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## **ARTICLE** **LEADERSHIP**

# What Bosses Gain by Being Vulnerable

*by Emma Seppälä*

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One morning in Bangalore, South India, Archana Patchirajan, founder of a technology startup, called her entire staff in for a meeting. When they were all seated, she announced that she had to let them go because the startup had run out of funds. She could no longer pay them. Shockingly, her staff of high-caliber engineers who had their pick of jobs in the booming Silicon Valley of India, refused to go. They said they would rather work for 50% of their pay than leave her. They stayed and kept working so hard that, a few years later, Archana's company – Hubbl, which provides internet advertising solutions – sold for \$14 million. Archana continues to work on startups from the US and her staff, though thousands of miles away from her, continue to work for her.

What explains the connection and devotion that Archana’s staff had toward her?

Her story is particularly extraordinary when you consider the following alarming fact that [70% of employees are “not engaged” or “actively disengaged” at work](#). As a consequence, they are “less emotionally connected” and also “less likely to be productive.” What is it about Archana that not only prevented this phenomenon in her staff, but actually flipped it?

When I asked one of Archana’s longest-standing employees what drove him and the rest of the team to stay with her, these are some of the things he shared:

“We all work as a family because she treats us as such.”

“She knows everyone in the office and has a personal relationship with each one of us.”

“She does not get upset when we make mistakes but gives us the time to learn how to analyze and fix the situation.”

If you look at these quotes, they suggest that Archana’s relationship with her employees is deeper than that of the usual employer-employee relationship. Simply put, she is vulnerable and authentic with them. She honestly shared her doubts when the company was going downhill, she does not adhere to a strict hierarchy but treats them like family members, and has a personal relationship with each one of them.

Sound touchy-feeling, daunting, or counterintuitive? Here’s why it’s not:

Brené Brown, an expert on social connection, conducted thousands of interviews to discover what lies at the root of social connection. A thorough analysis of the data revealed what it was: vulnerability. Vulnerability here does not mean being weak or submissive. To the contrary, it implies the courage to be yourself. It means replacing “professional distance and cool” with uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. Opportunities for vulnerability present themselves to us at work every day. Examples she gives of vulnerability include calling an employee or colleague whose child is not well, reaching out to someone who has just had a loss in their family, asking someone for help, taking responsibility for something that went wrong at work, or sitting by the bedside of a colleague or employee with a terminal illness.

More importantly, Brown describes vulnerability and authenticity as lying at the root of human connection. And human connection is often dramatically missing from workplaces. Johann Berlin, CEO of [Transformational Leadership for Excellence](#) recounts an experience he had while teaching a workshop in a Fortune 100 company. The participants were all higher-level management. After an exercise in which pairs of participants shared an event from their life with each other, one of the top executive managers approached Johann. Visibly moved by the experience, he said “I’ve worked with my colleague for over 25 years and have never known about the difficult times in his life.” In a short

moment of authentic connection, this manager's understanding and connection with his colleague deepened in ways it had not in decades of working together.

Why is human connection missing at work? As leaders and employees, we are often taught to keep a distance and project a certain image. An image of confidence, competence and authority. We may disclose our vulnerability to a spouse or close friend behind closed doors at night but we would never show it elsewhere during the day, let alone at work.

However, data is suggesting that we may want to revisit the idea of projecting an image. Research shows that onlookers subconsciously register lack of authenticity. Just by looking at someone, we download large amounts of information others. "We are programmed to observe each other's states so we can more appropriately interact, empathize, or assert our boundaries, whatever the situation may require," says [Paula Niedenthal](#), Professor of Psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. We are wired to read each others' expressions in a very nuanced way. This process is called "resonance" and it is so automatic and rapid that it often happens below our awareness.

Like an acute sounding board, parts of our brain internally echo what others do and feel. Just by looking at someone, you experience them. You internally resonated with them. Ever seen someone trip and momentarily felt a twinge of pain for them? Observing them activates the "pain matrix" in your [brain](#), [research](#) shows. Ever been moved by the sight of a person helping someone? You vicariously experienced it and thereby felt [elevation](#). Someone's smile activates the smile muscles in our faces, while a frown activates our frown muscles, according to [research by Ulf Dimberg](#) at Uppsala University in Sweden. We internally register what another person is feeling. As a consequence, if a smile is fake, we are more likely to feel uncomfortable than comfortable.

While we may try to appear perfect, strong or intelligent in order to be respected by others, pretense often has the opposite effect intended. [Research by Paula Niedenthal](#) shows that we resonate too deeply with one another to ignore inauthenticity. Just think of how uncomfortable you feel around someone you perceive as "taking on airs" or "putting on a show." We tend to see right through them and feel less connected. Or think of how you respond when you know someone is upset, but they're trying to conceal it. "What's wrong?" you ask, only to be told, "Nothing!" Rarely does this answer satisfy - because we sense it's not true.

Our brains are wired to read cues so subtle that even when we don't consciously register the cues, our bodies respond. For example, when someone is angry but keeps their feelings bottled up we may not realize that they are angry (they don't *look* angry) but still our blood pressure will increase, according to research by [James Gross at Stanford University](#).

Why do we feel more comfortable around someone who is authentic and vulnerable? Because we are [particularly sensitive](#) to signs of trustworthiness in our leaders. [Servant leadership](#), for example, which is characterized by authenticity and values-based leadership, yields [more positive and constructive behavior](#) in employees and greater feelings of hope and trust in both the leader and the

organization. In turn, [trust in a leader](#) improves employee performance. You can even see this at the level of the brain. Employees who recall a boss who resonated with them show [enhanced activation](#) in parts of the brain related to positive emotion and social connection. The reverse is true when they think of a boss who did not resonate.

One example of authenticity and vulnerability is forgiveness. Forgiveness doesn't mean tolerance of error but rather a patient encouragement of growth. Forgiveness is what is described by Patchirajan's employee as, "She does not get upset when we make mistakes but gives us the time to learn how to analyze and fix the situation." Forgiveness may be another soft-sounding term but, as University of Michigan researcher [Kim Cameron shows](#) points out, it has hard results: a culture of forgiveness in organizations can lead to increased employee productivity as well as less voluntary turnover. Again, the impact of a culture that is forgiving breeds trust. As a consequence, an organization becomes more resilient in times of organizational stress or down-sizing.

Why do we fear vulnerability or think it inappropriate for a workplace? For one, we are afraid that if someone finds out who we really are, or discovers a soft or vulnerable spot, they will take advantage of us. However, as I also described in my last post on "[The Hard Data on Being a Nice Boss](#)," kindness goes further than the old sink-or-swim paradigm.

Here's what may happen if you embrace an authentic and vulnerable stance: Your staff will see you as a human being; they may feel closer to you; they may be prompted to share advice; and - if you are attached to hierarchy - you may find that your team begins to feel more horizontal. While these types of changes may feel uncomfortable, you may see that, as they did for Archana, the benefits are worth it.

There are additional benefits you may reap from a closer connection to employees. One study out of Stanford shows that CEOs are looking for more advice and counsel but that [two thirds of them do not get it](#). This isolation can skew perspectives and lead to potentially disadvantageous leadership choices. Who better to receive advice from than your own employees, who are intimately familiar with your product, your customers, and problems that might exist within the organization?

Rather than feeling like another peg in the system, your team will feel respected and honored for their opinion and consequently become more loyal. The research shows that the personal connection and happiness employees derive from their work [fosters greater loyalty](#) than the amount on their paycheck.

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