

He Was Working Over 100 Hour Weeks, Then All Of A Sudden, His Life Came Crashing Down

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You are about to listen to an exclusive conversation with Paul Markiewicz. He is the CEO of Blue Shield in California, which is a health care company with over 7000 employees. Paul is one of the over 100 CEOs that I interviewed for my brand new book leading with vulnerability, which basically goes over why leaders should not be vulnerable at work. But instead, they should lead with vulnerability, which is about bridging together competence and connection. As Adam Grant said, this is a thoughtful resource on how leaders can be more candid about their foibles and fears without sacrificing their effectiveness. And if you want to learn how to bring vulnerability inside of your organization for leaders, then this is the book for you, according to Adam Grant, so hopefully that will entice you to grab a copy, which you can do at leadwithvulnerability.com. What you're going to listen to now is the first part of the interview with Paul, if you want to get access to this second part, head over to greatleadership.substack.com. Again, that is greatleadership.substack.com.

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Here, everyone, my guest today is Paul Markiewicz. He is the president and CEO of Blue Shield California. Paul, thank you for joining me. It's my pleasure. Thanks for having me. For people not familiar with Blue Shield of California. What do you guys do? And how many employees do you guys have?

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Well, we're large regional health plan, we have about 7000 employees, we provide health insurance benefits to about 4.7 million Californians. And it's worth, you know, a health plan is people I think, would normally think about it, we provide health care coverage to

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just about any

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person that is willing to buy it from us or organization that's willing to buy it from us. Yeah. And we actually spoke a little bit from my last book, The future leader, where we talked about skills and mindsets for leaders. And, you know, the theme of vulnerability come up quite a bit from a lot of the interviews that I did. And so that's a lot of what we're going to talk about today. But why don't we start with just background information about you? Can you take us back to baby Paul, maybe your where you grew up how you were raised? And what was your trajectory like to becoming the CEO of Blue Shield California? Well, you know, it was a dark and stormy night. No, I was I was born and raised in Grand Forks, North Dakota. And for those of you that aren't familiar with North Dakota, other than through the movie, Fargo, it's

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sick 110,000 square miles, and has about 650,000 people living in it. So there's a lot more space than people. I happen to live in the eastern part of the state in the second largest city, which has about 45,000 people. And you know, my parents taught at the university there, but I was born there, all the way all the way through high school there.

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And in a very tight knit community and very Midwestern. And at any point, if you need me to lapse into my Fargo accent, I can do it for you on command, because I grew up speaking that way. And most of the people around me did as well. You know, I also grew up playing hockey, so I still played a day and played competitively in college and went away to school in Colorado and went to school there and played hockey and then was fortunate enough to win a Rhodes scholarship and so studied abroad.

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In between college and Oxford, I studied it six months in Moscow learning Russian and will speak Russian.

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Ah, Mala Yeah, it's Yeah, yeah.

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My family's from the Republic of Georgia. Oh, excellent. Yeah, that's great. So

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So yeah, I at that point, I, you know, gained a level of fluency. But that was 30 years ago. So I've

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come a long ways from that now, but it was it was great experience. And I went to Oxford study there for two years.

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And then started my working career in New York City in a management consulting firm that was called Booz Allen and Hamilton. Yes, I remember them.

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Yeah. And I started out in financial services, but then after a couple of years, really just

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took a an affinity towards healthcare and its complexity and how everyone needs to access it. So I started then my last two years, working in healthcare at Booz Allen Hamilton and then

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my wife who did her MBA at Stanford, we got engaged while we were in New York, and she said there's only one place in the world to live and that's the San Francisco Bay area.

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And I had never been there. So it, it became very logical for me to pay to visit. And we did. And we moved out here in 1995 and have not looked back. So I've been out here ever since then, working in health care and all but probably two and a half years of it when I took an entrepreneurial sabbatical from Blue Shield.

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I've been working at Blue Shield of California. Very cool. I used to live in the Bay Area with my wife, we recently moved back

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to LA last year, and we never thought we would leave the Bay Area because we loved it so much. We live in Alameda. I don't know if you know where Allen's Yeah, I know I'm sure. And then you know, pandemic happened, all of our friends moved away, our family was in Southern California. And we kind of looked at each other one day. And we're like, why? We have no support here. No community, all of our friends moved, we have no family, why are we here. And we ended up moving back to LA, which again, we never thought we would ever do. But it was a big, you know, an important decision and probably a really good one because now we have helped with our two kids.

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And I can go on date nights again, which is important.

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So today, we're obviously talking about this theme of vulnerability. So when you hear the phrase vulnerable leader, what does that mean to you?

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Well, I in preparation for this, I actually looked up the word vulnerable, and just to see what the definition was. And

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the one that I found was susceptible to physical or emotional attack or harm.

