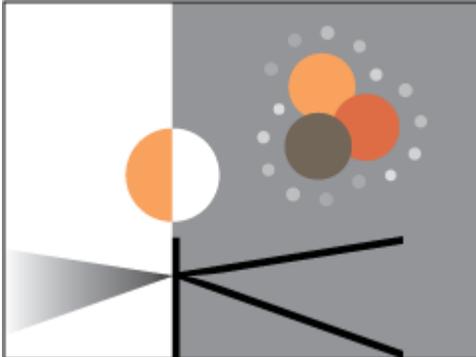


Executive Women's Leadership: Facing our Vulnerabilities Strengthens our Leadership



In my consultations with clients, I approach leadership as a developmental process—the need to grow into parts of ourselves we do not know or would like to disavow, to more fully become our potential selves.

This is the process of individuation as described by C. G. Jung, and it is a journey.

In “Growing into Your Leadership” (Part 1 of this article series), I wrote about the importance of embracing feedback about your leadership to be an increasingly effective executive. Good leaders realize that others’ perspectives and experiences are key to a leader’s growth and success as well as to the growth and success of the organization. In this article I will talk about developing leadership capabilities that take us out of our comfort zone and are difficult to grow into.

Vulnerabilities and fears

When we are ready to develop new capacities and capabilities, we will find ourselves confronted by our vulnerabilities and fears. The new capacities cannot cover up the vulnerabilities; rather, the vulnerabilities need to lessen their grip on our emotions and provide the emotional and mental space for new capacities to develop without being blocked. Sometimes this requires a fundamental shift in how we see ourselves and in our identity as an individual.

Feedback often touches something deeper within us than the surface issues being presented.

Executive leaders exhibit qualities and behave and think in ways that are direct reflections of who they are as people—how they are in the world, experience the world, and see themselves in it. All of the person, the whole human being, will affect other peoples’ experience of their leadership in both its positive as well as unconstructive aspects. Often embedded in an employee’s or colleague’s

feedback is a reflection of a personal aspect of the leader that may inhibit the effectiveness of their leadership. For example, a leader's inability to work constructively with others might be experienced by others as a need to control. The feedback reveals the leader has an underlying need or vulnerability.

When feedback sounds or feels critical and we don't like or agree with it, we have an emotional reaction. Our reaction indicates that the feedback touches vulnerable and tender parts of ourselves. These parts have been with us for a long time, generally since our young years. We all have had painful experiences in childhood, in our families, schools, and with friends or antagonists. Feelings from these experiences often continue to live deep within us. They have shaped our ways of being in the world with the intent of protecting us from experiencing these painful situations again. Present-day situations that feel like or remind us of these previous difficult situations will evoke feelings similar to those we felt in the past. We want to avoid the pain and protect ourselves from re-experiencing it.

Feedback can activate these feelings and the fear that we are again in a difficult situation, and our impulse to protect and remove ourselves from pain or harm is natural. It can be difficult to understand that being presented with feedback about our leadership is not the same as a situation from the past, because it feels the same. It is also challenging to remember that the end goal of feedback is to develop the capacities and capabilities needed to be the effective leader that the organization needs us to be.

For example, I have worked with many executive women who respond to feedback with an emotional reaction based in the fear that others perceive them as less than perfect, while their personal identity demands they be perfect. The feedback is not asking them to be perfect, but rather is asking them to change some things about the way they exercise their leadership. The need to be perfect is an example of a vulnerability that was formed in their youth. As an adult, the woman wants to do whatever is necessary to appear as perfect as possible.

But no one can be perfect in all situations for all people. For those who have a need to be perfect, accepting feedback that they are otherwise does not come easily.

It is here, in exposing to ourselves our vulnerabilities and the pain we feel and why, that we can begin to move forward.

We need to tolerate the discomfort of being with the painful feelings, of recognizing the validity of our emotions, and of seeing ourselves in a new way. We need to balance this discomfort with our desire and commitment to develop ourselves—the balance is essential. For deep changes to our psyche and emotional selves, we cannot deny or pretend our emotions and vulnerabilities do not matter. We have to bring them along with us as we slowly move forward, by being constantly aware of them. Are they rebelling? Are they getting in the way? What impact are they having on our leadership at the moment? And are they getting more comfortable and lessening their grip? If so how do I know?

Support yourself on the journey

This is the time to slow things down and be with the vulnerabilities. Spend time alone, journal, take walks—make space to be in relationship with yourself. My clients find it helpful to have a trusted consultant sit and walk alongside of them on this journey of discomfort. It is important to have someone with whom you feel comfortable being open and vulnerable—someone who understands this process and provides support. Empathy and understanding of the pain and vulnerability are important; a consultant must have these for the leader, and you must have them for yourself.

In thinking about organizational issues, incorporate what you are trying to learn and integrate it into the planning process. Where might this apply in your leadership now? What can you do or try?

In meetings with the consultant, talk about what you did, what the impact was, how you felt doing it, and what you learned that will help you next time. Being critical of yourself is not helpful; the point is in learning about yourself and the growing effectiveness of your leadership.

Awareness of vulnerabilities leads to resilience and vitality

It takes time to develop new capabilities that feel foreign to us. It can be a rough ride filled with obstacles. It can feel clumsy and make us anxious. We can doubt ourselves and want to give up and go back to our known and comfortable places. Developing a new sense of identity is a large undertaking.

When we increase our awareness and desire to develop our vulnerabilities in constructive ways, we can begin to be more resilient and less constricted by our younger emotions and the need to protect ourselves. This freedom also brings the necessary vitality to keep moving forward. The journey is both challenging and rewarding. Though development of certain essential leadership capabilities may take us out of our comfort zone and be difficult to grow into, our increasingly effective leadership and the quality of our life will reap benefits.

Reflections:

1. What vulnerabilities might be reflected in your leadership?
 2. How are they reflected to others?
 3. How does that impact the effectiveness of your leadership?
-

© 2015 Evi Kahle. All rights reserved.

Evi Kahle, Executive Organizational and Leadership Expert, supports executive leaders to effectively direct organizational change, manage across boundaries, think and plan more strategically and engage people in change more effectively. Her clients include healthcare organizations, middle market and Fortune 500 companies. You are welcome to reprint this post as long as you include the above copyright and bio in full. Please contact Evi Kahle if you have any questions.

Website: www.Evikahle.com

Email: evikahle@evikahle.com