

**Vulnerability and Inspired Leadership by
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After spending the past decade studying vulnerability, courage, shame, and worthiness, I've come to believe that leadership has nothing to do with position, salary, or number of direct reports. I believe a leader is anyone who holds her- or himself accountable for finding potential in people and processes.

Contrary to how we traditionally think about organizations, leaders are developing strategies and shaping culture across all levels. And, contrary to the myth of the "all-knowing-all-powerful" leader, inspired leadership requires vulnerability: *Do we have the courage to show up, be seen, take risks, ask for help, own our mistakes, learn from failure, lean into joy, and can we support the people around us in doing the same?*

In our culture, vulnerability has become synonymous with weakness. We associate vulnerability with emotions like fear, shame, and scarcity; emotions that we don't want to discuss, even when they profoundly affect the way we live, love, parent, and lead.

To reduce our feelings of vulnerability, we wake up every morning, put on our armor, and rarely take it off – especially in our work lives. We use invulnerability as a shield to protect us from discomfort, anxiety, and self-doubt.

The invulnerability shield takes on many shapes and forms. Some of us protect ourselves with perfecting, pretending, and pleasing. We convince ourselves that making everything "just right" or keeping everyone around us happy will minimize our risk of feeling blamed, judged, or criticized. Even though perfecting is exhausting, suffocates innovation, and ultimately leads to resentment and blame, we keep thinking, "Maybe this isn't working because I'm not perfect enough. I'll just work harder to be a little more perfect."

Invulnerability can also take the form of disengagement. We protect ourselves by never quite being "all in." We never get too excited or too invested or too hopeful. We're always waiting for the other shoe to drop. The motto becomes, "It's easier to *live* disappointed than it is to *feel* disappointed."

Not only does the invulnerability armor fail to protect us from experiencing hurt, never taking it off means never letting ourselves be seen. Invulnerability means self-protection over self-expression, fear over courage, blame over accountability, and safety over innovation.

Why is being vulnerable worth the risk? Because vulnerability is indeed at the core of difficult emotions, but it is also the birthplace of love and belonging, joy, creativity and innovation, adaptability to change and accountability – the experiences that bring purpose and meaning to our lives.

I know it's hard to believe, especially when we've spent our entire lives thinking that vulnerability is weakness, but it's true. Vulnerability is simply uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. Vulnerability is a part of all emotions – light and dark.

Leadership is all about relationships and to be in relationship (with anyone) is to be vulnerable. Every single day, leaders are called to navigate of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure – the only choice is to do it consciously or unconsciously; to lean into the vulnerability or to push it away.

Across the private and public sector, in schools and in our communities, we are hungry for authentic leadership – we want to show up, we want to learn, and we want to inspire and be inspired. We are hardwired for connection, curiosity, and engagement.

When leaders choose self-protection over transparency, when money and metrics are more valued than relationships and values, and when our self-worth is attached to what we produce, learning and work becomes dehumanized. People disengage and turn away from the very things that the world needs: their talent, their ideas, and their passion. The equation is simple: Invulnerability in leadership breeds disengagement in culture.

Re-humanizing work and education requires courageous leadership. It requires leaders who are willing to take risks, embrace vulnerabilities, and show up as imperfect, real people. That's what truly, deeply inspires us.