

LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS: GREAT LEADERS BALANCE STRENGTH WITH VULNERABILITY

Great leaders are capable of being strong (tough, effective) while at the same time being vulnerable (authentic, emotionally exposed). In our executive coaching practice, we have worked with leaders who believe they have to know all the answers, and that tough talk demonstrates strength. Interestingly, what we know is that leaders who admit they are vulnerable, that they don't have all the answers and ask for help, are the ones who are more respected and admired. Being vulnerable and able to ask for help creates the possibilities for inclusiveness, teamwork, and enhanced credibility.

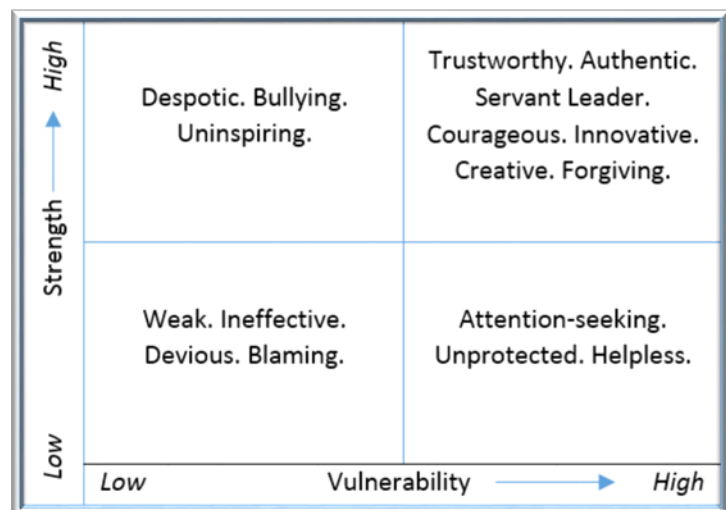
The key is to know when, where, and how to be both "in control" and "vulnerable." This type of leader demonstrates "just because I am asking for help doesn't mean that I am having a nervous breakdown. Rather, it means "I know what I know and I know what I don't know, and this is why I have a team!" A benefit of this approach is that the team members come to know that they are important, autonomous, accountable, and trusted. Importantly, it also shows *the leader to be trustworthy*. An interesting article published by *Harvard Business Review* in December 2014, [What Bosses Gain by Being Vulnerable](#), explores the connection between a leader's trustworthiness and vulnerability.

Vulnerability can be expressed by sharing business or personal concerns. Molly, a high-powered executive, was having significant and difficult challenges with her daughter. She shared these challenges with key members of her team. Everyone had surmised that something wasn't "right" with Molly. The fact that she opened up and expressed her challenge to the team enabled them to help her in a more responsive and supportive way.

Another example is Joe, a marketing manager facing a new challenge in marketing his company's services. He shared with his team that he had never seen a situation like the current market conditions before, and that the support of his entire team would be required to continue to win in the marketplace; he couldn't do it alone.

These actions showed both vulnerability and strength. By role-modeling these behaviors for direct reports and those a rank below, a culture of communication and coaching was instilled throughout both Molly's and Joe's organizations. These executives viewed these instances as watershed events.

What is the interplay of strength and vulnerability? Again, great leaders are both strong and vulnerable. What if you are low in both? Or highly vulnerable but low in strength – how might you be perceived by those around you? The chart suggests how this may play out.



Where do you want to be in this grid? How do your beliefs about leadership allow you to show up as too strong, too vulnerable, or a good balance of the two?