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And or in need of special care and protection, because they're at risk of

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abuse or neglect. I mean, the basic concept here is that you are

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sharing something Sorry, I lost you for a second, can you repeat what you just said? Okay.

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I heard what you said about the definition, and then you cut out. Okay, yeah. So the the, the basic idea here to me is that you are sharing something of yourself, and exposing it to a person or persons

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that can be used in a way that is, you know, could be you could be portrayed or seen as weak, or flawed, maybe even deeply flawed in some way, has the potential to be used

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against you, in some fashion that could be harmful. And you're in you're trusting that that person or persons in trusting them with this information or what you're sharing, that they won't do that. And so it's a pretty, it's a pretty important act, I think, for both the person who's doing it and the person or persons that are on the receiving end. And that's actually a big fear for a lot of people when it comes to vulnerability is, yeah, I'm going to share something and somebody's going to use it against me.

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So if that's your kind of the definition of being a vulnerable leader, can you share a time? Or do you have any stories or examples of when you had to be vulnerable with someone at work?

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Well, I just went through pretty significant one.

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At the end of 2021.

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I think everybody went through some very stressful times during the pandemic. I think in many respects, the challenges that I faced in my family faced were

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you know, we were very benefit, we were very privileged in that time to stay healthy and have access to you know, food and a home and

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and not have to venture outdoors very much during a risky time. So in many respects, I'd say the things that we faced as a family were maybe not at the same scale as others did. But at the same time, it was very stressful. I volunteered myself along with other Blue Shield of California employees twice during that time to help the state out first with COVID testing and then with vaccinations. And the workload was preposterous it was,

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you know, for me personally, it was seven days a week, and probably 100 hour weeks, you know, on average for several months. That's crazy, you know, Saturday looked like Monday, and

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it was very intense, because you were you know, it was we felt like we were trying to save lives. And it was a really important cause. And there was urgency and importance to it. And I feel great about the results that we got, but it took a personal toll on me and it also affected my family as well. And by the time that I got to the end of 2021 I was certainly personally burned out. But then we also kind of hit an important

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stress just within the within my family. That was probably the biggest thing that I faced personally in terms of the highest stress level that I can remember. And

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so the combination

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Seven, being,

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you know, physically and I think mentally and emotionally burned out from work. And then, you know, having all of your reserves

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and your resilience be down at a very low level, and then

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be facing this

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unprecedented for me at least emotional challenge personally, it was

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I was going through long stretches where I just was barely sleeping, and having a hard time, just

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honestly, like, I would cry just about every day, like I knock over a glass of milk and it felt like it will be devastating. I mean, it's kind of at that point where I, you know, I could feel that it was it was hard to card sort of keep things together. And,

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and so what was happening was it it started to come out in, challenging, I started to lash out more

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in meetings when things weren't going the way I wanted them to go. And it was having a really bad impact on my team.

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And at one point, I could tell, you know, I almost had this out of body experience, I could tell, I don't want to be saying it this way I don't want to be doing in this way. And I can't help myself, I just can't stop myself from

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from doing it. And I felt really badly afterwards.

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And I remember

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that one of my direct reports called me and talked to me, and I just I apologized to him for the, you know, the way that I behaved. And he started to give me feedback about how that made him feel and how it just, you know, it was not acceptable behavior to him, and I, and I just lost it, you know, I just started

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crying on the phone, and I could not stop for quite a while and he was very good. He gave me the space to talk about it. And and I just I told him, Look, this is not an excuse, but I'm going through a lot.

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Here, you're right on all those counts, and I need to be better. And I just want to provide you some context about,

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about what I'm going through and why it is that I'm

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showing up this way. I'm not showing up as my best self. And,

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and, and it's, you know, that felt about as vulnerable as I felt in a long time. Yeah, I share a lot of things personally like that. And also, then I'd say Jacob back to that my coach went and got feedback, and basically the feedback that he was giving me in that moment I was getting from the rest of the team as well. So then I went through a set of cycles, where I was talking to the team about what I was going through how hard it was apologizing to them for showing up that way, talking through what I would do about it. So yeah, it was a it's pretty exhausting. Yeah, I can imagine.

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Yeah, that I mean, that's definitely a very, very vulnerable moment, right? When you're crying on the phone, you're talking to somebody, they're telling you stuff and you just kind of like lose it.

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And so what did the what was the impact of that? You think on the other person, so he hears you breaking down, he sees you being emotional not being your true self? And then what what happened to him?

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Well, I think that we had enough of a relationship up until that he knows I always knew that my intentions were good. My behavior was probably not good. Well, it wasn't good. But my intentions were good. And I think this just reinforced that there for him that there was something more going on. Because we had had, you know, challenges or conflicts before, but it wasn't like I was losing it. That situation. So there was clearly some other factors

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there going on, and he was very supportive at the time, you know, also just

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and so he made it certainly made it safe for me to, to express myself in that way. And which which helps. Yeah, and I would imagine, right, I mean, working 100 hour weeks probably arguments with the spouse tough relationship with kids a lot of stress at home, and it's just, it's all just kind of piles on and it makes it very, very hard.

