

The Impact of Vulnerable Leadership on Employee Empowerment

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Abstract

This research explores the concept of vulnerability in leadership, emphasizing a paradigm shift from traditional notions that prioritize strength and invulnerability. Vulnerability is redefined as a tool for successful leaders to navigate physical, mental, and emotional experiences, fostering authenticity and openness. The researcher conducted a qualitative case study using semistructured interviews with three business leaders in the services, banking, and healthcare industries. The study identified three key aspects of vulnerable leadership: modeling vulnerability, investing time, and displaying empathy using Kanter's theory of structural empowerment. Followers experience reduced vulnerability when their leaders exhibit humility which weakens as the sincerity of leader humility diminishes. Modeling vulnerability involves leaders openly acknowledging limitations, uncertainties, and mistakes while creating a culture of transparency and continuous improvement. Investing time in understanding and connecting with team members on a personal level is a crucial leadership style. Results showed that vulnerability, when embraced by leaders, contributed to the normalization of fairness and equity without compromising resources, ultimately enhancing strategic success. Limitations of the study included the lack of generalizability and direct correlational analyses between vulnerability and organizational revenue generation. Future implications of the study could explore measurable objectives for vulnerable leaders in terms of innovation, transformational leadership, and employee growth and development.

Keywords

Employee Empowerment, Strategic Management, Transformational Leadership, Interpersonal Relationships, Value-Added Decision Making

1. Introduction

The term *vulnerability* is derived from the Latin *vulnus* (“wound”) or the degree

to which the individual experiences a variety of weaknesses that can be exploited or triggered (National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2024). Vulnerability, historically marginalized in its reference, has become a state of being in the honest form (Hill & Sharma, 2020). Instead of understanding it as merely a weakness, successful leaders use vulnerability as a tool, navigating through physical, mental, and emotional experiences (Fry & Vu, 2024). Employees continuously evaluate the strength of their relationship with leaders and whether they receive adequate resources from them prior to leaving the organization (Becker, Ertz, & Büttgen, 2023). According to conservation of resources theory (COR) or the concept that the loss of resources is more painful than the gain of resources (Wu & Lee, 2020). To protect their resources, followers might follow a respected leader to a new organization at the cost of giving up their current job (Becker, Ertz, & Büttgen, 2023).

The relational view includes the interconnectedness of physical, emotional, and social interdependency between individuals (Fry & Vu, 2024). Vulnerability likely fosters understanding as a pre-condition for relationship building (O'Reilly & Chatman, 2020). Some leaders who share frustrations and joyous moments allow others to relate which can improve relationship empathy and compassion (Pullen & Vachhani, 2020). Vulnerable leaders welcome others to share experiences with the goal of forming closer connections (Ito & Bligh, 2016).

Three key explorations in this study suggest that vulnerable leaders a) model vulnerability, b) invest time, and c) display empathy. Followers must trust leaders' actions match their decision-making ability. Leaders who project their true feelings refuse to hide them when challenges occur. While some leaders openly share their weaknesses, research from the *Global Leadership Forecast* stated 24% of senior leaders said they allow themselves to be vulnerable with others at work. Less than half of senior leaders said they accepted their personal failures and shortcomings (Development Dimensions International, 2023). Direct reports disagreed by asserting only 13% of senior executives were willing to be vulnerable and 26% of the direct reports genuinely acknowledged their own failures (Development Dimensions International, 2023). Individuals who feel apprehensive about sharing might fear how the information will be perceived. Modeling vulnerability requires leaders to be open to criticism and make changes to perceived negative behaviors to exercise continuous improvement.

2. Literature Review

Vulnerable leadership is a relatively recent but increasingly significant concept in leadership studies. It counters preconceived notions of the traditional standards that often emphasize strength, control, and infallibility in leaders. Instead, vulnerable leadership promotes authenticity, openness, and the ability to acknowledge one's own limitations and mistakes. This literature review examines the evolution of the concept, its theoretical foundations, key dimensions, and implications for leadership practice.

The concept of vulnerable leadership has evolved significantly over time, shifting from a traditional, hierarchical view of leadership that emphasized strength, control, and authority, to a more relational and emotionally intelligent approach. Initially, leaders were required to appear infallible, always in control, measured, and immune to mistakes to maintain respect and authority. Vulnerability was considered a weakness, something to avoid in the competitive and high-pressure environments of business and governance (Kellerman, 2004). Leaders were expected to always project an image of certainty and confidence, which often resulted in a culture of masculine dominance, inauthenticity, and disengagement (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011).

By the late 20th and early 21st centuries, leadership scholars and practitioners began to challenge this rigid notion. Influential works, such as Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence* (1995), introduced the idea that emotional awareness and interpersonal skills, including vulnerability, were critical for effective leadership. Goleman's research demonstrated that leaders who could connect with others on an emotional level were more successful in motivating teams and fostering collaboration. Empathy and self-awareness became more important leadership traits which marked a significant shift in leadership perceptions.

