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# CAREER DEVELOPMENT

## Five Benefits of Being Vulnerable

By Doreen Stern, Ph.D.

**T** rue confessions: I dream of being perfect. I picture every spiky hair on my head standing at attention as I make my way to the stage to deliver a humorous presentation titled, “How to Increase Your Confidence So You Seem Like a King or Queen.” Afterward I envision audience members clapping and circling me to ask questions.

Sure, I’ve delivered talks like that. But just as real is how flummoxed I felt yesterday at Starbucks, when I had trouble ejecting a DVD from my MacBook Pro. Seeing my distress, a friend hurried over and deftly pressed the triangle at the top of my laptop. Voilà, the disc appeared.

*What’s wrong with me?* I worried, feeling embarrassed that I’d appeared inept.

Yet executives like Walter Bettinger, CEO of the Charles Schwab Corporation, claim that the willingness to expose oneself is key to moving up the organizational ladder.

“You’ve got to open up to move up,” declares Bettinger, a former actuary.<sup>1</sup>

“It was more important than anything to share with people the great failures of my life as opposed to the successes,” he reveals.

“One of the things that was the most challenging for me was the confidence to open up,” Bettinger admits. “I’ve always been a relatively private person, and maybe with a natural tendency to assume that people don’t want to hear what [I] might have to say. ...”

“But one of the lessons I learned is that, in the transition from management to leadership, I had to open up. I had to be vulnerable. I had to share with people.”

Here’s why: “There’s a contractual relationship with your manager. And you can do your job and fulfill the terms of that contract and never really have your heart in it.”

“But leadership is something completely different. With leadership, you make a decision *every day* about whether you choose to follow someone. And you make it in your *heart*, not



your *head*. The ability to inspire followership is so different from management, and it requires *transparency, authenticity, and vulnerability*. ...”

### WHAT DO RESEARCHERS SAY ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF VULNERABILITY?

In 2010, before she became a consultant to corporations such as Google, Banana Republic and Morgan Stanley, along with being an *Oprah Magazine* contributor, I was one of Dr. Brené Brown’s Facebook friends. She’s a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. Shortly before her popular TEDx Talk, which has garnered more than 23 million views and is one of the top-five-watched TED Talks in the world,<sup>2</sup> Brown put out a Facebook request: “How do you define vulnerability?”

“Being willing to be seen as you are, warts and all,” I wrote back. “Asking for help when you need it, and saying when you don’t understand something. Being willing to look stupid.”

For her part, Brown uses four specific words to define vulnerability: “exposure, uncertainty, and emotional risk.”

“You can’t get to courage without walking through vulnerability.”

—Brené Brown

“Yes, feeling vulnerable is at the core of difficult emotions like fear, grief, and disappointment, but it’s also the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, empathy, innovation, and creativity.”

Furthermore, “when we shut ourselves off from vulnerability, we distance ourselves from the experiences that bring purpose and meaning to our lives.”<sup>3</sup>

#### HOW CAN BEING VULNERABLE HELP US BECOME MORE SUCCESSFUL AT WORK AND AT HOME, TOO?

Where vulnerability is concerned, most folks ask: “Why should I dare?” I can’t answer this question for you; however, I *can* share what I’ve decided for myself:

1. I’m more creative when I put less stock in what others think. When I let others’ perceptions shape my decisions, I shrink with each breath I take. Because what kind of life do I have when I live in fear of offending others, sticking out, or saying the wrong thing?
2. I get more of what I want when I tell people what that is. From a raise, to a job opportunity, to plans with my family and/or friends, it doesn’t serve me well to hide my preferences out of worry that I’ll get slammed for asking for what I want, especially since people generally respond to my requests based on *who they are*, and *their own beliefs*, over which I have *little* control.
3. I have closer relationships with my family, friends, co-workers and boss when I express my true feelings, thoughts, preferences and ideas. Sure, I worry that they’ll laugh at me, because somewhere in my neural pathways is the belief, “I’m not good enough”; but in truth, *I’m fine just the way I am*.
4. The only way I grow is when I say what I don’t know and ask for help. For example, during my doctoral studies I once taped a note on the office door of a professor at Dartmouth College, admitting that I was stumped about statistics. “I have to be good at it to pass my Comprehensive Exams,” I wrote.

Out of the warmth of his heart, he tutored me, invited me to audit his winter term statistics course, and served on my dissertation committee. His assistance resulted in my winning “New Hampshire’s Better Government Competition” and being elected to *Who’s Who Among Students in American Universities and Colleges*. It all came about because I became desperate enough to say, “Help!”

5. I’m more successful when I express my own uniqueness, rather than try to fit in. And it’s not just me: Most successful people abandon the path of saying nothing, riling no feathers, and making no waves. The ones who don’t stay hidden from view. I don’t want that kind of life, so I choose to take the (sometimes) uncomfortable path of articulating my individuality. (*On the big screen, think Steve Jobs, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Abraham Lincoln.*)

#### CONCLUSION

At its core, *trust* undergirds the willingness to let oneself be vulnerable. Patrick Overton put it this way, in his 1975 poem, *Faith*:<sup>4</sup>

*When you walk to the edge of all the light you have  
and take that first step into the darkness of the unknown,  
you must believe that one of two things will happen:*

*There will be something solid for you to stand upon,  
or you will be taught how to fly.*

If you ask me, standing on solid ground is good, yet I opt for flying. How about you? ■



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#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This and the following quotes are from an article available online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/07/business/walt-bettinger-of-charles-schwab-youve-got-to-open-up-to-move-up.html>. Retrieved Feb. 23, 2016.
- <sup>2</sup> Available online: [https://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en). Retrieved Feb. 23, 2016.
- <sup>3</sup> Brown, B. (2015). *Rising Strong: The Reckoning. The Rumble. The Revolution*. New York: Spiegel & Grau.
- <sup>4</sup> Copyright © Patrick Overton, *The Leaning Tree*, 1975; *Rebuilding the Front Porch of America*, 1997. <http://www.patrickoverton.com/poster.html>