

Should CEOs Be Vulnerable?



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Let's get it out of the way: the answer to that question is a resounding yes. In the words of Dr. Brené Brown, "Vulnerability is the absolute heartbeat of innovation and creativity." If that's true (and we believe it is), vulnerability is essential.

But practicing vulnerability is also hard. It doesn't come naturally. Instead, we have a natural desire to protect ourselves – to put up walls so that we stay hidden and don't get hurt. It's a tendency we learn early and practice often.

And it doesn't change as people move up the corporate ladder. In fact, in an executive role, vulnerability is even more difficult because the stakes are higher. The actions of a CEO are public; they carry with them the potential for public backlash and company-wide consequences.

In the face of that pressure, how can CEOs still be vulnerable?

Let's take a look.

What is vulnerability?

First, to practice vulnerability requires an understanding of what that means – and what it doesn't.

Being vulnerable doesn't mean baring everything all the time.

There's a common misconception that vulnerability is honesty at the expense of tact and common sense. But that approach is flawed.

Yes, at times vulnerability does require drastic transparency. **But at its core, vulnerability isn't thoughtless honesty. It's an intentional commitment to authenticity, even when that involves risk.**

[Brown describes it this way](#): "Vulnerability is uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure." Vulnerability is to admit that we're all human – to lower the façade of perfection and lean into the reality that, in spite of our flaws, we're enough.

So, what does that look like in an executive context? Let's take a look at how vulnerability plays out practically, as exemplified in three real-world contexts.

Vulnerability means being willing to admit mistakes.

In April 2010, in the immediate aftermath of the [Deepwater Horizon oil spill](#) that killed 11 people and unleashed 4.9 million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, then-BP CEO Tony Hayward clung desperately to the illusion of perfection.

Speaking to CNN, Hayward attempted to [direct any responsibility for mistakes toward a BP contractor](#): "The responsibility for safety on the drilling rig is Transocean. It is their rig, their equipment, their people, their systems, their safety processes."

Ultimately, though, the biggest oil spill in history was, at least in large part, BP's mistake – the result of a flawed well plan. In spite of Hayward's initial denial, four years later a judge would lay the lion's share of legal fault at the company's feet.

That gaffe wasn't the company's only misstep in responding to the crisis, but it was an impactful one. In the wake of Hayward's initial statements, public opinion of the company tanked, and financial difficulties mounted. As the saying goes, there's only one chance to make a first impression. In making his (likely counseled by legal or PR teams), Hayward chose an approach that was effectively the opposite of vulnerability.

His company suffered.

Vulnerability doesn't mean accepting fault blindly. But in the long run, it's better for a CEO to own mistakes and be vulnerable than to point fingers.

Vulnerability means showing empathy.

Regardless of whether a mistake was made, vulnerability also involves empathy.

In September 1982, seven people in the Chicago area died from taking cyanide-laced Tylenol capsules. It was never discovered who had tampered with the medicine, but the reality was that Tylenol's reputation was tainted; in the aftermath, there was legitimate concern over the safety of the drug.

National panic ensued. But, incredibly, Johnson & Johnson, the maker of the effected drug, was [able to maintain public credibility](#) and even rebuild trust through a wise display of pre-emptive empathy.

In large part, this was due to the response of the company's CEO, Jim Burke. Burke led the decision to recall 31 million Tylenol capsules, an act that cost the company over \$100 million but was crucial to salvaging trust.

In describing the decision, Burke recalled how he had reached for a bottle of Tylenol in his own medicine cabinet, only to briefly doubt the safety of the drug. According to him, that was the point at which he realized that if he were concerned for his own safety, he couldn't in good faith put anyone else's at risk.

So, in spite of the financial and logistical burden, Burke allowed empathy to be the deciding factor in his decision. He recalled the product.

And he led the company farther, too; Johnson & Johnson also set up a hotline for concerned consumers and offered frequent updates on the crisis to major news networks, all in an effort to keep the public as informed as possible.

That transparency and empathy paid off. Amazingly, within 18 months of the tragic incidents, Tylenol had regained nearly all of its lost market share. Today, it's fully trusted by consumers.

Showing empathy can feel risky. But it's a necessary component of vulnerability, and ultimately, it's foundational to building trust.

Vulnerability means taking authentic action.

Finally, as Burke showed, vulnerability doesn't stop at a display of empathetic sentiment. It's carried out through authentic action.

In April 2018, a Starbucks employee called the police on two black men who hadn't made a purchase while waiting for another person to arrive. A bystander captured the event on video and posted it to Twitter, where it went viral; strong public backlash ensued, with people gathering at locations in Philadelphia and across the nation to protest racism.

In the wake of the incident, the company's CEO, Kevin Johnson, issued a fairly vulnerable apology. He condemned the treatment of the two men, and also took personal responsibility for what had happened. But his vulnerability didn't stop there.

[Johnson also met personally with the two men.](#) "I listened as they shared their personal experience with me. We had a very constructive dialogue." Opening that kind of dialogue –listening to what you've done wrong – is authentic action. And Starbucks followed through with more costly action: a month and a half after the incident, the company closed all of their stores for two hours to give employees [training about racial biases.](#)

Public response to the move was vastly positive.

It was a deliberated, action-oriented response, meant to return the company to its stated values. Because of that, it felt authentic – and ultimately, it was vulnerable.

practice vulnerability as a CEO

The reality of life is that people aren't perfect – not even CEOs. It's a tough truth to admit, especially when we believe that a spotless perception protects us. We never want to let them see us sweat. We want the perception of perfection.

But it doesn't work.

Exposing ourselves to emotional risk is the only way to grow, to innovate, or to create anything of value. It's the only way to lead a business. At the end of the day, it's the only way to live.

We and our businesses have flaws. That doesn't mean we shouldn't strive for excellence. But it does mean that, sometimes, excellence calls for courageous honesty and intentional authenticity.

Because the most excellent CEOs are vulnerable.

If you're interested in understanding what that means for you and your organization – and how you can grow in communicating vulnerability – [let's talk](#).