The concept of vulnerable leadership gained further momentum with the work of researchers such as Brené Brown, whose studies on shame, courage, and vulnerability highlighted the importance of authenticity in leadership. In her book *Dare to Lead* (2018), Brown argued that vulnerability is not about weakness but rather about courage and emotional honesty. She posited that leaders who are willing to admit mistakes, ask for help, and acknowledging uncertainty create environments of trust and psychological safety, which are crucial for innovation, engagement, and resilience in teams. This evolving understanding of leadership reflects a broader cultural shift towards valuing emotional intelligence and human-centered leadership in a rapidly changing and interconnected world.

Historically, leadership theories have evolved from trait-based and behavioral approaches to more complex paradigms that include transformational and servant leadership. Some experts suggested a more adaptable style of leadership facilitates adeptness through challenging situations (Deep, 2023). Vulnerable leadership integrates elements of authenticity and emotional intelligence, stimulating its users to think outside the box to gain respect from followers (Matilda, Anthony Kwarteng Addai-Amoah, & Kuranchie, 2022). A general medical practitioner might be vulnerable with their patients by reassuring them that certain temporary, curable ailments are shared by other patients experiencing similar symptoms while the same general medical practitioner might display discernment, innovative thought, and resolve when communicating with board members of a medical facility. The early 21st century experienced acknowledgement of the emotional and relational pillars of leadership, partly influenced by scholars like Brené Brown, whose work on vulnerability has significantly impacted leadership dynamics. Other scholars such as Patrick Lencioni focused on group behaviors that

determine success while Simon Sinek pioneered empathetic leadership through his research on trust, collaboration, and innovation.

Vulnerable leadership draws from several theoretical frameworks including a) authentic leadership, b) emotional intelligence, and c) servant leadership. Authentic leadership theory posits that genuine leadership is rooted in self-awareness, transparency, and ethical behavior. Authentic leaders are true to themselves and their values, creating trust and engagement among followers (Mishra & Reddy, 2021).

Popularized by Daniel Goleman, the theory of emotional intelligence emphasizes the importance of self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills in effective leadership. Leadership roles require individuals to respond quickly to change and demonstrate agility in navigating complex scenarios (Goleman, 1995). Self-awareness is knowing how one's strengths, weaknesses, emotions, and decisions impact themselves and others. Self-regulation is the ability to control one's emotions and stressors. Self-motivation is intrinsically characterized by individuals who seek achievement regardless of reaching success (Goleman, 1995). Empathy requires business leaders to consider others' feelings when making decisions. Collectively, Goleman (1995) asserted that emotional intelligence among leaders significantly influenced managing relationships to move people in desired directions.

Self-awareness begets effective leadership, particularly in the context of vulnerable leadership. Fostering a deep understanding of one's strengths, weaknesses, emotions, better equips vulnerable leaders to recognize their limitations and embrace their imperfections. The content of self-awareness has internal and external components. Internal self-awareness includes our affect, beliefs, cognitions, interests, and meaningful experiences that allow individuals to show others who they are (London, Sessa, & Shelley, 2023). External self-awareness includes what individuals believe about what others show them (London et al., 2023). Vulnerable leaders self-evaluate in relation to what others need from them. This feedback allows individuals to recognize how people perceive them and how they might respond to others.

Some experts believe vulnerable leaders express the ability to readily empathize with others which is highly correlated to self-awareness (Eckland, Leyro, Mendes, & Thompson, 2018). While extremely difficult to accurately assess one's own empathy skills, a variety of psychological preference tests, such as Myers-Brigg Type Indicator (MTBI), add weight to anecdotal accounts of actionable empathy. Vulnerable leaders who display self-awareness monitor their responses and remember distinct language that evokes emotion during conversations (Duval & Wicklund, 1972). Leaders in some educational settings empower students to practice self-reflection exercises to provoke self-awareness (Alam & Mohanty, 2023). By harnessing students' awareness of their actions, greater consideration for others takes place (Alam & Mohanty, 2023).

Vulnerable leadership, characterized by the willingness to show one's true self,

including flaws and uncertainties, is crucial in building strong, genuine connections with others. Self-awareness is integral to this process because it allows leaders to be mindful of when and how to share their vulnerabilities in a way that is constructive rather than self-serving or overly exposing. Self-aware leaders promote followers' agency by implementing measured support. Some followers resent the notion of being saved in challenging scenarios but would rather experience a collaborative environment (Gamm, 2024).

Self-aware leaders are more likely to seek and accept feedback, understanding that it is a valuable tool for personal and professional development (London, 2023). Openness to feedback requires leaders to confront areas where they may need improvement. By revealing and working to improve deficits, leaders encourage a culture of continuous learning and development within their organizations, where team members feel empowered to grow and improve together. Ultimately, the combination of self-awareness and vulnerable leadership leads to more resilient, adaptive, and cohesive teams.

Self-regulation impacts vulnerable leaders through their ability to properly manage emotions, impulses, and behaviors, especially in challenging situations. In challenging situations, self-regulation helps individuals remain calm, composed, and thoughtful when making decisions or dealing with conflict (Goleman, 1995). This emotional control enables leaders' credibility and composure during difficult conversations or crises without letting stress or frustration dictate their actions. By demonstrating self-regulation, leaders can model emotional resilience, creating a more stable and positive environment for their teams.

