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# How Leaders Can Find Strength In Vulnerability

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This post was originally published in Forbes Magazine on April 16, 2020. You can [read the post on Forbes website](#) here. Laura Maloney is a member of the Forbes Coaches Council and founder of [Adisa](#), which runs Energize and provides consultancy for purpose-driven leaders and organizations.

In “[Vulnerability](#),” English poet and philosopher David Whyte describes the “sense of power over all events” as a “lovely illusionary privilege.”

Understanding power or control as a “beautifully constructed conceit” means understanding that vulnerability is, contrastly, an inescapable part of the human condition. Vulnerability, Whyte says, “is not a choice” and that “to run from vulnerability is to run from the essence of our nature... to close off our understanding of the grief of others.”



When the world feels relatively stable, it’s easier for us to deceive ourselves into thinking we’re in control. We attribute the stability of our own personal and professional circumstances to positive steps we’ve taken to turn life’s steering wheel in the right direction. Sometimes it takes an extraordinary global event like the COVID-19 pandemic to see that none of us – not even our leaders – is in control. We find that true strength stems, not from power, but from vulnerability.

Many of us are leaders – of companies, families or simply ourselves – who are used to feeling a certain amount of perceived control. When day-to-day issues pop up, we spring into action. We see leaders as those who act according to plan, who make things happen, who fix things. Those who are young in their leadership journey tend to believe that being the boss means being in control.

Those who have truly mastered leadership know that leadership isn't about achieving the illusion of control. With [over 26 million American jobs](#) lost in just the past few weeks, and nearly every working American dealing with significant disruption to their personal and professional lives, almost all of us are facing an unparalleled time of uncertainty. Leaders may feel like they're failing, because they're not able to control everything.

The good news is that none of us has lost control, because we never really had it in the first place. If you're feeling especially vulnerable during the coronavirus pandemic (or any other time of uncertainty), here are several ways you can find strength in that vulnerability to become a truly impactful leader.

## **Loosen your grip.**

Leaders may interpret "accepting what is" to mean assessing a situation and then springing into action. But [accepting what is](#) simply means accepting the truth as it stands in the present moment – without resistance – because resistance is the source of suffering. When we resist the truth, we cannot respond to the truth.

Resistance often takes the shape of trying to keep a tight grip on reality through rigid beliefs and routines. But once we realize that even the most disciplined thoughts and actions cannot control our external reality, we begin to loosen our grip and open ourselves to new ways of thinking that may generate truly novel and life-changing ideas.

When we hold on to anything in life too tightly, we hinder our ability to affect change – just like a golfer who grips their club too tightly can't maximize their swing. Loosening our grip on how we think things should be and allowing ourselves to experience how things actually are frees us up for better performance.

## **Tune in to your body.**

"Focusing" is a process of tapping in to bodily awareness that can help a person build a better relationship with those thoughts and feelings that might be standing in the way of what they want out of life. Often, an aim of focusing is to give tangible shape to intangible notions. For example, if you're afraid of losing control in your life, take the time to sit with that fear and observe where you might feel it most in your body and what it looks like.

You might then be able to draw the physical manifestation of your fear. It might look like a red blob or a scary beast, but the goal is to first see and acknowledge the emotion, then eventually befriend it. In befriending our vulnerability, we become allies with the deepest essence of our being – which is ultimately our greatest source of creative energy.

## **Embrace a flow state.**

The opposite of control is creativity, which is all about letting go of control and allowing things to take shape. This can be difficult for people who are driven and results-oriented. We may associate a creative “flow state” exclusively with artists, but leaders also need to know how to access a flow state, especially when responding to a crisis.

Flow is the absence of tension. In times of crisis, when information changes moment-to-moment, leaders need to be able to flow in the midst of panic. If we think of panic as a reaction to what no longer is, leaders can transcend panic by flowing toward the future, instead of staying stuck in the past.

### Engage others.

Once we embrace our vulnerability, we expand our capacity to be in service to others. By acknowledging their own vulnerability, leaders can engage and inspire others to work in collaboration. When leaders are honest about the fact that they don’t have all of the answers, they’re better able to [lead from behind](#), empowering individuals to be creative problem solvers and boosting the collective’s knowledge and ability as a whole.

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## Comments from Readers

*Submitted on January 14th, 2021*

*Nancy Young, Treasurer, Mountaineer Spay Neuter Assistance Program, Morgantown, United States*

Laura Maloney's "How Leaders Can Find Strength in Vulnerability" turned on a light bulb when she suggested that holding on too tight limits our ability to make changes. Compare to the Founder's Syndrome that takes down many non-profits. Thanks for connecting the dots.

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