



Vulnerability is power in leadership and relationships

Every family has its stories, its inside jokes. One of my family's is that, no matter what question someone asks of me, my answer is frequently, "I don't know, but I'm delighted you thought I did." The fact is, I really don't know. And the older I get, the more I feel like an ecstatic Scrooge, dancing around in his nightgown at the end of *A Christmas Carol*, singing, "I don't know anything. I never did know anything. But now I KNOW that I don't know anything." It frightened his housekeeper, but what happiness, what freedom. Not knowing, not having all the answers, and not *needing* to have the answers becomes a leader. I highly recommend it. People will want to pull up a chair and sit close to you, a real human being, and share *their* answers, which are often astoundingly good.

— Susan Scott

By Deli Moussavi-Bock

Looking back over the course of my career, I realize I missed some amazing opportunities because of a belief that I had to figure something out completely on my own or because of a desire to do something perfectly. Now I've come to view perfection as counter to growth, risk, learning, and innovation and, most importantly, authenticity.

The definition of a Fierce Conversation is one in which you come out from behind yourself, into the conversation, and make it real. Authentic, genuine, real, whatever you call it — we know it when we see it or hear it. In *Fierce Conversations*, Susan Scott writes, "Authenticity isn't something you have. It's something you choose."

I have had the good fortune to work with Scott during the past eight years.

I'll never forget when she told me years ago that she wrote *Fierce Conversations* for herself. The transparency of that statement shifted my context about leadership and the personal nature of it. That conversation created a huge context shift for me. I thought, "Wait a second, I don't need to have all the answers, and I can admit that I continue to learn? How human, how irresistible!" Since then, I've been in the company of extraordinary leaders and been witness to the raw power of vulnerability in leadership. I've learned that if I want to fully embrace authenticity, I need to be willing to make myself vulnerable.

Given this, for years I have been mesmerized by the power of vulnerability in relationships and was thrilled to watch Brene Brown's TEDx talk on vulnerability. Brown is a research professor at the University

of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. She has spent 10 years studying vulnerability, courage, authenticity, and shame, and discovered in her research that "in order for connection to happen, we have to allow ourselves to be seen, really seen ... deeply seen." In her research, Brown found that people who had high self-worth "had the courage to be imperfect. They had the compassion to be kind first to themselves and then to others. They had connection as a result of authenticity. They were willing to let go of who they should be in order to be who they were, which you have to absolutely do for connection. They fully embraced vulnerability" (Brown, 2010).

Vulnerability is where our greatest untapped source of power lies, a



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In each issue of *JSD*, Susan Scott (susan@fierceinc.com) explores aspects of communication that encourage meaningful collaboration. Scott, author of *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success At Work & In Life, One Conversation at a Time* (Penguin, 2002) and *Fierce Leadership: A Bold Alternative to the Worst "Best" Practices of Business Today* (Broadway Business, 2009), leads Fierce Inc. (www.fierceinc.com), which helps companies around the world transform the conversations that are central to their success. Fierce in the Schools carries this work into schools and higher education.

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key ingredient of a leader and also of a culture that creates openness, truth telling, innovation, and most importantly, connection.

Vulnerability is essential for connection between human beings. In summing up her research during her talk, Brown says, “We are here to connect, neurobiologically. This is what it’s all about. It doesn’t matter whether you talk to people who work in social justice and mental health and abuse and neglect, what we know is that connection, the ability to feel connected, is — neurobiologically, that’s how we’re wired — it’s why we’re here.”

WHEN WE GET IT WRONG

Often we revert to behavior that makes us seem invulnerable, even when we know better. We present an image of ourselves as know-it-all or work hard in a vain attempt to actually know it all. Rarely does the know-it-all, invulnerable, perfectionist approach get us the results we’re looking for long-term. Why? No single person knows it all or has all the answers. It’s implausible for anyone to take this position. And it’s hard to relate to a person like this.

I don’t want to confuse a know-it-all, invulnerable approach with high standards. Having high expectations of yourself and others leads to continuous learning and improvement. A perfectionist mindset contributes to a culture where ego and striving for infallibility become more important than honesty, solid relationships, and the results we actually want.

The problems with a know-it-all or perfectionist mindset show up one conversation at a time:

Inauthenticity: Inauthenticity creates an environment where presenting an image of ourselves is more important than being truthful. We can sniff inauthenticity from a mile away. As Jim Sorensen puts it, it doesn’t matter how good your message is if people don’t experience it as true.

Fear: Perfectionism produces a cover-your-rear-end culture of fear, finger-pointing, and failure to execute. Fear is only a short-term motivator. Long-term, it creates a scarcity-focused, punitive environment with a resentfully compliant workforce.

Confusing our roles with our selves: People become one with their roles, and they speak from their titles rather than speaking from their hearts. The latter is what gets people to commit at a deep level, and you can’t get that from a title.

PRACTICING VULNERABILITY AND AUTHENTICITY

Pay attention to the conversations in your team, in your school — are people simply trying to prove they’re right, are they speaking with or to each other? Are they going into the conversation willing to listen to learn? Observe the undercurrent of the conversation. What’s really going on? Find out and address it.

Authenticity is a behavior we choose to practice moment-to-moment. It’s OK to fall off the bandwagon occasionally. We’re not perfect. Just remember, leadership is first and foremost about behavior. Anyone can talk a good talk.

Hold your own feet to the fire. Are we being honest with ourselves about our fears, strengths, weaknesses, about our behavior and the way we show up in our conversations? Ask yourself, what am I pretending not to know? And also, what am I pretending to know? Whose reality do I need to interrogate? Maybe it’s my own. It takes confidence to admit you don’t have the answers to everything. It’s the path to real progress.

When you shift your mindset from “I know it all” or “I need to know it all” to a belief where each person owns a piece of the truth, you’re talking about a true learning mindset. Such a mindset creates an environment of collective learning where everyone involved takes joy in learning.

PRACTICING VULNERABILITY

Practicing vulnerability requires us to put away the masks we wear and name the truth with good intention. The most powerful thing we can do to create a culture of authenticity is to model it. Allow yourself to be vulnerable, to be transparent, and model the kind of behavior that invites others to put the truth on the table in a way that moves the relationship forward.

Let yourself be seen. It’s a risk, and there’s no way to get the results you want without taking a risk. You have to expose who you are. If you’re scared, admit it. Confidence does not mean being without fear. It’s having fear and moving through it anyway.

Embrace your imperfections. Be yourself. Don’t project the image of your idealized self. Earn people’s respect, not only through your competence and triumphs, but also by admitting and debriefing your misses. Be confident enough to say, “I don’t have all the answers.”

Speak from your heart, not your title. As the old saying goes, people don’t care what you know until they know you care. If you achieve this, people eventually willingly receive your message, no matter how difficult.

At the end of her TEDx talk, Brown says, “Give me a generation that has these qualities — high self-worth, vulnerability, and connection, and we’ll solve today’s problems.” I’ll add: Give us an organization, a team, a culture that has these qualities, and watch them change the world. It’s possible.

REFERENCE

Brown, B. (2010, June). *The power of vulnerability.* Video from TEDx Houston. Available at www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html.

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