The connection between self-regulation and vulnerable leadership is critical for building trust, fostering innovation, and promoting a healthy work environment. When leaders can regulate their emotions, they are better equipped to embrace vulnerability in a way that inspires others without losing authority or control (Gamm, 2024). Employees feel empowered to take risks, voice concerns, and learn from mistakes. Reserved employees might feel compelled to share ideas when leaders establish psychological safety (London, 2023). When mistakes occur, vulnerable leaders who embody self-regulation find greater value by concluding why employees make mistakes rather than punishing employees for the initial failure (Blair, 2021).

Motivation in vulnerable leadership can foster a deeper connection between leaders and their teams. When leaders are open about their challenges and emotions, they humanize themselves, making it easier for employees to relate to them. This connection enhances belonging and loyalty, which are key drivers of intrinsic motivation (Koç, Bozkurt, Taşdemir, & Günsel, 2022). Self-motivated leaders stand alongside followers in a shared vision for success. When employees feel understood and valued by their leaders, they are more likely to be motivated to contribute meaningfully to the organization's success.

Vulnerable leadership supports motivation by promoting a culture of trust and transparency. Trust is a critical factor in motivating employees, and vulnerable

leaders build trust by being authentic and honest about their experiences (Brown, 2018). Motivated leaders respect causes greater than their work by applying innovative approaches to exploit potential areas for growth while promoting organizational change (Ahsan, 2023). For instance, self-motivated leaders might predict objections from workers, stakeholders or other stakeholders and prepare an action plan (Ahsan, 2023).

Displaying empathy requires vulnerable leaders to connect with people to value and understand their contributions in an intentional, caring and meaningful way (Yue, Thelen, & Walden, 2023). A workplace built on empathy promotes strong connections between colleagues and overcomes barriers more undoubtedly (Yue et al., 2023). While difficult to measure, empathy is essential for success in the workplace to provide room for employee growth and development. Vulnerable leaders who respond with empathy are much more capable of guiding their teams through difficult situations. Empathy gives vulnerable leaders permission to impart their knowledge to others, which has an impact on employee levels of engagement and productivity. Burnout occurs when an individual fails to receive access to necessary tools, support, and recognition in their workplace to complete responsibilities (Khan, Mehmood, Le, & Khan, 2023). McKinsey and Company (2023) found in a global survey conducted across 15 countries including 15,000 employees and 1000 HR leaders that 25% of employees experienced burnout. Employees who experienced empathetic leaders tended to miss less days from work due to stress-related causes (McKinsey and Company, 2023).

Empathetic leaders encourage employees to be open about their own feelings and challenges, leading to stronger communication, improved morale, and a more cohesive team dynamic. Empathy not only enhances interpersonal relationships but also drives productivity, as employees are more motivated to perform when they feel emotionally supported by their leaders. The motives and concerns of others take precedent above forming patchy or haphazard solutions to meet deadlines (Banker & Bhal, 2020). Vulnerable leaders use intuition to recognize individuals' feelings and operationalize a plan to meet their needs (Tran, Hardie, & Cunningham, 2020). Organizations lacking empathetic leaders have high employee turnover rates (Cao & Chen, 2021). No one wants to work for a company that refuses to support their needs.

In the 2024 State of Workplace Empathy Study conducted by Businessolver, researchers found that 65% of CEO participants felt intimidated by their coworkers and using empathy would typecast them as pushovers (Businessolver, 2024). These findings suggest that empathy is not widely embraced in most workplace environments. Sixty-three percent of employees in toxic workplace environments suggested their organization needed to include more empathetic leadership (Businessolver, 2024). Empathy, when supported by leaders, can contribute to employee retention.

Savvy social skills enable vulnerable leader the ability to manage relationships, navigate social networks, and influence others effectively. Vulnerable leaders

naturally engage in honest communication and conflict resolution, key elements of strong social skills (Goleman, 1995). By being transparent about their challenges, vulnerable leaders make it easier for others to relate to them, shattering walls that might otherwise hinder effective communication.

By rejecting scarcity-plagued language in favor of abundance, vulnerable leaders give employees permission to be human and imperfect, which promotes freedom to grow from continuous learning (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021; Putnam-Walkerly, 2021). Active listening helps them be in tune with what people need in the moment and not necessarily what will solve organizational problems. When employees feel their relationships with leaders are more than transactional, team cohesion increases (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021). Leaders with strong social skills adeptly influence others by driving organizational change. Vulnerable conversations among leaders and employees generate unity by reducing the pressure to please others superficially (Lawton-Misra & Pretorius, 2021). Building genuine relationships requires socially proficient leaders who connect with intention.

Vulnerable leaders think and act strategically by increasing employee engagement. Organization members bring their authentic selves to their work roles by expressing themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances, unblinded by fear or retribution (Kahn, 1990; Sağbaş, Karabal, & Sürücü, 2021). In one study, authors attempted to establish a relationship between strategic leadership and employee engagement. Some breweries in Uganda and Ghana experienced challenges maintaining employee engagement with more than half of employees in one company spending less than 3 years in the organization (Muzee, Bagire, & Ngoma, 2016). Authors sampled 155 respondents from a population of 260 to measure strategic leadership using 147 closed ended questions including 4 metrics such as strategic direction, capacity to learn, capacity to change, and managerial wisdom based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1—no extent to 5—very large extent (Muzee et al., 2016). Results indicated there was a positive and significant relationship between strategic leadership and employee engagement (Muzee et al., 2016). Leaders who prioritize employee engagement and the capacity to learn experience stronger relationships with employees (Muzee et al., 2016).

