

Vulnerability Is My Superpower: Notes from a Practitioner

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“Hi. How are you?” While simple in nature, striking up a conversation for the first time with someone might seem really intimidating. For me, it’s an opportunity to open up my world to new possibilities. As cliché as it may sound, it’s true.

I am a genuinely curious person and have no problem walking up to someone and saying hello. Honestly, what do I have to lose by doing that? Sure, I could be ignored or dismissed, but I could also make a new friend or learn something new.

Recently, I had the pleasure of sitting down with a couple of new friends and having one of those foundational discussions: the typical getting-to-know-you dialogue. What was unique about that conversation is that I actually learned something new about not only my new friends, but also myself. Well, not something totally new, but instead a different perspective on what I have always thought of as one of my characteristic behaviors, which they called vulnerability.

What I mean by this is that I always thought of my ability to open myself up to someone as “normal” and an intentional choice for interaction. What I learned, however, is that it isn’t a normal behavior at all and for some, it’s actually a desired behavior. Being willing to strike up a conversation always seemed like a choice for me, but what I learned is that people may be willing to but may not feel comfortable enough to do it.

When you think about vulnerability, what comes to mind? Is it weakness? Is it instability?

Webster’s dictionary defines vulnerability as:

- 1:** capable of being physically or emotionally wounded
- 2:** open to attack or damage: assailable

- *vulnerable* to criticism

My best friend, Maryanne, defines it as “putting yourself out there without the worry of failing.” I tend to agree with Maryanne, which explains why she’s my best friend. She gets to see my acts of vulnerability in action quite frequently and supports them, which is really important to me. These “acts” can be as simple as my ability to strike up a conversation with anyone to taking a huge leap of faith by changing fields during the prime of my professional career.

What you may not know is that both Maryanne and my husband, two of my favorite people, are not willing to be vulnerable. In fact, they avoid it whenever possible. They are very analytical people who analyze and calculate the risk for every situation. While it’s important to think before you act, just the thought of such analytical detail sucks the fun out of it right now for me and fills me with doubt. For example, they’ll literally think of every possible scenario and outcome as they decide whether or not to skydive; meanwhile, I’m waving goodbye as I’m jumping out of a perfectly good airplane.

I share this with you because without them, without their support, I don’t believe I would be able to be as vulnerable as I am...actually, I know I wouldn’t. They are my strength; they are my calculations of risk. At the end of the day, I know they are going to be there to love and support me no matter what happens, which allows me to be more courageous and take risks with the hopes of experiencing something new and exciting. They are what’s truly important in life.

Without them, I wouldn’t be where I am today. Take my recent shift in career fields where I went from 10 years of marketing experience to being a greenhorn in the field of learning and development. Talk about a completely different world!

Throughout my career, being vulnerable has helped and hindered me. For example, by reaching out to people and consulting them about ideas, I sometimes may be perceived as

someone who lacks original ideas. That is simply not the case. For me, it's the analytical part of my brain wanting to hear everyone's opinions and using it to help form my own. Let's face it - no one can claim that they know or are an expert in everything. So, why wouldn't I reach out to subject matter experts on a topic to hear their perspective? That doesn't mean I need to agree with them, but it does mean I need to be willing to shift my perspective momentarily to see the bigger picture.

One recent instance was in my previous marketing job. We were trying to figure out how to showcase different positions for which my company was hiring in order to attract new, right-fit talent to our organization. The challenge was that you can only say, "Now Hiring Engineers" so many times and ways, but we needed them in the door tomorrow. So, we needed to shift our thinking and come up with a creative way to position our company as the "Employer of Choice" for engineers; we needed to put our heads together. I had met with a variety of people on my team already, but then I decided to take it a step further and asked other internal partners, such as our analytics and finance partners, for thoughts and ideas. While some of their ideas were out of scope and not feasible, having this diversity of thought triggered ideas and concepts for my team and ultimately ended up yielding our final product.

Another example is when I simply asked someone about the opportunity to volunteer my time to learn more about their department. This was someone whom I had met earlier in my career and whom I admired, so I wanted to learn more about her work. What started as sheer curiosity turned into a job offer in that same department two years later! I wasn't looking to change career fields and I loved the work that I was doing; I was just curious to learn about other departments. But then again, I also didn't know what I was missing, until I started volunteering. Who knows if I would be in the same job if I hadn't taken that chance to ask?

For both of these examples, I had to be vulnerable. I was able to do that because I knew that no matter how they would've ended up, my best friend and husband would be there

supporting me at the end of the day. Frankly, it's easier for them because I'm the one taking the risk, but for me, not having someone to support me would be the greatest risk.

And honestly, had I not taken those risks, what's the worst thing that could've happened? Someone else could've come up with the great idea on how to hire the engineers and I could still be in my old job. Either way, my friends and family would still love me and I experienced something new. I didn't lose anything. I knew I was taking a risk and could fail miserably or soar. From my perspective, however, the greater risk was the regret of not doing them.