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So how come you weren't vulnerable with somebody before that, like why did it get to that point? Do you think like, why couldn't you open up and share that you were struggling and going through these tough times? With somebody, you know, three months before this happened?

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Yeah, well, in hindsight, I probably should have. Right I mean, it's it's always easier to look back at it at that point.

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I do think that when you are the CEO, there's, I think a certain I feel a sense of response.

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ability and burden not to put burdens on other people.

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And I do think that it can be very unsettling for people. If the CEO himself or herself is unsettled, he can feel like oh, maybe the organization isn't gonna be, maybe he or she is not going to be around, like, what does this mean? What does this mean, for me? Was it mean for the company. And so

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I think there's a temptation that I give into probably too often, and maybe others do, too, when you're at the top of an organization to not want to share to that level, for fear of creating fear in others about what it might mean for them and for the organization and for their team. So in retrospect, I probably should have, and,

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and I really was trying to avoid it for those reasons. Well, you make an interesting point, because I think leaders are under a tremendous amount of pressure. And you kind of like, what you were saying is, you don't want to scare other people, you don't want to make other people feel unsettled. But at the same time, it makes it very hard to lead, right? Because if you don't have anybody that you can talk to over and up to at work and share these things with. And it's like, Where does you know, where do you go?

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So what I mean, what do you do? What do you see other leaders out there? Do if sometimes you can't share these things with with your people? Or do you think that you can? And it's just you didn't do it? Well, no, I think that

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I think that you can I do think you have to be selective. I mean, if if, if you're, if people around you at work, think you're going through a therapy session, every quarter, they're going to start wondering about you as a leader, I mean, that's just a fact, there's no way around it.

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At the same time to just never be sharing at that level is going to limit your effectiveness as a leader as well. So there's going to be a judgment call about when and how you share things like that with your team members. It can't be zero, and it can't be 100%. But for me, I'd say there's two, two places that I go. And I've seen others do that, too. I mean, I've got an incredible

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spouse and partner. We've been married for 27 years. And she's congratulation I just lean on her. Thank you. Yeah, I lean on that relationship heavily. In particularly in tough times, and then

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they're all professionally, that's one of the reasons why they have, you know, chat groups and confidential talk groups with CEOs, because I think you have a chance to share things professionally, things that are challenging, or that you, you really aren't at liberty to share within your organization, because you don't have any peers. So having those peer conversations is a safe way to say, Well, I'm having this challenge within the team or with my board or something else. And you really don't want to go back to your team and say, well, here's what I'm have this issue with the board, that is maybe not where you're going to get your best advice. And it runs some of the same risks about going into Dynamics. Fortunately, I haven't really had many of those issues myself, but I know a number of my colleagues out based on these meetings. Yeah, but that'd be an example of having a safe place to

share. Professionally, if you can't do it. within your own organization, do you find leadership sometimes can be a lonely, lonely job?

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Yes.

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I don't find it lonely in general. But there are times it's lonely. And I would say the loneliest is when you have to fire a friend.

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You develop a lot of you have an obligation as a leader, you have a fiduciary responsibility to do what is in the best interest of that organization. And sometimes what's in the best interest of the organization is to part ways with an individual and yet you may have developed a really strong affinity for them. And usually I do frankly, I I talk about love in the workplace a lot, because I think that

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that those strong bonds and emotional connections are a part of what can make it a great place to work, can part of what can help people bring their best self to work. But when you have to then turn around and

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when the right thing to do in your job is to ask them to leave.

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And yet you have this, you know, deep caring for them. It's really only because nobody else gets to do it. You can't delegate it. There's no escaping all the emotion that's involved in it. It's the hardest part of the job for sure. So I'm assuming you've had to fire a friend. I have and is that is there vulnerability in that?

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Oh, there absolutely is. Yeah, I mean, it's it's

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because for me,

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I can't divorce those two things. I can't somehow separate them out. So you show up with your whole cell

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If you have this,

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you know, this

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strong feeling for this person, you want them to be safe, you want them to feel good, you want them to be okay. You know, but you know, the news you're going to share is potentially going to make them not okay. And, and I fortunately for me,

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I've never surprised somebody with that news, it does never come out of left field, we've always had multiple conversations leading up to it.

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That have also been usually stressful, and you'd had to be vulnerable. But for me, I was just trying to show up and be really clear about two things. One is,

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what I think about them as a person, and how much I care and respect them as a person. And what I need as a leader of the company from them in the role that they're in and where it's not working. And so, you know, I just do my best to share both of those things. And I'm fortunate in that the vast majority of the time, I've actually managed to maintain really good relationships.