Noble character contributing to leadership excellence impacts the behaviors vulnerable leaders model. Character, subjectively, has no consensus on a unified definition (Oc, Daniels, Diefendorff, Bashshur, & Greguras, 2020). The effort to make decisions in an ethical and efficient manner normalizes the character of leaders (Younie, 2016). Character captures individual values and beliefs which impacts organizational and employee performance (Crossan et al., 2017). Mishra and Reddy (2021) posited character as a continuum of complex traits, values, and virtues that develop over time. Oc et al. (2020) formed four hypotheses to determine whether a relationship existed between leader vulnerability and follower empowerment. The hypotheses included 1) leader humility negatively relates to follower vulnerability, 2) the authenticity of leader humility moderates the negative relationship between leader humility and follower vulnerability such that this

relationship is stronger for leaders whose humble behaviors are more authentic, 3) follower vulnerability negatively relates to follower felt authenticity, and 4) the indirect effect of leader humility on follower felt authenticity via follower vulnerability is moderated by the authenticity of leader humility, such that the indirect relationship is stronger for leaders whose humble behaviors are more authentic (Oc et al., 2020).

In the correlational analysis of the study, authors surveyed 258 full-time employee-supervisor pairs in India through Maction Consulting, a professional survey panel provider with access to a substantial participant database exceeding 15 million members, to provide evidence of organizational enhancement through vulnerable leadership (Oc et al., 2020). Participants volunteered to take part in research in exchange for compensation, receiving \$3.00 for their involvement (Oc et al., 2020). Followers answered queries about their vulnerability to leaders, along with various control variables and demographic details, while leaders assessed their own humility and its authenticity (Oc et al., 2020). In the second wave, occurring one month later, followers provided assessments of their perceived authenticity. In four studies conducted across diverse cultural contexts and employing varied methodologies, the research investigated the connections between leader humility, the authenticity of that humility, follower vulnerability, and follower perceived authenticity (Oc et al., 2020). Authors found humility indirectly enhanced follower perceived authenticity by reducing follower vulnerability. Notably, this effect remained significant only when leaders demonstrated higher levels of authentic humility and supported theoretical understandings and practical applications in leadership dynamics (Oc et al., 2020; Younie, 2016).

Historically, the workplace leader has been expected to rule with authority, confidence, and detachment (Crossan et al., 2017). Research indicates a shift toward fostering vulnerable-based trust in the workplace, but the stigma around vulnerability within senior leadership still exists. When leaders embrace vulnerability, they create a safe space for others to share details unrelated to the work environment (Younie, 2016).

Some leaders struggle to share any issues outside of the workplace for fear of removing hierarchical boundaries. Acknowledging that they are human makes it acceptable for others to be open about personal struggles. Becoming more comfortable with vulnerability allows leaders to re-evaluate boundaries and share bravely.

Vulnerable leadership represents a paradigm shift from traditional notions of leadership that often emphasize strength, invulnerability, and an authoritative demeanor (Oc et al., 2020). In recent years, scholars and practitioners have recognized the value of leaders who embrace vulnerability as a strength rather than a weakness. For instance, in the medical setting, some leaders intertwine vulnerability through anecdotes about overcoming major personal obstacles. At a medical humanities educator workshop, participants were requested to bring an image or poem they connected with (Younie, 2016). When a senior clinician and educator

chose an image of a patient in a fetal position on a waiting room chair and described how they felt, a student resonated with the image by finding the image emotionally compelling (Younie, 2016). Sharing in this manner humanized the relationship between the senior clinician and student by providing the student a new source of motivation (Younie, 2016). Externalizing the stress allowed the student to normalize the common ups and downs medical students experience while completing their education (Younie, 2016).

Modeling vulnerable leadership involves leaders being open about their limitations, uncertainties, and mistakes (Crossan et al., 2017). This approach fosters a culture of transparency and authenticity within an organization, creating an environment where team members feel comfortable sharing their own vulnerabilities. One key aspect of modeling vulnerable leadership is the ability to acknowledge mistakes and learn from them. Instead of hiding errors or blaming others, vulnerable leaders take responsibility for their actions and use setbacks as opportunities for growth (Crossan et al., 2017). This not only sets a positive example for the team but also manifests a culture of continuous improvement. By demonstrating that making mistakes are a natural part of the learning process, leaders encourage their team members to take risks and innovate without fear of reprisal.

Effective communication is another crucial element of modeling vulnerable leadership. Leaders who openly share their thoughts, concerns, and uncertainties create a more inclusive and empathetic work environment (Ito & Bligh, 2016; Komariah & Nihayah, 2023). This type of communication fosters trust and strengthens the leader-follower relationship. It allows team members to feel heard and valued, leading to increased performance and a greater sense of belonging within the organization.

Modeling vulnerability also involves recognizing and addressing personal and professional challenges. Leaders who share their struggles with work-life balance, stress, or other difficulties demonstrate that vulnerability is not a sign of weakness but a shared human experience. This can lead to increased empathy among team members and a supportive culture that prioritizes the well-being of everyone in the organization. Vulnerable leadership involves promoting a healthy work-life integration rather than perpetuating a culture of burnout. Leaders who acknowledge their own need for balance inspire their teams to prioritize their well-being. Followers grow and develop on a continuum of ebbs and flows rather than adhering to unrealistic linear projections. This can result in increased productivity, creativity, and overall job satisfaction among team members.

