

The Vulnerable Leader



Katie is a competent 40-year-old nurse manager in a Midwestern community hospital. She is sharp, well prepared, and committed to her organization's vision of quality patient care. In the past, she frequently suggested viable ways to achieve her unit's goals and solve its problems. She made her recommendations even if they challenged the status quo.

Linda is a seasoned nurse leader in an academic medical center on the West Coast. She is a member of her hospital's top executive team, and she has received numerous honors for her achievements throughout her career. Linda is passionate about excellence in patient care and nursing leadership.

Each of these nurse leaders recently experienced challenging encounters that left them feeling off-center and vulnerable.

Katie described several meetings in which she perceived her boss' language and tone to be demeaning. She started to believe that her boss was marginalizing her or simply did not like her. Although she saw solutions to vexing unit problems, she stopped volunteering them because she thought they would be ignored. She feels angry and upset by behavior that she perceived as disrespectful and dismissive.

Linda has had a similar internal experience. Although she has successfully interacted with the senior team for 2 years, she recently started meeting one-on-one with 2 of its strongest leaders. With both the vice presidents of human resources and finance, she reports feeling "tongue tied" and unable to confidently defend her positions despite her well documented facts. She even finds it difficult to sit up straight and breathe properly during these meetings.

What do Linda and Katie have in common? They are way off their game. Both of these normally effective individuals perceive themselves to be weak and ineffectual. They cannot articulate their usually ready thoughts and solutions. Both have lost sight of and access to their considerable personal power.

Rather than leading with their competence, they are lost in negative, self-perpet-

uating reactive feelings. They are paying a big price. They feel invalidated, and they are acting that way, too. Linda has stammered with both the finance and HR heads. Katie has stopped speaking in group meetings in which her boss was present. Both Katie and Linda are out of touch with their professional focus and their effective presence.

These are normal human experiences. Katie and Linda are both responding to emotional triggers. The popular expert on emotional intelligence, Daniel Goleman, speaks about the amygdale, or the "reptilian brain." This is the seat of emotions that is hard wired in human beings; it is the home of the fight or flight response. We know we're reacting from the reptilian brain when our adrenalin is pumping, we cannot think straight, we lose sight of our longer-term goals, and we lose our sense of humor. Instead, we feel startled, afraid, angry, or intimidated. We are focused on fighting or getting away from the "perpetrator" of our negative experience.

As sentient beings, these and similar emotions mistakenly tell us that our very survival is threatened. In the heat of these moments, we cannot see that we are reacting to our own emotional interpretation of others' behavior, rather than the behavior itself.

The literature on emotional intelligence identifies two remedies for these difficult experiences. The first is to enhance self awareness, and the second is to learn successful techniques for self management. For example, to increase her self awareness, Linda needed to step back and reflect on what she perceives as separate incidents of feeling ineffective with her colleagues. When she tried this, she realized that there was a pattern and that the behavior of both leaders was similar—impersonal and standoffish. By contrast, Linda saw herself as warm and affectionate, but she viewed her colleagues as emotionally detached and disinterested in *her*. As she reflected on their actions, she realized that they behaved the same way with others. She

saw that she was internalizing their actions and taking them personally.

Over time, Linda has gained awareness *in the moment* when she starts to feel powerless with these individuals. She has learned to manage herself differently by using a multi-step process. First, she offers compassion for herself rather than beating herself up. Next, she stops the action by taking a break. When she can, she suspends the conversation until later. If that was not possible, she says, "Let me think about this for a moment." If that is not possible, she takes several deep breaths.

When she implements her new techniques for self awareness and management, she is able to detach and speak with confidence, even in the face of their behavior. She sees their actions for what they are—personality preferences that have nothing to do with her.

Katie had an equal challenge. Unchecked, her view of her boss' behaviors was eroding her confidence. As she became more self-aware, she began to witness her distress with her boss *as it occurred*. She decided to take hold and manage this negative experience.

First, she started to meditate each morning to increase her ability to stay centered throughout the day. As she grew calmer and gained self control, Katie realized that she needed to confront her manager. When she did, she spoke honestly and directly. She described the behaviors that troubled her, she described the impact they had on her, and she asked her boss to provide her with direct, consistent, timely, and specific feedback about her work. In that session and a follow-up meeting, her boss appeared to listen and agreed to comply with Katie's requests. However, he did not follow through with his commitment.

Katie has reaped considerable benefit from her practice of meditation. Despite her boss's commitment

to change, she has more difficult encounters with her boss. When they occurred, she was able to recover more quickly. She reminded herself that she was a competent professional and that her boss' unwillingness to give her specific feedback and follow through was not her fault.

Recently, Katie left her job for a new position. Although the unit lost a valued contributor, Katie made the right decision for herself. She used these unpleasant encounters as opportunities to grow, acquiring valuable self-management tools in the process.

Both Katie and Linda learned that every leader can be vulnerable and weakened when triggered emotionally. Both realized that the key to sustained leadership excellence is to be self aware, compassionate with oneself, and, most important, a savvy manager of oneself. Our skill, our power, and our spirits are the most significant leadership resources we have. We must nurture them, and we must discipline ourselves so we can enjoy and lead with the best of our competence, power, and presence.

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