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Even after that, but not always. Yeah, I can imagine. So why is letting go of a friend vulnerable? Like, what what about that process is vulnerable in terms of like putting yourself out there? You know, because a lot of people might view that as, hey, come into my office, you're fired. I'm sorry. It's not working out. Some people might be letting somebody go is not being vulnerable is being kind of like automatic. Why is it vulnerable to you? And what what does that actually mean during that process? Well, it's vulnerable to me, because you're you're literally, for me, I don't dwell on it. But I can't help but express how torn I am. Yeah. And how hard it is. And frankly, it's hard for them. So I tend to tend to focus more on them. But I never in my life had a poker face, I will never be a good poker player, I'm always the person who's going to be paying too much into the pot. And people can read me pretty easily. And so I don't try to hide it. It's really clear when people walk in, even if I don't express it out loud. How torn I am, how hard it is, for me to do what I'm doing. And that I think is where the vulnerability is, at least for me. Yeah. Oh, why be vulnerable? You know, the one of the questions I always ask to CEOs is we all know a lot of CEOs and leaders out there who are not vulnerable at all, and they make billions of dollars, they have huge, successful companies, 1000s of employees, and you look at them, and you think they're robots.

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So why why not be like that, Paul? Why? Why share? Why do all the things that you're doing, why show emotion if you don't have to?

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I have multiple reasons. One is happiness is priceless. And you just, you're my life at least, is so much more rich and joyous in being able to make those human connections with other people, including at work. And you really can't make those deep connections without sharing at a level that makes you vulnerable. So that would be number one. It just it brings, it's a source of joy. For me. And I think for others, more practically speaking in terms of your effectiveness as a leader.

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There's always a power dynamic when you're at the head of a company. And

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there's always a level of, for many people.

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That nervousness fear, because of that power dynamic when they're meeting or seeing or interacting with

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the CEO. And so

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when you make yourself vulnerable, and you share,

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it feels safer for people that would otherwise feel maybe less safe in your presence, and their willingness to engage and share and trust you with some things

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increases, you also become far more relatable as a human being.

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And I think that sometimes CEOs are seen as I you know, caricatures of some sort, you know, it's like, no, no, we get up and you know, shave and shower and eat and you know, we're that is not really, we got stuff to deal with just like you've got stuff to deal with. I mean, we are human beings after all, but sometimes you sort of get this sense of, you're at least within that little sphere, like the 7000 plus employees for us. You're kind of a celebrity within that small bubble. And you almost get thought of sometimes and treated that way. And so when you when you can share that way be vulnerable. People I think connect with you see you as more human and relate to you much more easily. I would say their comfort level just goes up. So all those things help you

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be a more effective leader. And I think in the long run, it also creates a much more sustainable success with your legacy, like when you do leave when someone else takes over,

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hopefully in the same mold, whatever you put in place kind of stays with people a lot more. Whereas I think for folks that aren't that are more robotic, as you described, I think they have a very difficult time having those companies sustain results after they've gone. Yeah. Ya know, couldn't agree more. Can you think of a time or a story when somebody was vulnerable with you?

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Oh, absolutely. Yeah. I mean, it's,

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it's, it's happened in, you know, multiple circumstances where

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sometimes it's when people are sharing.

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They're dealing with their own personal crises, I've had multiple

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people at work, who've either personally gone through major health issues, or had spouses and parents go through those health issues. And talk to me about their fear. I remember, I can't clearly one case, just how much fear

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encourage Well, one of my team members displayed going through a situation like that. And she talked to me about the also the sense of loss,

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experienced by having to go through this. And it ended up taking her away from work for a period of time and how much of her self identity was wrapped up in work, and how hard it was to

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be in a period of time where, you know, she had to really identify herself in a different way. And how difficult that was, the circumstances themselves were hard enough. But being able to share that deeply about what it meant for her

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to be dealing with that challenge, and how the toll that it took on her mentally and emotionally to not be

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really not be able to work anywhere near the level that she had previously. That's that that was the major vulnerability. I can remember. Yeah, no, it's a big one. And so when somebody shared their vulnerability with you, what impact did that have on you?

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I just the level of empathy

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just goes through the roof for me. I mean, I just I'm there with them. I'm feeling what they're feeling. I'm

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immediately projecting myself walking in their shoes. I

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mean, it's, it's very emotional for me, when when someone's sharing like that, and I will do my best to express it and support them in that and encourage them. So yeah, I just I feel like

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when I get done with those conversations, I just feel like I've been through the wringer emotionally, because I've just lived a part of their life with them.