Vulnerable leadership embrace authenticity, openness, and humility in leadership roles (Crossan et al., 2017). It involves acknowledging mistakes, effective communication, addressing personal challenges, and promoting a healthy work-life balance. By adopting and promoting vulnerable leadership, organizations can create a positive and inclusive culture that fosters growth, innovation, and the well-being of their members.

Vulnerable leaders offer support first rather than help. This implies a respect

for others' authentic experience and autonomy to make decisions with less than perfect outcomes. Offering support relies on leaders' empathy and willingness to share rather than the egoist approach of saving (Lanaj, Gabriel, & Jennings, 2023; Ozkan & Ardic, 2022). Oc et al. (2020) explored relationships among leader humility, the authenticity of that humility, follower vulnerability, and follower perceived authenticity. The study's findings consistently supported the proposed model, demonstrating that leader humility indirectly increased followers' perceived authenticity by decreasing their sense of vulnerability. This effect was particularly strong when leaders displayed higher levels of genuine humility. These results expose important theoretical and practical implications.

This research addresses a gap in understanding how social factors influence felt authenticity at work, a relatively understudied area. The findings underscore the importance of leaders as influential elements in followers' social systems at work, impacting their sense of authenticity. This insight is particularly relevant given existing theories highlighting the tension between the pressure to conform to social expectations and the ability to behave authentically.

One key aspect of the vulnerable leadership style is investing time in understanding and connecting with team members on a personal level. When leaders take the time to genuinely listen to their team members' concerns, aspirations, and challenges, they foster a sense of trust and create an environment where open communication is valued (Miller, Tilak, Evans, & Glassman, 2023). This investment in time allows leaders to identify the unique strengths and weaknesses of each team member, enabling them to tailor their leadership approach to maximize individual and collective potential.

Investing time in vulnerability also helps leaders navigate conflicts more effectively. When leaders openly address conflicts and acknowledge their own role in them, it sets the stage for constructive resolution. This approach fosters a culture of accountability and continuous improvement, as team members feel empowered to learn from mistakes and work towards shared goals. Vulnerable leadership, through the investment of time in conflict resolution, contributes to a healthier and more resilient team dynamic.

Rodríguez-Sánchez, González-Torres, Montero-Navarro, and Gallego-Losada (2020) reiterated the value of time investment and employee retention. By conducting interviews with 54 organizational leaders across various departments and three reflections from human resource managers, authors underscored a shift from traditional organizational focus solely on economic factors to recognizing the crucial role of human resources (HR) in organizational functioning and success (Rodríguez-Sánchez et al., 2020). Authors acknowledged the challenges posed by globalization, competitiveness, and societal changes in talent recruitment and retention. Accommodating the increasing importance of work-life balance in addressing management challenges and preventing the loss of valuable human resources addresses the core strength of vulnerable leaders (Ismail & Hilal, 2023). Providing an integrated model of key work-life balance policies to retain talented

employees permits vulnerable leaders to form trusting bonds with employees for the mutual benefit of stakeholder and organizational success (Yue et al., 2023).

Moreover, the commitment to vulnerability encourages leaders to actively seek feedback from their team (Stanley & Gilzene, 2023). By inviting input and suggestions, leaders demonstrate humility and a genuine desire to learn and grow. This investment of time in seeking feedback contributes to a culture of continuous improvement and innovation. It allows leaders to operationalize their strategies based on valuable insights from team members, ultimately leading to better decision-making and outcomes.

Investing time in understanding, connecting, and engaging with team members creates a positive and empowering work environment. This leadership style leverages openness and transparency to build trust, navigate conflicts, and foster a culture of collaboration. The time spent in cultivating vulnerability pays dividends in the form of a more resilient, motivated, and cohesive team that is better equipped to overcome challenges and achieve shared objectives.

Embodied, relational understanding of empathy places emphasis on caring. The alignment of caring, equality, and a rejection of judgement allows further connection between the separate goals of society, institutions, or organizations. By centralizing individuals' feeling of "different" into a leverageable mechanism for acceptance and accountability, vulnerable leaders encourage followers to rise above their hindrances.

Empathetic leadership is a transformative approach that goes beyond traditional management styles by placing a strong emphasis on understanding and connecting with the emotions and experiences of team members. At its core, empathetic leadership involves the ability to recognize, acknowledge, and respond to the feelings of others. This leadership style is built on the foundation of empathy, which is the capacity to comprehend and share the feelings of another.

One crucial aspect of empathetic leadership is active listening. Leaders who practice empathy take the time to truly listen to their team members, not just hearing words but understanding the emotions and motivations behind them (Yue, Men, & Berger, 2021). This creates a sense of validation and fosters open communication, as team members feel heard and valued.

