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Required Reading for Growing Companies

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power through vulnerability

As a CEO you know that taking risk, subjecting your company to known, measured and managed vulnerabilities in pursuit of particular goals, comes with the territory. Risk-taking is the very fabric of entrepreneurial existence and is a fact of life in the largest of corporations.

Risk-taking is at the heart of great success stories like Johnson & Johnson's withdrawal of millions of dollars of possibly tainted Tylenol from the shelves or ugly failures like Enron where risk-taking became hubris, feeding upon itself until the entire structure, devoid of values, came crashing down.

What is not well-accepted in the American business landscape is the image of the personally vulnerable CEO. There is a cultural expectation that the leader will have the answers, giving accurate guidance as to quarterly and annual earnings (deviation here is severely punished by Wall Street and maybe even the SEC), and will act from knowledge and certainty, rather than ignorance or mistaken assumptions.

Further, if the leader displays any emotional vulnerability, it must be finely tuned to just the right frequency, with public relations and investor relations directors closely monitoring media, analyst and stockholder response.

I certainly bought into this image as a new CEO. I assumed that power came from strength. I avoided personal vulnerability at all costs as a sign of weakness. Only as time passed and I accumulated experience as a CEO (and during several extended periods as an ex-CEO), did I realize I did not have to heroically "power [verb] through vulnerability," but could humbly achieve "power [noun] through vulnerability."

This column shows how opening yourself as a CEO to unknown, unmeasured and unmanaged vulnerability immeasurably adds to your power as a leader.

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POWER THROUGH MOMENTARY VULNERABILITY

A CEO client of mine recently announced the first massive layoff in company history. The justification was clear and his Board and top management team were fully behind the move. Human Resources and outplacement consultants stood in the wings with safety nets and the script for the day had been honed to a fine edge.

And *then* there was a glitch - the set-up of the room was not what was planned, and gave a more intimate atmosphere to this announcement than he envisioned. The CEO saw more clearly the eyes of those whose livelihood and lives he was about to unalterably affect.

His voice broke, surfacing his emotion, showing that he, too, was vulnerable that day, hurting in his own way at having to make the announcement. It certainly wasn't what he planned, but it became the source of many comments supportive of him and his action on

that day, both from the affected and the unaffected - "He really cares." "He's hurting like us."

What we learn from this experience is that when a powerful leader openly shows his or her suffering in an unplanned, spontaneous way he or she becomes more powerful, not from an elevated position, but at the same level as those with less outward power. This vulnerability results in a rare intimacy, which immediately begets loyalty at an extremely difficult time.

Most CEOs resist vulnerability altogether because they fear, as I did, being perceived as weak, unsure or unstable. Further, they feel unsafe.

What they fail to recognize is what my client said when I gave him a draft of this column and pointed out that he might be recognized. He said, "So what? That's what happened and this is who I am." What he recognized was that accessing his emotions in this charged situation showed him as the full human being he is, and his authenticity carries with it its own safety.



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There is, however, the temptation to become embarrassed and gloss over feelings. When this happens, colleagues and employees feel uneasy and distanced rather than comfortable and intimate. When the leader can be open to his or her own vulnerability, however, colleagues and employees feel inspired and loyal, as proved by Napoleon when he openly wept on the battlefield.

Freely given employee loyalty is priceless. It results in employees treating the business as their own, exercising their own initiative. And loyalty is most surely gained, not from carefully worded articulation, but from deep intimacy with the leader's human feelings.

What are you willing to do to access this power? As an experiment try publicly apologizing to someone in your organization you've stepped on without justification, or publicly recognize your failure to recognize someone who deserves it. If you give a genuinely humble apology or recognition, intimacy and loyalty automatically result. I guarantee it! Convinced? OK, so have someone—your spouse, confidant, coach—hold you accountable for giving that apology or recognition.

Power through vulnerability is such a tremendous source of power that there may be a temptation to stage it. It cannot be done. Vulnerability must be honest and heartfelt in the moment. Be sure you meet the test!

BEING OPEN TO DESTINY THROUGH CONTINUING VULNERABILITY

As CEOs you know the daily weave-and-dodge routine, always trying to anticipate where the next threat will come from. You also know the importance of achieving that operational plan, the one your Board, your management team and your stockholders are counting on you to deliver. There's also the strategic plan, representing the best thinking of you and your team about the longer term direction of the company.

John Lennon wrote "Life is what happens to you while you are making other plans." Do you make an effort to listen what "life" may be telling you in the face of all of your conscious stratagems and plans? Are you sensitive to the way events are trending, the way doors are opening or closing, the way people are appearing or disappearing? Out of those indicators a general direction may emerge. How alert are you to go with this flow, regardless of what the operational or strategic plan may say?

You say "You're not talking about a Chief Executive Officer here, whose job is to execute the plan, you're talking about a Chief Reflective Officer, whose job is to divine direction from the entrails of events!" Well, perhaps. And yet those visionary companies whose contributions to our economy and culture span decades found much of their greatness in their openness to "accidents" and their unwillingness to dismiss them as inconsequential. (See Collins and Porras, *Built to Last*).

Being open to events coming from the "wild blue yonder" requires maintenance of an "I don't know" attitude. I don't know how this event fits in with all the others but I'm not going to dismiss it, and I'm going to keep in mind that all of our planning efforts may be off the mark, and "life" may have

something entirely different in store for us. If the railroad companies had adopted this attitude, how different their histories might have been!

When I left my second Fortune 500, the disappointed suitor for the corporate presidency, I determined I would sell myself to smaller corporations as a "professional manager" experienced in both line and staff responsibilities. How could a Fortune 500 Strategic Planning V.P. and Group Operations V.P. go wrong?

Eight years and three CEO positions later, I mused as to what had really happened. True, in two of the three situations the initial corporate objectives had been met and surpassed. Yet the real learning was internal - how much I didn't know, despite my gold-plated credentials. It was the experience of my vulnerability to what I didn't know which led over time to a capacity for intimacy, so important to powerful pursuit of my present calling.

I see now that this was my destiny forming - I needed to sit in the seat, experience the experience, sweat the sweat, use and lose the power - to be able to truly empathize with others who would sit there and whom I would coach. I saw what poet Lawrence Raab describes in his *My Life Before I Knew It*.

...and then
the life I'd never been able to foresee
began and everything
before I became myself appeared
necessary to the rest of the story.

If you as a CEO adopt the "I don't know" attitude, you must dispense with tightly held images of yourself, your colleagues and your company, and address your individual and your company's collective defense mechanisms. You must become open, vulnerable and permeable to whatever "life," or destiny, has in store for you, your colleagues and your company. Otherwise, as William Stafford observed in *A Ritual to Read To Each Other*, "a pattern that others made may prevail in the world, and following the wrong god home we may miss our star."

Momentary yielding to vulnerability will not get you there. It requires a commitment to continually living with the unknown, which perhaps becomes fully known only in retrospect. It requires a faith, almost child-like, that there is a destiny "out there" to be discovered and lived.

It's a long way from making payroll this Friday to being fully open to whatever "life" may have in store for us and our companies. And yet if we as leaders are not open to the unfolding possibilities, who will be? And how much of the glorious potential of our companies and ourselves will be unrealized?

My call is to welcome vulnerability. Make it a friend. Live with it daily. Become comfortable with it. And from there see what presents itself to you and to your company.

Wayne Caskey is a three-time CEO who is now an executive coach. His web site is www.waynecaskey.com.