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And what does it do afterwards? Does it create more of a connection between you and that person? Oh, absolutely. Not. For me, it does. You know, I think that there's,

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you find out the most about people during times of adversity, you know, everything's going well, it's easy to have principles and values on the wall and everything else. But it's when, you know, the place goes to hell in a handbasket that you find out

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who you can really count on.

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Whether that's in your personal life, or your work life. And so it's in these situations with people being vulnerable with me.

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And me showing up and doing everything I can to support them in their circumstances, that creates this incredible sense of I can count on you. I can trust you, I can trust you with this information. And I can count on you to be there for me when when times are tough, when I've got a real big challenge in front of me. And

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and so yeah, it I think it does a lot to create a bond because that's like anyone can look like a great leader when

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life is going well. And your business is going really well and everybody's doing their job and there aren't any major crises to deal with. But when something does strike, that's when you find out what everybody's made of. What do you think comes first leadership role or vulnerability? So I was talking to the CEO of American Airlines, for example, and he was telling me how, earlier on in the 90s, the CEO of continental when the company wasn't doing well. He sent out an email to all of his employees and he said profit a company. And that's it. And so when I was talking to Doug Parker, the CEO of American he's like, You know what, that's a

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vulnerable thing to say, but that's not there's no leadership there.

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So he said, there's, he gives us a very good analogy. And basically, you know, there's a difference between being vulnerable versus being a vulnerable leader. And about and he said that you need to be both. And it's okay to say, hey, the company is you know, we're struggling. But here's what we're gonna do. Here's how we're gonna get there. I have a plan I have a vision of. So I guess in your case, are those ever at odds with each other, like the vulnerability piece and the leadership piece?

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They haven't been so far, Jacob, but they can be I think, if you you can overdo it. I don't think I've ever really been at risk of overdoing it, because it hasn't come naturally for me over time. Said being vulnerable hasn't come natural. No, no, it's it's it's work. And I mean, it's more natural now. But it's not where I naturally go. Yeah. And so.

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So I but I do think that when you think about leadership, leadership, there's

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a pretty broad set of skills and characteristics I think you need to bring to the table in order to be an effective leader and vulnerability is one of them. And it's really important, but it's not the only one. And so, and it's situational, I say all the time that great leaders do what's needed. And what's needed for your organization at a given point is dynamic, it changes it shifts.

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And so, you know, there may be times where, wow, like we're we're in an existential crisis as a company. And, and we're looking at a potential turnaround, and the kind of the way that you need to lead in those circumstances can be very different than when you've got

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a very healthy company that's doing really well. And then something like the murder of George Floyd happens.

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And if you show up starting to talk about, you know, financial performance, instead of saying, Oh, my God, I just witnessed this man being callously murdered in the street, and it has deeply affected me and started and made me also think very deeply about racism in this country, and what we can do to address it, maybe you're not showing up and talking about that.

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And sharing from that level, then I think people would look at you very different than what you're what's going on. So. But if you shut up and started talking about how you feel about just out of the blue, you know, you're maybe a quarter away from financial insolvency, and you started to talk about, you know, the diversity, equity inclusion efforts of the company, people would also look at you like, what is wrong, I mean, not that those aren't important social issues. But, you know, we're all going to be out of jobs if you can't turn this around. So you need to demonstrate some competence here. And you know, and have a plan. So, I think it really depends on on the circumstances, Jacob, but in terms of

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in terms of being an effective leader, and also when and how to be vulnerable and having that help you be a more effective leader versus maybe create more of a problem than it helps. You said that this isn't natural to you. And I suspect it's not natural for the majority of people who are going to read the book and listen to this and watch this. Why is it not natural? Is your did you used to be like a command and control CEO don't show emotion? You know, that guy from office space? Yeah, I'd say, maybe not quite that extreme. But I, there's two things. The first is

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the way I'm wired, I almost always go to analyzing the situation, and coming up with a plan, or a strategy or a vision for how to make the situation better. And so I'm naturally wired and predisposed to go to my head first. And think something through even affairs of the heart be like, Okay, I want you know, that we think this thing through. And so it's kind of an overused strength, to be analytical, and use some critical thinking, and figure out a plan or a vision for how to address a particular situation, as opposed to feeling like how do I connect with this person? And starting with the heart, it's just not, I'm not I'm wired to start with my head, not my heart. So that would be the first thing and the second thing is, I think when I started at work, I had this notion that at work, you were professional and you interacted professionally and you just worked on work. And then you had your personal life, and in my personal life, much more willing to be

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Be vulnerable and share those things. But at work, it's like you're working. And so

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I'm not sure where that came from, I just kind of had that assumption coming into the workplace. So it was also, it felt like also an unnatural act, to then start bringing that those personal vulnerabilities personal stories into a workplace where it's like, but we're supposed to just be getting work done. So I think for both those reasons, it hasn't been natural for me.