Additionally, empathetic leaders adeptly put themselves in the shoes of their team members. This perspective-taking allows leaders to gain insights into the challenges and aspirations of their team, enabling them to make more informed decisions that consider the well-being of individuals. It also helps in creating a culture of inclusivity, where diverse perspectives are not only acknowledged but embraced. Understanding the anxieties and uncertainties that often accompany change, empathetic leaders communicate transparently and provide guidance, instilling a sense of trust and stability.

Empathy in leadership extends beyond the professional realm. It involves recognizing the personal lives and challenges of team members, showing compassion for the unique circumstances individuals may face. This holistic approach to

leadership strengthens the bond between leaders and their teams, creating a sense of loyalty and commitment among employees. Empathetic leaders also excel in conflict resolution (Stanley & Gilzene, 2023). By understanding the perspectives and emotions of conflicting parties, they can facilitate constructive dialogue and find mutually beneficial solutions. This approach not only resolves immediate issues but also contributes to the long-term harmony and cohesion of the team.

Empathetic leadership is a powerful and humane method that prioritizes understanding and connecting with the emotions of team members. Through active listening, perspective-taking, and genuine care for the well-being of individuals, empathetic leaders create a positive and inclusive work environment (Agyenim-Boateng & Ghansah, 2019). This leadership style not only enhances team dynamics but also contributes to the overall success and resilience of the organization. Interpersonal adeptness of vulnerable leaders reflects their willingness to view experiences objectively, appreciate others' strengths, and welcome creative ideas (Hutt & Gopalakrishnan, 2020). Vulnerable leaders are open to new ideas, advice, and information from their followers which create an environment characterized by cooperation, confidence, creativity, and accomplishment (Bouzidi, 2020).

3. Methodology

This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences and perceptions of vulnerable leadership among organizational leaders in three business settings including services, banking, and healthcare. The semi-structured interview format allowed in-depth exploration of the participants' views while providing flexibility to probe further into interesting or unexpected themes that emerge during the conversations. Including first-hand accounts of participants' experiences emboldens the conversation on vulnerable leadership traits transferable to actionable strategies.

The study involved three organizational leaders from various industries, including a pressure washing small business, bank, and long-term care facility for older adults. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of experiences and contexts regarding vulnerable leadership. The researcher used a small sample size to focus on deep, rich data from a limited number of participants to explore and understand their experiences and perspectives, rather than generalizing results to a larger population as in quantitative research; this approach prioritizes quality of data over quantity, making a smaller sample more suitable for in-depth analysis. The researcher valued the participants' thoughts and feelings and selected leaders in different industries to represent diverse perspectives. Understanding vulnerable leadership characteristics within specific contexts allowed for focused exploration of individual cases.

Inclusion criteria included individuals over the age of 18 years old, holding leadership positions for at least five years, with a demonstrated interest in or practice of vulnerable leadership. A semistructured interview guide helped the

researcher ensure consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility for participants to express their thoughts freely. The interview guide included the following key questions:

- 1) How does displaying vulnerability as a leader influence your followers' trust and confidence in your leadership?
- 2) In what ways can you balance displaying vulnerability with maintaining authority and respect among your team members?
- 3) Can you share any experiences where your vulnerability led to stronger relationships or motivation among your followers? What did you learn or accomplish from those situations?

Potential participants were identified through professional networks, industry conferences, and social media platforms. The researcher invited potential participants via e-mail outlining the study's purpose, the nature of their involvement, and the expected time commitment. Participants who expressed interest in the study received an informed consent form detailing the study's aims, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Participants were required to sign and return the consent form before scheduling the interview. Interviews were conducted via video conferencing platforms (e.g., Google Recorder) to accommodate participants from various geographical locations. Each audio recorded interview lasted approximately 30 minutes with the participant's permission. During the interviews, the researcher followed the semi-structured interview guide, asking follow-up questions as needed to clarify or expand on participant responses. Field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details.

This study adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Participants' confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning pseudonyms and securely storing data. Informed consent was obtained, and participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

The researcher investigated further to gather information from industry managers on the challenges they face being vulnerable while leading operations in the small business, banking, and healthcare settings. The researcher did not limit the time to answer questions or coerce the participants in any manner. The following interview questions shed light on the qualities vulnerable leaders possess to operate successfully. Separate audio interviews were conducted via Google Recorder with Participant #1, a pressure washing business CEO, Participant #2, a loan operations director, and Participant #3, a licensed nursing home administrator. For interview question #1, how does displaying vulnerability as a leader influence your followers' trust and confidence in your leadership, Participant #1 stated:

It depends, kind of, like what I was saying. There are different degrees of mistakes. I feel like there are categories where a) someone is making a good effort, but they just miss something, b) they don't care about the quality of work they do, and if they don't care about the kind of work they do, it is hard to fix it. Is the time investment worth it or do you just get rid of that person and find someone else who cares, and c) someone who makes the effort but

rushes to finish. Some people try to finish quickly to move on to the next job while others take their time because they are detail oriented. I try to give my employees the benefit of the doubt, but that has come back to bite me when customers complain.

For question #2, in what ways can you balance displaying vulnerability with maintaining authority and respect among your team members, Participant #1 responded:

While I have made mistakes and will make mistakes, I am not perfect. I do have more experience than my employees. I am the one that signs their paychecks. Part of it is experience, so you have to respect the hierarchy of the company.

Interviewer:

Would you say your experience is more valuable than your position?

