

CEP Magazine – June 2023



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Vulnerability is a crucial aspect of the algorithm for good leadership

By McCeil Johnson, JD, and Elizabeth McDuffie, Esq.

There are many definitions of the word “leader.” But what does it mean to be a good leader? How do good leaders guide their teams? Many ask what characteristics constitute good leadership. Different people will answer this question in myriad ways. Many observers believe exhibiting vulnerability is counterintuitive or even antithetical to one’s status as a good leader. However, we found that vulnerability is a bedrock principle inherent in leadership style and posture.

What are the characteristics of a good leader?

In today’s society, we often hear that good leaders are hard to find. We also hear phrases such as, “She is a born leader.” Finding good leaders is important to all organizations’ stability. Thus, identifying the crucial characteristics of a good leader is crucially important. We have identified the following primary characteristics of a good leader: truthful, collaborative, strategic, and accountable. “Truthful” ties very closely to vulnerability because it requires admission of weaknesses, mistakes, and concerns. “Collaborative” means a leader who considers the opinions and thoughts of others on the team. “Strategic” suggests a leader will ultimately set the agenda or plan of action. Finally, “accountable” means the leader takes ownership of what happens but also holds those on the team accountable for their part of the plan.

Displaying flexibility, consistency, persuasiveness, and motivation are all secondary characteristics of good leadership and support the primary aspects of leadership. Flexibility is demonstrated by the ability to pivot if necessary and may apply to the primary characteristic of being strategic. Consistency is the hallmark of a good leader, which is letting others know you are available and may apply to the primary characteristics of being truthful and accountable. Persuasiveness entails getting others to see your vision and is part of collaboration. Finally, motivation may require someone to be inspirational to those working with you and ties closely to being collaborative and accountable. Good leaders often demonstrate many of the primary and secondary characteristics.

What role does vulnerability play in good leadership?

Vulnerability may seem counterintuitive to the concept of leadership—it often feels like combining oil and water. But when authentically embraced, vulnerability enhances and strengthens one’s position as a good leader in an ever-changing world where both business and life move at the speed of light.

At its core, vulnerability is about expressing who you really are in words and behavior. Definitionally, vulnerability is another way of expressing and taking responsibility for our own personal and professional

authenticity. Our ability to be our authentic selves empowers each of us to allow our vulnerability to shine bright and illuminates our strengths as good leaders.

Some might define vulnerability as being weak or passive. However, vulnerability actually empowers leaders to admit things that are true, which also creates and enhances transparency. Vulnerability works simultaneously with the ability to lead collaboratively and strategically; operate with flexibility and accountability; and be honest, a good communicator and listener, and display consistency.

In her book *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead*, Brené Brown says, “Vulnerability is not a weakness, and the uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure we face every day are not optional.”^[1] Brown also says, “Our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose; the level to which we protect ourselves from being vulnerable is a measure of our fear and disconnection.”^[2] In summary, vulnerability allows leaders to lead with who they are and not the titles they hold.

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