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How do you work on it? Because I'm sure that's probably what a lot of people are thinking. Like, okay, it's it wasn't natural for Paul. It's not natural for me. Paul, did it. I want to do what did this guy figure out? So how do you work on this? Yeah, well, Jacob, you know, here's the thing is, I remember vividly this story that a first time authors told a long time ago, and I don't remember his name. But he he really aspired to write a novel. And he started going around and asking people,

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what he should do, to get prepared to write this novel, you know, what workshops, he should go to what books he should read. And he kept getting advice that said, just right, just right, to sit down and start writing the thing, and then rewrite it and rewrite it and rewrite it. And you just if you want to be a writer, right, if you want to be vulnerable, just be vulnerable. I mean, you have to figure out the way to do it yourself. And you have to try it. And it's you know, life is not a dress rehearsal. So, you know, for me,

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what has worked well, for me is just

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it's a it's a fundamental core value of mine to be authentic, and everything that I do, you know, so I don't lie. There's times where I had to say to people, you may be really interested about this potential acquisition that's out there. That's been rumored. I can't talk about anything like that. So I will tell you, when I can't talk about something, you know, being honest, is not always full disclosure, because there's confidences you have to keep.

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But there's times I never understood where people will say, Well, they've asked me a question about x. That's a sensitive topic. And I don't want them concluding that even though it might be true. So I'm going to say, why instead, is like, why are you doing that? You don't you can, you can say when there's something that's a topic that's off limits, and I do otherwise, people, they need to see you, when they see you as authentic generally, in the way you engage and honest and open and accessible, then when you are vulnerable,

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they're far more likely to see it and receive it as authentic. So I do think for me, the fact that I kind of show up, and I'm very open and honest and transparent. And I think perceived as authentic is that when I have been vulnerable, and you're clearly going to feel awkward and everything, it will land the right way. If you are not that way in general, then then folks, it might be a little more suspicious as to why you're, you're sharing it. But I think the only way to do it, frankly, is you find your own way by doing it. And the more you do it, think the better that you get at it. And so I don't have any advice other than humans get better when they practice? Yeah, no, that's good advice. I mean, like the Nike always says, right, just do it.

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Yeah, maybe I should have started with that slogan would have made the podcast a little more efficient. So one of the things that a lot of people are scared of is, I don't want to be vulnerable, because people

are gonna think that I'm weak or incompetent or stupid or lazy, or, you know, whatever the the negative description might be. What advice do you have for people who want to be vulnerable, but not perceived as being weak? How do you do that?

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I just don't worry about perceptions. You know, because the perceptions, you can't control the perception, you can't worry about the things you can't control. And, and for people that, that jumped to that conclusion, they're probably not people whose opinion you're really worried about, or should be worried about.

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The people whose opinion that really matters to you, the people that you respect, and admire and care about the most. They're very unlikely to jump to that conclusion about you. Yeah. And so

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I think that

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the most important thing is just be confident in yourself that this is real for you. You know, if it's, if it's real and authentic and genuine for you, and you're expressing it in an authentic and genuine way.

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That's all you can do. And then after that, it's just out there and people are gonna react and respond the way they react and respond.

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And you just got to feel good about it was real for you. It was true for you true with a little t not an objective truth with a capital T. And as long as that's the case, you're gonna have people especially if you're vulnerable to a larger group, and you know, and I have been like with all in

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Ways that you know, at times, and you know, you're never going to get 1000s of people to agree on their reaction to you. So don't, don't sweat it, just be confident in yourself that you're, you're doing the right thing in the right way. A dog jumped onto my lap. She's the I see that yeah, you've got a you've got a buddy there. She's now a guest. She occasionally chimney Connie appearance.

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So, you know, it's interesting about vulnerability, like don't worry about other people's perceptions. But there also have been plenty of times where people have been vulnerable at work, and somebody takes that vulnerability, and use it against them. You know, you share something and somebody says, I told you, Paul couldn't do it. See, he told me first Has that ever happened to you? And second, what if that happens to somebody? Do you just keep going you just ignore it? And because oftentimes, that could keep people from being vulnerable again? Well, no, I do think look at things can go or I they can go wrong. For sure. And it's

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and I think some environments are highly dysfunctional, and make it

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very difficult, if not unsafe, to be sharing at that level. And so I don't want to be pollyannish about it, there are risks associated with it. If you're feeling unsafe, my I've got a couple of suggestions here. One would be,

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make sure you seek out the people that you trust that you truly trust, and start with them. And make sure they understand who you are, what this vulnerability is that you're potentially going to share with others. What the story in the context is, and so that they have your back.

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Yeah, and,

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and I remember, being at one point, in a work environment where it was pretty dysfunctional.