Participant #1:

Yes, I think so.

For question #3, can you share any experiences where your vulnerability led to stronger relationships or motivation among your followers? What did you learn or accomplish from those situations, Participant #1 declined to answer.

Participant #2 included their experience as a loan operations director. For question #1, how does displaying vulnerability as a leader influence your followers' trust and confidence in your leadership, Participant #2 stated:

I believe in open communication and resolving conflicts by addressing them head-on. In one event, two of my team members had a disagreement that was affecting their productivity. I facilitated a discussion between them, focusing on understanding each other's viewpoints and finding common ground. When we looked at the root of the disagreement, one of my team members mentioned they forgot to record new modifications made after a recent audit. The other team member had the impression that the audit deficiency had not been corrected when it had been. Ultimately, the issue was resolved, and their working relationship improved with more communication tools.

For question #2, in what ways can you balance displaying vulnerability with maintaining authority and respect among your team members, Participant #2 responded:

Consumer loan processing is the biggest deal to me. I handle a team of six loan processing specialists, all with their own unique talents. When I first train them, I tell them the story of how I started out. I grew up in a low-income area, and I have firsthand experience on the challenges that many families face trying to make ends meet. My parents purchased their first home when I was 11, after many banks refused to give them a loan due to

poor credit. I think what I have learned is that everyone has some type of challenge, but it does not mean that it stops them from achieving their goals. I always make a point of sharing what I have learned in how to help clients learn while also providing them empathy. Even when my team must tell a client no, that does not mean that the process stops there. We can find ways to help them improve their credit score or their financial literacy to get there.

For question #3, can you share any experiences where your vulnerability led to stronger relationships or motivation among your followers? What did you learn or accomplish from those situations, Participant #2 responded:

I can. I was late for work on the same day I had to train two new team members. My son forgot his reading book that was due back at the library. I had already made it halfway to his school when he told me. I made the decision to turn around and get it because he was starting to cry. As a mom, it is just what we do. I called my branch manager to let him know I would be late. I told the new team members what happened to make me late and one of them was a new mom, herself. She related to me since that day, and we can talk about our experiences on lunch break. I think if you open up a little bit so people can relate to you, it means they can feel safe.

For interview question #1, how does displaying vulnerability as a leader influence your followers' trust and confidence in your leadership, Participant #3 stated:

To be a great leader, you must admit your mistakes and be open to feedback. I do not want anyone to think I am above them in a way that is unapproachable. I accept that my job is to solve problems while building community. I want my employees to grow and learn, but seek improvement, not perfection.

Participant #3 responded to question #2, in what ways can you balance displaying vulnerability with maintaining authority and respect among your team members, by stating:

I am a naturally strong-willed person. I think I want my employees to respect me by doing the work. I can offer them advice on ways to complete their tasks and to be assertive when necessary. I am responsible for more than 40 employees at this facility, from nurses, nurse practitioners, dietary staff, finance, and management. They are my pride and joy, but that is tough to balance. Many days I stay later to make sure there is nothing left to be done. Even when I'm not there, the show must go on. My employees are very hard-working and accountable individuals.

For question #3, can you share any experiences where your vulnerability led to stronger relationships or motivation among your followers? What did you learn or accomplish from those situations, Participant #3 responded:

Definitely. There are many. During COVID-19, we had to make sure the patients were not only safe but still able to communicate with their friends and

loved ones. It really hit us hard because we had never experienced anything like that before. Flu season was our biggest threat before then, but it was not devastating. Our staff are required to have the latest vaccinations to protect our patients. Finding the right masks and running out of hand sanitizer was also challenging. The pandemic made us much closer because we had to depend on each other to keep our patients active and aware. I really thank my staff for keeping everyone fed and with clean facilities. Early on, we made several mistakes when dealing with suppliers and not vetting some new hires. I took accountability for those issues and learned to do my research before making tough decisions.

The researcher transcribed the data verbatim to ensure accuracy. Transcripts were reviewed alongside the audio recordings to correct any errors and to include non-verbal cues and contextual information. Transcripts were imported into qualitative data analysis software (e.g., NVivo) for coding. An initial coding scheme was developed based on the interview questions and the study's research objectives. Open coding identified emerging themes and patterns using [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) six-phase approach to thematic analysis. The phases included familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Participants were provided with a summary of the interview findings to verify the accuracy of the interpretations. Data was triangulated by comparing findings across different participants and contexts. Regular meetings with research colleagues were held to discuss and refine the coding scheme and emerging themes.

Three themes emerged from the interviews such as spontaneity, intuitive responses, and trust. Participant #2 and Participant #3 exercised vulnerability through shared challenging experiences in leadership. Unplanned events confronted their ability to respond quickly to interruptions in the workday. All three participants intercepted detractors to maintain control over their environment. Participants #1 and Participant #3 internalized responsibility for their employees. Each participant asserted their role and how, ultimately, they were responsible for their employees. Learning from past mistakes helped them humanize missteps and model leader behavior to sustain operations. All three participants acknowledged leaders cannot display leadership without trust. Employees must accept the terms of the environment in hopes of gaining the necessary knowledge to grow professionally. Vulnerable leaders establish safe spaces for their followers to fail and succeed which enables them to build their independence.

