosing to no longer micromanage others is a great leap of faith that requires vulnerability on the part of the leader.

Intuitively, we may understand the negative effect that micromanaging has on staff motivation and creativity. Letting go is still a frightening experience because we have, in our own minds at least, placed the success of our organization in the hands of someone other than ourselves.

It is interesting to note that in cultures characterized by a command-and-control mentality there is a continuous downward spiral in staff morale and productivity. At the core of these cultures is a deep-seated lack of trust on the part of the leadership. Values are replaced with stringent rules and regulations. The team members, perceiving the scarcity of trust and lacking the guidance of values, are often immobilized by their inability to determine the right thing to do. Ironically, this inability to act results in loss of productivity, which the leadership views as a lack of adherence to the rules, and, consequently, more rules and regulations are created. Punishment for further disobedience becomes more severe.

How do we resolve this obvious contradiction, or cognitive dissonance, between our perceived need to trust and our fear of trust? The solution lies in our belief that never to trust again would be to deny ourselves the many meaningful experiences that trusting others can provide. In the final analysis, we are willing to trust in spite of the potential harm because we value the positive aspect of trust more than we fear the potential negative.

When trust is present within a business atmosphere, the employees are empowered to make decisions that will benefit the entire team. Trust can be felt. And it's an element that has the power to transform almost any individual and business. Try adding trust as a core value to your

business today. Watch how things change. Say “I trust you” often to your employees and loved ones through your actions and words. Build your business around trust.