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And there were people that were willing to just,

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you know, attack you in

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it to just try and prevent, you know, I was like, for me, I was getting promoted, and I was clearly pretty clearly getting promoted. And, you know, there were people that would have preferred themselves to get promoted into some of these roles. And so, you know, at one point, I had developed a really strong working relationship with a woman who reported to me.

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I mean, I had done that with everybody really, that I worked for me, but I had with her and

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and so what they had, or what some people had started to do was basically start a rumor that it was a romantic relationship, not just a professional relationship, which there was no truth to that whatsoever. Wow. And fortunately, my boss knew that. He knew me. I had been talking to him about it. I had been talking to him about how I had been working with her and what had been happening along the way. I had been talking to him openly about my worry, that this could be misconstrued.

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And getting his advice, for example, on how I might handle it, if it did get misconstrued. And so what ended up happening is, these folks sort of went to him and said, Oh, we think this is going on.

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And it there was there's no proof, there's no real other than just it was kind of gossip and rumor. And as a result, when he told me about it, I just said, well, then you need to do an investigation. He said, No, I don't. Because there's no credibility to any of this. So there's no need to do an investigation. So I do think that that would be an example of I felt like I was in a dysfunctional situation. I anticipated what could go wrong by virtue of leaning in and having this strong connection with this employee. And I tried to sort of anticipate it and make sure that people that I trusted had my back when the viciousness came out. That's a good story. Because for a lot of people that could prevent them from ever wanting to get close to any coworker, male or female. Precisely. Yeah. So I mean, I've heard men say, I will go out to dinner or lunch or be in a room alone. And it's like, well, if you're going to be in a room alone with men, and then you're not going to be in a room alone with a woman, then it's unfair access to you, it's really not, you know, you're not being you know, equitable as a leader. And it's problematic. So you, you it is it can be can be challenging. So how did you get over that right and get over that?

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Because you probably must have been thinking at one point like, that's it I'm never gonna get close to anybody else I've ever worked with. But clearly you did. So how did you get over that?

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You know, that that mental I would say in terms of being ticked off at the people that did it. I don't know that I've ever really gotten over that. Yeah. Um, but but, you know, I would go back to Jacob, you know, the people that know me.

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Like that. First of all, I have a set of personal

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values in the way I want to live my life and,

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and I just am committed to them. And I just figure I've realized for a while now that if you want to try and make a difference in the world and be a leader at any particular level, you just have to keep trying to do the right thing and know that people are constantly going to be some people are going to be constantly accusing you the exact opposite. And you can't control that, they're going to do it for their own motives and reasons. But you can create these connections with people that you do admire and respect and even love in a in a professional context and, and create these bonds and really make a difference in the world. And not everyone's gonna react that way. And,

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but it's a lot easier to, to quote the Taylor Swift song and shake it off, if you've got a support group there. If you've got people who, you know, and admire and respect, they know who you are. And they

know if something like this were to pop up, you know that. It's just nonsense. And when you've got that, I think you've got a pretty firm foundation. It's interesting, because a couple CEOs I've interviewed mentioned this idea of like, informal advisory appear like a trust group of people that they can go to, to share things. Can you talk a little bit about how you develop this group? Is it? You know, do you formally go up to people and say, Hey, is it okay, if I come to you with with with things? Or did you just start doing it one day?

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They get in what do you look for in these people?

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Well, I first of all, I don't think you get forced this. Jacob, I think that you have to

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do this connections come more organically and naturally, over time. And, you know, the first thing that I look for is this somebody that I can trust, we talked about how you really learn a lot about people in adverse circumstances. And so being knowing that I've gone through something with someone where they've stuck it out and a tough time been there been trustworthy, in multiple circumstances is is important. And when I see that they have they genuinely, care, respect for me, can provide some insight and guidance and help and are trustworthy. Those are the general characteristics that I look for. And yeah, I mean, it's, it's, you know, I don't necessarily go out and formally, say, I'm going to have this network, and I'm going to organize this group, and you're going to be a part of this group, it's more in key situations, when I think they can be beneficial. I just reach out to them directly and say, I could use your help. And I would say, somewhere between 10 and 10 times out of 10. They're there.

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Yeah, no, I think that's an important thing for people to have. Because it's hard to be vulnerable. I think when you're alone, if you don't feel like you've got people to talk to you don't have that peer group, I think you can make it

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me can make it pretty challenging. So having somebody like that at work is probably pretty important.

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Yeah, I know, we only have a couple of minutes left. So maybe you want one or two more questions for you? What are some of the elements that you think are required for vulnerability? In other words, are things like self awareness, empathy? compat? Like, what? What elements are required? Do you think,

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to allow for vulnerability to flourish?

