

leadership : vulnerability

John Greenall explores vulnerable leadership





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of the perils and
the power of
vulnerability?

why is it so
important in
leadership?

My respiratory placement was probably the scariest of medical school. I dreaded Tuesday mornings when the esteemed Prof would take us around the respiratory ward. 'So, Greenall, what did you learn from your reading on psittacosis that I set you last week?' My answer, lacking in any scientific knowledge and evolving into a story about my friend's pet parrot, was given short shrift. I was left feeling rather small, which if you know me, is quite some (six and a half) feat!

Fast forward three years to my first week as a Cardiology F1 on nights. The registrar has asked me to prescribe a GTN infusion. Fearing the registrar's dressing-down for disturbing her (again), I boldly prescribe a rate 'somewhere in the middle' of the 1-10mg/hr dose, before I (and likely the patient) am saved by the sister in charge.

We are averse to being vulnerable – being 'exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally'.¹ It's so tempting to cover up and pretend to have it all together. Why? Deep down we are people pleasers; we pretend we have all the answers. We love the approval when we can recite the 'six 'P's' of the ischaemic limb (go on, I bet you can't remember them all!). We are trained to cast ourselves in a good light to impress our consultant, and in future our colleagues, the nurses and the patients.

The irony is we admire vulnerability in others. We are surrounded by vulnerability in our healthcare setting. Indeed, we want our patients to be vulnerable! When I ask a teenage girl with abdominal pain about her periods or whether she is sexually active, I am looking for the truth, because otherwise I can't help her. It's why I love paediatrics, because kids (until they are teenagers) are so transparent!

So, we are aware of the perils and the power of vulnerability. But why is it so important in leadership?

Being vulnerable in leadership isn't often celebrated as a strength. Indeed, it's more often

seen as a sign of weakness. 'Football manager on the brink' screams *Metro*. 'Prime Minister wobbles in big speech to the CBI' roars *The Times*. But as Christians who are in leadership, we are called to be vulnerable.

But we can be tempted to show we 'have it together' to somehow legitimise our leadership. To ensure our followers have faith in us; that they are following someone they can emulate. How many speakers use examples in their talks that are from the past – 'I used to struggle with x,y,z, but now I've overcome it and walk free'. Whilst this is good to hear, it isn't real vulnerability at all, and if anything, it discourages people admitting a present struggle.

character blemishes - what are your foibles?

As you lead others, let me implore you to know yourself. Know your strengths. Know your sinful habits. And (perhaps less commonly taught or encouraged) know your character foibles. Perhaps you are a great communicator and can cast vision, but you talk too much. Perhaps you are a solid and disciplined Christian but can come across as abrasive, critical and not as gentle as you need to be. Perhaps you are responsible, careful, you hate to be wasteful (a person who others would like as their treasurer!) but verge on miserliness and an ungenerous attitude. Or perhaps you're kind-hearted, eager to work, but not reliable or punctual, always overextended and leaving people to sweep up behind you.² These character blemishes are not sin. But a lack of self-awareness can hamstring your leadership. We all know leaders who have character traits that make them difficult to work with. It's a lack of insight (what some people call emotional intelligence) that can become a lifelong issue. The longer it persists, the more difficult it can be to spot!

'Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.'

Romans 12:3

four selves to self-awareness

1 OPEN SELF

I can see - you can see

For Open Self, this should normally be easy enough to see.

2 BLIND SELF

I can't see - you can see

For the Blind Self, we need reflection and feedback from others. A helpful question we can ask is **'What's it like to be on the other side of me?'** I ask this of everyone I directly lead – and I want to hear feedback. Over the last year that has included 'you're not tough enough with strong characters', 'you step in too soon without letting me find a solution' and 'you use too many words on your slides.'

3 CONCEALED SELF

I can see - you can't see

For the Concealed Self, we need disclosure and confession. It can be hard to find someone to oversee you, to pastor you. Colossians 3:16 says 'Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another...' This only happens as we have relationships where we can confess our sin and ask forgiveness. Who is pastoring you?

4 UNKNOWN SELF

I can't see - you can't see

For the Unknown Self, we need teaching and reflection on experience. Reading, journaling, and reflecting with others is key here. We should also pursue sharpening friendships. Honest friends who love you enough to say the hard things might mean difficult conversations,³ but it's worth it! Sit down with a friend and say, 'Look, I want to go deeper. I want you to ask me difficult questions. I want you to tell me my character foibles and to help me address them.'

Someone who can help with this might be a spiritual mentor. Do you have someone a little further on the journey who you can meet with to chat and reflect? Often that person won't come to you, it will be you who will need to seek out that support.

imposter syndrome? - know your true identity

It is imperative that as leaders we know ourselves. But we need more than that. Because we all have weak spots. We can suffer from imposter syndrome, with that nagging fear that we'll be exposed for who we really are and be disowned. We often go to great lengths to avoid feeling vulnerable. We confabulate and cover up the fact we don't know the answer to the consultant's question. Or talk about our friend's pet parrot!

We need help to be secure enough to take it on the chin when someone criticises us. That's where, as Christians, we are called to root our identity firmly in Jesus. Vulnerability starts with knowing ourselves but relies on knowing who we are in Christ.

Like Jesus, we can be deeply secure in our self-identity as a beloved son of the father.⁴ Like Jesus, we can handle criticism because we work *from* approval rather than for approval,⁵ keeping us from the idols of pride (when we look down on others and sense our superiority) and despair (when we look up at others and sense our inferiority). When we compare ourselves favourably to others, we are less likely to admit weakness. And vice versa, when we feel inferior to others we are still unlikely to do so, feeling we will push ourselves even lower down the pecking order.

Like Jesus, we can have a vulnerability of spirit that means we don't have to defend our reputation or project an aura of invincibility. After all, he could serve others who should have bowed the knee to him because his identity was so secure.⁶ And like Jesus, we can know the strength to fear God and not man as we lead others. True vulnerability is when we allow people full access to ourselves,

SUMMARY

- Being vulnerable is difficult and potentially costly, especially as a leader when we want to 'lead by example' (But this is one way to lead by example!)
- We all have character blemishes which, if not identified and dealt with, can hamper our leadership
- We need to know ourselves through seeking reflective feedback, disclosing and confessing sinful acts and attitudes and pursuing sharpening relationships.
- Our security to survive such self-disclosure only comes through a deepening understanding of our identity in Christ

without reservation, just as Christ gradually revealed himself for humans to understand who God is.⁷

If we want to lead like Jesus, we need to be ready to be vulnerable. If we want more than fans or admirers, then we need to be ready to reproduce ourselves in others by sharing our inner life with them.⁸ We may risk ridicule and loss of respect; but we will be following in the footsteps of Jesus himself 'who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!' (Philippians 2:6-8). May our vulnerability mean we are ready to go and to live likewise. ■

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