

STRENGTH AND VULNERABILITY IN LEADERSHIP

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Leaders should never show vulnerability. Vulnerabilities generally are considered the Achilles heel of armoured up leaders. This is a strong conventional belief. But what if there were times when it was the armour and not the flesh which was the true weakness?

It is easy to understand why conventional views and practice demand that leaders be strong, decisive and directive. This view fits well with some of the dominant myths of leadership, especially the myth of the heroic warrior-like leader, and the equally powerful myth of the rational technocratic leader. The view also fits in snugly with the modus operandi of our egos, including the needy bits. It reflects the masculine tone of leadership. And the view makes a lot of common sense too.

Leaders do need to protect their informal authority – the alternative of resorting to formal authority may involve all sorts of unsavoury measures such as threatening to sack people or to shoot them or at least to keep pulling rank on them. But informal authorization from others usually comes with strings attached. Folks expect their leaders to be strong and expert and credible. They expect some protection from external threats and the ability to maintain some internal order and harmony. Followers also expect their leaders to reflect some of the dominant values and norms of the group.

Leadership and authority are not the same thing. Informal authority is necessary for leaders but what may be good for our informal authority can be an obstacle to exercising leadership. Showing vulnerability at times may be the act of leadership even if it is not without risk. Some of the advantages of vulnerability in leadership include: it allows others to trust and connect more profoundly with the leader; it frees the leader from the energy- consuming pretence and burden of needing to have all the answers and be perfect; it allows the leader to avoid grandiosity and to stay in touch with their real

purpose in being a leader, and; it frees and empowers others to be themselves, take more responsibility and to exercise leadership more often.

As I started writing this article I happened to read two columns by journalists about the political leadership of Hilary Clinton and Tony Abbott. Interestingly, both authors argue that in leadership it is not always a choice between being “strong” or “weak”, but between being “strong” or “large”. In one of these articles, David Brooks of the New York Times argues that Hilary Clinton can be her own worst enemy in the way that she handles pressure situations where she feels vulnerable, and in the steps she takes to avoid appearing vulnerable in these stressful situations. He contends that “In normal times she comes across as a warm, thoughtful, pragmatic and highly intelligent person”. But “her career has been marked by a series of brutal confrontations: Watergate, travelgate, healthcare reform, cattle futures, Monica Lewinsky, Benghazi” and most recently the “email controversy”. “Her manner amid these battles is well established”, writes Brooks. She goes “into battle mode” and “the descriptions from people who know her are ... hunkered down, steely, scornful and secretive”. This approach, he argues, has often exacerbated her problems rather than resolved them.

With the latest “email” controversy he writes “it will be interesting to see if she goes strong or large. If she goes strong, she will fight fire with fire.... If she goes large, she’ll resist the urge to fight scorn with scorn. Temperamentally, she’ll have to rise above the bitterness, as former presidents Ronald Reagan, Franklin Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln did”. Brooks asks, “Can Clinton do this? Is she strong enough to rise above hostility, to instead reveal scary and vulnerable parts of herself so that voters feel as though they can trust and relate to her?” Brooks is arguing that it is her very willingness to show some vulnerability (maybe admit she was being too self-protective over her emails when she was Secretary of State) which will enable her to connect with people, and he is arguing that there is a different form of leadership strength which is based on “going large” rather than aggressive.

Coincidentally, on the very same weekend Fairfax journalist Peter Hartcher was making some remarkably similar observations about Australia’s Prime Minister Tony Abbott. He noted that since his “near death experience” in an attempted leadership spill, Tony Abbott has been very busy demonising and antagonising

as many minority groups as he can in an effort to re-assert his “strong leadership” credentials to his shrinking conservative support base. Hartcher quotes a Monash University political psychologist who claims that Abbott’s “default position is aggression. When everything is relatively smooth he can put that behind him to some extent. But he is probably feeling insecure. In these circumstances the aggression comes readily to the surface.” Hartcher himself argues that it is not so much Abbott’s psychology at play, but that it is a deliberate and “shameful” political strategy by him. For myself, I would not be surprised to see that both personal psychology and leadership strategy dovetail with each other very neatly.

Hartcher argues that history has shown that at times “Abbott can be a unifying leader” but “he is disqualifying himself from the leadership of a successful country of immigrants from every nation, race and religion”. He concludes by saying “We can only hope that the Prime Minister can recover his higher and better self”. Again, we see this contention that strength in leadership sometimes requires us to “go large” rather than “go strong” in the conventional sense of that word!

When colleagues and I are conducting leadership development programs we open ourselves up a lot and we share a lot about our own vulnerabilities, flaws, and failures as well as our successes. It is never easy for us to do this. Practice helps, but it is never risk-free for us. Part of the challenge involves staring down our own internal judge and critic, which in my own case relishes an opportunity to stomp on me for being “weak”. We have found that overwhelmingly participant managers appreciate our willingness to do this. It helps to break down the separation between us as teachers and others as participants. It helps us to distinguish between being the authority figures and exercising leadership. But most importantly, it creates space for others to be more honest and to share more about themselves. It helps to foster strong and rich relationships which enable us to do some really serious work together.

But no aspect of leadership can ever be reduced to a formula. I recall one very impressive participant who was a senior academic in the Medical Faculty of a major University and a very senior surgeon at a major teaching Hospital, who took great umbrage at our approaches. She was particularly unhappy at our attempts to get her to lower some of her very well fortified defences. Later in

the program she explained that the surgical field was a battle zone, full of power plays and heroics, and dominated by males. She had hardened herself to be successful at this game and she wasn't about to give any free kicks to her colleagues or expose any unprotected flanks to them. Her point was well taken, but it does seem to me that leadership still requires us to create some space for ourselves to be different.

Similar complications arise with the issue of emotional vulnerability and emotional displays by leaders. I see leadership as inherently emotional (see my previous article "Leadership Is Emotional") but we need to apply some wisdom along with the emotion. I can remember two very different stories of emotional display by leaders that were shared by senior managers on the same leadership program. In one instance, the CEO of a public organisation which had been receiving a lot of negative publicity over the supposed "doctoring" of performance reports, had become quite emotional and upset at a meeting of all staff when she talked about how the organisation's good reputation was being impugned. The participant manager claimed that this display of emotion by the CEO energised the staff meeting and was the clear catalyst for a more creative strategy session on how to deal with the crisis. Another general manager shared how his CEO had become sad and upset at an Executive Meeting about failures to execute strategy, and that this display of emotion had thoroughly demoralised all the managers and led to mutinous whispers around the coffee machine. Obviously it helps to read your audience well.

The question of vulnerability does not apply just to the emotional realm. In their recent book "Playing to Win", Lafley and Martin claim that strategic thinking at Procter and Gamble was often stunted because the Executive Committee operated like a "shooting gallery". The unstated rule for Country Managers making strategy presentations to the Executive was: show no doubts or weaknesses, avoid engaging in any serious consideration of strategic choices, and survive to tell the tale. I have worked with "tough" and "rigorous" Executives where exactly the same dynamic prevailed. So much for creativity!

It is always a balancing act and a leadership call between the admission and display of vulnerability by a leader, and the establishment and protection of your authority. But this cannot become an excuse for never being vulnerable. There are times when a refusal to be vulnerable will actually weaken your

leadership. Some of our automatic responses and routines when we are stressed, under pressure or feeling vulnerable, can damage our cause and our leadership. It is also possible that leaders can transform weaknesses and blind spots into strengths if they are willing to be more open and transparent in how they deal with vulnerability. Perhaps vulnerability is not just an uncomfortable reality for leaders, but sometimes it can even be our friend.