Research has found several positive workplace outcomes of vulnerable leadership, including job performance, team innovation, and employee self-efficacy. In one study, researchers analyzed the impact of vulnerable leaders on follower performance. Evidence suggested that some employees chose to stay with vulnerable leaders even when their pay was reduced, or they faced challenges impacting performance goals. When a technology startup in Bangalore, Karnataka ran out of funds, one leader announced they would have to cut staff to continue operations

(Oc et al., 2020). Employees offered to work for 50% of their wages, and only a few years later, the startup was sold for \$14 million (Oc et al., 2020). When team members experience leaders' contributions to their project other than criticism, followers fully embrace the freedom and autonomy to contribute without fear of disapproval or promised success (Bouzidi, 2020).

Embodying humility can help leaders heal their own wounds while, ultimately, boosting the performance of a working team. After defining the parameters of the team, vulnerable leaders analyze individual and collective strengths which allows team members to define objectives. Vulnerable leaders improve the meaningfulness of work by helping employees understand role significance (Avolio & Drummey, 2023). Removing hierarchical relationship boundaries permits members to perform with confidence while building teams (Dick, 2023; Kock, Mayfield, Mayfield, Sexton, & De La Garza, 2019). Authors in one study analyzed the relationships between leadership effectiveness, knowledge sharing behavior, business performance, firm strategy, and firm performance by surveying 400 white collar department managers and directors in the textile industry (Sonmez Cakir & Adiguzel, 2020). Authors found performance is the qualitative or quantitative outcome resulting from intentional and planned activities (Sonmez Cakir & Adiguzel, 2020). Employees of various firms highlighted their appreciation for inclusion and feedback which led to greater accountability (Sonmez Cakir & Adiguzel, 2020). In this way, information sharing behaviors manifested in all efforts made by the organization to achieve its objectives (Corlett, Ruane, & Mavin, 2021; Sonmez Cakir & Adiguzel, 2020).

Knowledge sharing involves the transfer of valuable information, particularly in competitive environments, emphasizing the importance of active and strategic information distribution (Corlett, Ruane, & Mavin, 2021). Trust-based business cultures, fostered by communication and knowledge-sharing technologies, play a pivotal role in enhancing confidence, communication channels, organizational learning, and information sharing in organizations. Therefore, maximizing trust at all levels is deemed a fundamental principle for the success of individuals (Corlett et al., 2021).

When leaders share knowledge, they transform their environment by creating work-related tacit knowledge among organizational members (Bahagia, Daulay, Arianty, & Astuti, 2024). Enhancing individual competence improves employees' sense of independence. Veasna, Chanveasna, Sovannara, Wu, and Ngounhort (2024) focused on how transformational leadership impacts employee creativity and performance through mediating factors such as person-supervisor fit and psychological empowerment. Vulnerable leaders share transformational qualities that emphasize emotional intelligence, authenticity, and create a supportive environment for employees. Through their transparency and authenticity, vulnerable leaders contribute to a stronger person-supervisor fit by being more approachable and relatable. Organizations benefit by operationalizing employee creativity into better task performance.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, vulnerability allows leaders to contribute positive resource gains by efficiently using organizational resources as a mechanism for empowerment. Modeling vulnerability, investing time with followers, and exercising empathy connects the structural latticework to achieve organizational competence. Vulnerability in leaders can normalize fairness and equity in organizations without compromising resources, further enhancing strategic success.

Vulnerable leadership represents a significant shift in leadership paradigms, emphasizing modeling vulnerability, investing time, and displaying empathy. It offers numerous benefits for organizational dynamics, including enhanced trust, collaboration, and innovation. Successful implementation of vulnerable leadership requires a supportive organizational culture and a careful balance between vulnerability and strength. As the concept continues to evolve, further research is necessary to explore its measurable impact across different contexts and industries.

5. Limitations

Limitations of the study included a small sample size, lack of generalizability, and direct correlational analyses between vulnerability and organizational revenue generation. A small sample size restricted generalizability. The researcher included secondary data supporting the argument in favor of the relationship between vulnerable leaders and empowered followers. Primary data using a large sample size could have provided triangulation among variables. The lack of measurable, statistically significant relationships between vulnerable leadership and enhanced organizational performance limited the study's scope to largely anecdotal evidence.

Other limitations included the specified industries studied. Some industries lack vulnerable leadership due to the secure nature of their environment. For example, in intelligence and government sectors, exposure of secure information can be disastrous in the wrong hands. Demonstrating vulnerable leadership might be hindered by the autocratic leadership style enforced in the military. Acknowledging shortcomings without taking corrective action might discourage followers from accepting the high stakes of their positions. U.S. military leaders view vulnerability as a weakness in combat conditions (Kupenko, Kostenko, Kalchenko, Pehota, & Kubatko, 2023). Authentic leaders, however, use vulnerability to promote the well-being of U.S. Soldiers by building trust between leaders and their troops (Kupenko et al., 2023).

6. Future Implications

Future implications of the study could provide measurable data leading to vulnerable leadership policies. Normalizing alternative approaches to leadership might provide informal leaders with new perspectives on making meaningful impacts in

their organizations. Much research is needed to innovate, transform, and influence relationships among leaders and followers to adapt to the rapidly changing market.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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