

Working With Our Own Vulnerability

"It emerges from a dose of clarity that is (currently) too powerful for us to cope with – but isn't for that matter wrong. [...] Anxiety is simply insight that we haven't yet found a productive use for. [...] It's a mad world that insists that the anxious are the ones who have lost their minds¹."

Realising our potentials as individuals and organisations, in part, comes from understanding our place within the system and understanding the very positive impact we can all have if we shift from a reductionist to an emergent/holistic mind set. We need to not only survive the brutalities of the system but understand that we are an integral part of the system. Being resilient should not be the duty of the individual as if they are in some way to blame for their weakness, need to be hardier and improve their resilience skills. We all have a responsibility for creating a healing and enabling environment. Here are some of the first steps that we might take...

Facing our fear of failure

Fear of failure, shame and humiliation are important natural emotions that we should listen to but our responses to these feelings (in ourselves and others) are not always helpful. How we understand and manage these emotions informs, either directly or indirectly, what we do and directly impacts on the cultures we work within.

Hiding mistakes behind technical errors and 'slipping on a mask' to hide our vulnerability are common. We need to tackle the underlining causes which are:

- denying vulnerability exists – leading to an unpleasant culture of blame
- thinking that showing weakness somehow signifies that we cannot lead

We have learned that the opportunity to take risks and make mistakes is important for individual and organisational learning and effectiveness. Evidence shows that an environment where people do not 'own' mistakes and human imperfections severely hinders creativity and clear thinking. Trying to 'hide' mistakes takes a lot of energy and puts people into a 'fear' brain pattern engendering an unproductive working environment that becomes a work place to avoid, rather than a place to be creative and innovate.

Bringing people together

We need psychologically safe environments where people can work in a relaxed way, knowing that their work is meaningful and valued, speak freely, have difficult conversations, increase our understanding of our uncomfortable feelings, experiment and create the diversity of ideas that can lead to better solutions. We need somewhere for people to work where failure is an essential part of learning, where leaders admit mistakes and show how they learned from them. We need

¹ <http://www.thebookoflife.org/the-normality-of-anxiety-attacks/>

mechanisms where people can ask for help from anyone in the organisation and bring people together to share ideas, give clear feedback and tackle our most difficult feelings with calmness and compassion. We need to build enabling environments that maximise people's contributions toward common goals.

Being Embodied and Fully Present

We can only create such spaces by working with our own vulnerability and helping others to work with theirs. It is not feasible or desirable to 'put on a mask' or 'take on a persona' as this stops us connecting and responding to the reality of what is happening. To do this we have to be fully present and bring our whole selves into situations which are difficult, challenging and (in some cases) potentially dangerous.

Key to being present is taking time to reflect on the nature of the vulnerability we feel. For an excellent introduction based on academic evidence, see Brene Brown's work which demonstrates how successful people are vulnerable people, see:

https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en#

Vulnerability in Action (1)

Our vulnerability in action comes in three main flavours:

Before – we feel nervous and that we don't want to go ahead...

During – there is a moment (sometimes a long one or more than one) when everything seems out of control, we don't know what to do next. It can feel strange and is the hardest time to take on board any advice, simply because we're in the thick of it. Whether this is viewed as a positive or negative is very much cultural – at our most creative we may perceive this as a good place to be.

After – we are hit by a sudden wave of anxiety and shame...

All three of these may be utterly necessary for a successful encounter:

Before – Our body is telling us that there is something which is unsafe. The threat may be real or imagined but the feeling is very real. We need to show respect towards our self as well as towards the other people involved; ensuring that we have the right safety measures in place and taking time to reflect; "how does my relationship with these people, in this context, make me feel unsafe?" "What would be a wise response for them, for me and for the situation?" This is precious enquiry as it might really start to change things in the longer term.

And when it comes to the moment for action; keep breathing gently.

During – Remind yourself to breathe and slow down. Wisdom can only come from not knowing; hold the silence, something will happen. The danger is that someone always comes in to 'fix' the silence or the not knowing. Take time to reflect on what is happening in terms of knowing, not knowing and the emotional response. This is that moment of presence from which something new might emerge, if complexity and uncertainty are given permission to be there.

After – Our body is recovering from the stress response and integrating/digesting this experience. It is important to give it time. This experience of vulnerability has an element of trauma and as mammals/sapient beings we need time to release the physical effects of this. What we learn from this stage can inform what we do next – what can we learn from this experience?

Vulnerability in Action (2)

Here are just three of the many possible ways we can respond to ourselves and others ...

Awareness – is recognising our attention without judgement, noticing how it moves about, where and when it occurs or doesn't and how it is being drawn by what is happening around us.

Empathy – We naturally share and mirror the feelings or experiences of other people (through our mirror neurons) but this can become draining or overwhelming.

Compassion – is being able to be with a feeling, emotion or experience (ours or others) without being overwhelmed by it. This is more like sharing the feeling or experience in a space between us, allowing us to recognise the humanness of the feeling, allowing it to be as it is in this moment, and enabling us to enquire into and explore what is going on.

Empathy alone can increase our chances of both walking away from our conversation holding difficult emotions but adding in compassion and awareness can increase our chances of reducing our shared burdens.

Compassion and **awareness** are skills that we can cultivate. Patience, practice, reflection, sharing and supervision are key to improving our skills.
