

## The Quest4Life Podcast Show Notes:

### *Season #3, Episode #13: Vulnerability, Not Weakness*

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Many of us may associate vulnerability with feelings of uncertainty, shame, or fear. Throughout most of my childhood and into my adult life, I was taught, either directly by adults in my life or indirectly by the dictates of society, that it wasn't okay to display vulnerability. While this idea applies to women, being vulnerable and/or displaying vulnerability as a man was a nonstarter. And since I learned that vulnerability is akin to weakness, I avoided it, as I didn't want to come anywhere near the possibility of rejection or failure.

The reality is that, while vulnerability in 2023 is still related to weakness in the minds of many, it is a deeply important part of the human experience and learning to display vulnerability can bring with it greater joy, love, and authenticity in our lives. And making the decision to be vulnerable levels-up your mindset and allows you to achieve peak performance, most notably in your relationships with others.

#### **Vulnerability as Strength**

One of the first things to reconcile when it comes to vulnerability is that it is not a weakness but rather a strength. When we let our guards down, we allow others to see us as we truly are...our authentic selves. We stop trying to please and seek validation from others (Season #, Episode #6 of The Quest4Life Podcast – “Validation as Addiction”). This is noteworthy because when we put our self-worth in the hands of others, the goalpost is always moving, and we are wrecked at the first sign of disappointment or criticism. But when we display vulnerability to others, we are saying to the world, “Here I am. Taking me as I am. If you don't like me for who and what I am, that's okay.”

Another strength of being vulnerable is that it builds empathy. According to the Greater Good Science Center, a research institute that studies the psychology, sociology, and neuroscience of well-being, empathy is “a building block of morality that allows people to put themselves in someone else's shoes and is also a key ingredient of successful relationships, as it helps us understand the perspectives, needs, and intentions of others.”

Said differently, when we let our guards down and share our feelings, it encourages others to do the same, which allows for enhanced interpersonal connection. It also allows us to become more understanding in addition to having a greater willingness to forgive others and give them love. Being vulnerable also helps us process our emotions faster instead of pushing them away or brush them under the rug, which promotes emotional and mental health.

Still further, displaying vulnerability is a sign and act of courage. After all, when we are vulnerable, we are putting ourselves “out there.” And depending on who we are choosing to be vulnerable with, what we get in return is a coin flip. Those that we trust, have our best interests in mind, and care about us tend not to use our vulnerabilities against us. Unfortunately, there are

individuals that will, as some point or another, use that information to hurt us. You need to know this says more about them than it does you. It doesn't take the sting out of the violation, and it also doesn't mean you shouldn't be vulnerable. What it means is that the other person cannot be fully trusted with loving your authentic self, which reminds me of a Maya Angelou quote that goes, "When someone shows you who they truly are believe them the first time."

An example of this is telling someone you love them, especially for the first time, but this idea applies in long-term relationships as well. Saying, "I love you" communicates an extraordinarily powerful message because you are communicating your love for the other person and want them to know it, which could be met with reciprocation, silence, or indifference.

I'm a firm believer that we should tell people how we feel about them independent of their response, as your love for someone shouldn't be contingent on them loving you back or telling you that they love you. Your love for them is separate from their love (or not) for you. Plus, displaying vulnerability in this way without an expectation that it will be reciprocated relates back to a previous point about not having your self-worth in other people's hands.

The last thing you want is to lose ½ a day with your self-esteem wrecked...although that would provide you a significant amount of information about whether your love for the other person is either genuine or mature, as if it is contingent on them loving you back or telling you then maybe it's not real. Something to ponder...

### **The Vulnerable Leader**

Another thing to ponder is the role of vulnerability in the workplace, as vulnerability and leadership is a topic that continues to trend in contemporary organizations. Interestingly, if you asked someone, "What are the core strengths of a leader?", they would likely hear words like vision, confidence, integrity, trustworthy, excellent communication skills, and the like. Vulnerability tends not to make that list and, yet it can be incredibly powerful in leadership. Think about it this way, leaders are often placed on a pedestal – rightly or wrongly – and they, generally, feel it is unacceptable to be wrong or display anything that resembles weakness.

New York Times best-selling author, podcast host, and leading expert on social connection, Brene Brown, suggests that vulnerability is a crucial leadership quality. In fact, she says that it is a "must have" strength because she discovered in her research that vulnerability is at the root of interpersonal connection. As with the previously stated points, displaying vulnerability is the courage to be yourself, which is antithetical to being submissive or weak. What I am not suggesting is that we, as leaders, communicate our vulnerabilities willy nilly by saying exactly how we feel about anyone and everyone whenever the mood strikes us. We need boundaries as leaders. We need to behave appropriately.

Brene Brown suggests displaying vulnerability in the following ways:

- #1: Calling an employee or colleague whose child is not well.
- #2: Reaching out to someone who experience a loss in their family.
- #3: Asking someone for help.

#4: Taking responsibility for something that went wrong at work.

#5. Asking your team for feedback on your strengths and weaknesses so that you can be better as a leader.

Unfortunately, we are taught to keep business, business and personal, personal. Rather than being willing to be vulnerable, we “never let others see us sweat” in professional settings by avoiding feelings of anger, sadness, embarrassment, guilt, or shame. Ironically, we become less influential in the lives of others and, in many ways, become powerless. We are less willing to take responsibility because we don’t want others to look down on us. We actively avoid conflict because any display of emotions must be perceived as weakness by others. And in our attempts to suppress our emotions, we shut down parts of ourselves or hide our true selves from others, which compromises the integrity of the relationship. Said another way, suppressing our emotions and not showing up as our authentic selves makes things worse, not better. But that’s not what it feels like in the moment, is it? No, we feel like we have to play defense, especially if we’ve been burned in the past by others.

As leaders, however, we need to take risks in the pursuit of achieving our vision and communicating our vulnerabilities with other people allows us to develop the stamina in other relationships, which drives deeper connection.

As a strong, principled leader, I was able to gain greater loyalty and respect from my team members when I admitted a weakness or took responsibility for getting something wrong. Doing so made me more relatable. It showed them that I am just as flawed as they are despite having a position of authority. Interestingly, research shows that when people who seem “too good” make a mistake or show vulnerability, they are much more liked by others.

Additionally, people like to see that your vulnerabilities don’t stop you from pushing into and through struggle and adversity. For example, most public speakers feel nervous and anxious before giving a talk...even if they are an experienced speaker. Before taking the stage, they might say, “I am really nervous, and my legs are shaking.” And then it’s showtime. When other people see this, they admire the person for moving forward despite their vulnerability.

It should be noted that some people use vulnerability in manipulative ways to gain favor or attention from others. I’m not promoting that in any way, but you need to know it’s a thing. Be on the lookout and be authentic.

If the goal is better, more meaningful relationships, perhaps we should give vulnerability a try.

As usual, it’s food for thought, Fellow Questers.