



The Power of Vulnerability

By Denise Perme

We expect a lot from our workplace leaders. We ask them to inspire us with their vision, demonstrate an impeccable work ethic, generate new ideas, solve problems, and help us develop our potential.

Patrick Krill, a leading authority on well-being in the legal profession, says lawyers in leadership roles receive constant implicit and explicit messaging about what is expected of them. “The message is, ‘You should be strong. You should be decisive. You should be the person who is willing to go the extra mile, demonstrating total commitment to your clients and to the firm,’” he says. As if that were not enough, Krill says that “there is a growing recognition of the important role that leaders and managers have as central to efforts to improve well-being.”

How can leaders enhance well-being? Lawyers Depression Project (LDP) cofounder Joseph Milowic III says that, in his experience, authenticity is key. “When you open up, it encourages people to respond and enables them to feel they can trust you,” he says. Milowic, who is director of well-being and of counsel at Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan, LLP, shares his experience with depression with folks inside and outside his firm. “By talking about my own experience, it encourages others to do the same,” he says. “There is a real power in communication and the expression of authenticity.”

Jeannette Boot, a partner at Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr LLP and an LDP board member, believes that leaders need to verbalize the importance of well-being, but agrees that what is truly impactful is when they are open and vulnerable. “If there are senior people

who have experienced mental health or substance use conditions, I think it is their responsibility as a leader to be open about it,” says Boot, who is in recovery from an alcohol use disorder. Boot believes that sharing her story at her firm combats stigma and helps others feel more comfortable seeking help.

Both Boot and Milowic say they are grateful for the steadfast support they received when they let their firm leadership know about their experiences. “I was received with compassion, understanding, and relatedness,” says Milowic, who believes that the perception, not necessarily the reality, of stigma inhibits people from seeking help, although he thinks his experience is probably not unusual. “There is a lot more compassion out there than we might perceive,” he says.

If we are more likely to receive compassion when we admit we need help, why is it so hard to be vulnerable? Dr. Brené Brown, who has researched and written extensively about vulnerability, has observed this firsthand. “We love seeing raw truth and openness in other people, but we are afraid to let them see it in us,” she writes. “Vulnerability is courage in you and inadequacy in me.”

In a 2018 study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, students participated in experiments exploring why we admire vulnerability in others but strenuously avoid showing it ourselves. The study demonstrated that when we imagine or observe someone being vulnerable, we are mentally and emotionally distanced from the situation. We perceive it from an abstract standpoint and therefore view the vulnerable person as courageous. Conversely, if we are showing vulnerability, it is personal and emotional, so it will feel too risky. Even though we are likely to receive compassion and admiration, we underestimate that likelihood and overestimate the probability our colleagues will see us as weak.


Krill thinks the balance between traditional leadership qualities and the more recent push for authenticity in leadership is challenging. “There is a tension between expecting leaders today to lead with vulnerability and still [expecting them to] exhibit the qualities that led to their rise to leadership,” he says. “They were not elected to managing partner because they were demonstrating vulnerability.”

If you are a traditional leader but want to introduce authenticity as a management skill, try starting with openness on a smaller scale. Krill recommends that leaders routinely incorporate authenticity in the way they interact with people, using “micro-moments of vulnerability.” It might make you uncomfortable at first, but the payoff can be a deeper connection with your colleagues and a more accepting work culture.

There is little downside to being more authentic at work. “I’ve never heard anyone [say], ‘I don’t think this person should be leading this practice group because they are too real and authentic,’” Krill says.

Here are some ways to start showing authenticity:

- Ask your team for feedback and ideas. Doing so shows that you value their expertise and don’t have all the answers.
- Admit mistakes. This reminds your colleagues that you are accountable and accept imperfection in yourself and in them.
- Be open about your personal challenges, which builds trust and connection.

The real challenge is to feel the fear and be vulnerable anyway. Be sure to remind yourself that others will admire your courage. 

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