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I would say self confidence and security as a base. And where that comes from? How do you how do you build that? Well, I think it goes back to what you were just talking about yet. First of all, you have to

feel good about yourself, and that this is authentic, and true and real for you. I think you want a base of support. And I talked about the relationship with my wife personally. There's other friends as well, that that I trust implicitly people on your professional network that you know, are going to be there in good times and in bad and you and you know, they've got your back. So having that base where you feel like

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even I put myself out there, these people know who I am. And they will be there for me. That's, that's important as a part of this, to give yourself the confidence to go out there, put something out there and have it potentially go wrong.

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So I would say that's number one.

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Number two is I think it is self awareness, in the sense that you are aware of what's going on inside of you.

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And being able to

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know how you're feeling and why you're feeling the way that you are.

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And being able to identify that and articulate that is

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important because sometimes you can feel all those emotions but if you just express the emotions, but you can't really share the why.

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You know what, what you're feeling what you're going through and the why you're going through it

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But then it's a lot harder for the other party to, to have that empathy or understanding or to be able to help you through that process.

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And, and then I think the other part of the self awareness is, how is what I'm saying or sharing impacting the party or parties I'm sharing it with. So being self aware in the sense that you can identify how you're feeling, but also self aware of the impact you're having on others as you do it. And then being able to read that it's like, oh, I'm freaking these people out completely. Maybe I should hit the pause button.

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Yeah, those are probably the main elements from my vantage point. Yeah, no, that makes a lot of sense. It kind of the internal and the external, external self awareness piece? Yeah.

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What about the role that boundaries play? Do you think you need boundaries when it comes to vulnerability?

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While I do think, I mean, look, you we have boundaries in the workplace, we have boundaries, and they're there for a good reason. And there are, I think, some limits as to where you're, you're gonna go with conversations.

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And, you know, and, and they should be there. I mean, you, you can imagine a scenario where, like, you know, I shouldn't be running around probably talking about sex in the workplace, and I just would not be appropriate.

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You know, and I don't play I never have, and I don't plan to but, but I mean, you can't be boundless, I can talk about any topic that happens to be on my mind, or going on in my personal life. And, and, and share it with people, when you're in those. In those circumstances. At the same time, I think as long as you're being genuine, authentic, real, and consistent with your values in what you're sharing, and not imposing yourself on someone else. Like, if I were to, if I were to talk about

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sex, it would be like, you can imagine it could be one of those lb mi two moments, right? It's gonna make, potentially, it's not just me being vulnerable, sharing some topic. It's making the person across them wonder what my motives are, or what's going on here, what it might mean for them, and makes them you know, starts to create, you know, fear and insecurity in them. So I think we're, you know, you're gonna have boundaries at work. But I think the good rule of thumb is, as long as it's true on authentic for you. And as long as it's not something that creates a pretty high risk of putting the party or parties you're sharing it with, in an uncomfortable situation, where they feel insecure or uncomfortable, then I think it's pretty safe.

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But, you know, it's always here. As long as you're following those things. I think you're okay. What if you are working with people who are not vulnerable? So I hear this come up a lot, right? You know, I want to be vulnerable at work, but my leaders, not those around me that, you know, this isn't how they work. This isn't what they believe in. What do I do? Do I just quit? Do I try to introduce vulnerability? Well, I mean, I had I, here's the thing is, I think what you do is you get as a leader. First of all, you need to insist that the leader gets feedback.

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And if that feedback needs to be anonymous, then it needs to be anonymous. I have a coach, every six months, he goes in interviews, my direct reports.

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And he gives me all the feedback. And it's all anonymous. It doesn't come from me as confidential. I mean, I know it's from my direct reports, but it's never identified with a specific person. Yeah. And so it's that feedback needs to come back. And I remember the first time that I got the feedback along the lines of what you just described,

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someone who wrote in the comments, I feel like I'm working with a robot. Right? And so it was like, Wow, this hit me square between the eyes, they're clearly not getting, they're not feeling a connection with me. And that is nobody said that about you. Yeah, early on, early on in my career, I got that feedback. So I get it. I don't get that now. But back when I was in a work is work and personal is personal. And you know, never the twain shall meet. Yeah, I definitely got that feedback. So if that feedback loop isn't there, and you may not feel comfortable giving it directly, but you should be in an organization or or insist that you give have a chance to give feedback in some way so that the leader can start working on the things that need to work up. Yeah. Our very last question for you. Anything else that you want to share about vulnerability? Is there a question that I should have asked you but didn't or another story that pops into mind anything else before we we wrap up?

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No, I just go back to what I said before, which is I think the only way to

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To do this in a way that helps you be happier as a person and better as a leader is to try it. Yeah. And you're gonna get there through trial and error. So that's the best advice I can give you. I love it. Paul, I appreciate it. Thank you so much for sharing your insights and taking time out of your day to speak with me. Is my pleasure. I hope it helps. Oh, I'm sure it will. I'm sure a lot of people will learn from it and thanks, everyone for tuning in.