

Vulnerability

LEADERS & STAFF



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VULNERABILITY**Leader's Guide**

How to use "Vulnerability" by BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS in your regularly scheduled meetings.

Welcome to BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS: Your Complete Guide to Leadership Training. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop leaders who can think strategically and biblically about the church. Selected by the editors of Building Church Leaders at Christianity Today, the material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.

A BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS training theme is not just another program. Each theme contains materials on the topic you choose—no tedious program to follow. The materials work when you want, where you want, and the way you want them to. They're completely flexible and easy to use.

You probably already have regularly scheduled meetings with board members or with other committees or groups of leaders. BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS materials fit easily into what you're already doing. Here's how to use our themes at the beginning of a board meeting or committee meeting:

1. Select a learning tool. In this theme of "Vulnerability," you'll find multiple types of handouts from which to choose:

- | | | |
|--------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| ◆ Bible study | ◆ case study | ◆ activities |
| ◆ interview | ◆ devotionals | ◆ resources |
| ◆ assessment tools | ◆ how-to articles | ◆ retreat plan |

2. Select a handout. Suppose, for example, you want your leaders to evaluate how vulnerable they are willing to be with one another. You could select one of three assessments in this theme: "Absence of Trust" (p. 6), "Fear of Conflict" (p. 7), or "Avoidance of Accountability" (p. 8). From these options, select the one that best fits what you want to accomplish.

3. Photocopy the handout. Let's say you selected "Absence of Trust." Photocopy as many copies as you need—you do *not* need to ask for permission to photocopy any material from Building Church Leaders (as long as you are using the material in a church or educational setting and are not charging for it).

4. Prepare for the discussion. We recommend you read the Scripture passages and identify key discussion questions. How will you apply the principles to specific decisions your church is making?

5. Lead the discussion. Most handouts can be read within five minutes. After you have allowed time for reading, begin the discussion by asking one of the provided questions. Be ready to move the discussion on to specific issues your church is facing.

Most BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS handouts can be discussed in 15 or 20 minutes (except the Bible study, which may take longer). Your board, committee, or team will still have plenty of time to discuss its agenda.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com.

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VULNERABILITY**Dropping the Mask**

No one is perfect—including church leaders.

1 Samuel 7:6

In every sermon I preach there will be a casual reminder of some area of struggle. And often, my confession is funny. Humor gives the congregation some relief and increases their receptiveness to my teaching on a touchy topic. Someone compared humor in preaching with using a rubber sword. It should make a point but not draw blood.

Who Needs to Know?

The setting may determine how vulnerable the preacher should be.

Years ago while speaking at a men's retreat, I confided that there was a time in my ministry when I chose not to turn on the television in the hotel rooms when I traveled out of town. "Hotels have movie channels that I don't get at my home," I explained to these Christian businessmen who travel a lot.

"The reason I didn't flip on the TV wasn't because I was so strong a Christian—but because I'm so weak," I admitted. "I've talked to plenty of men whose lives were ruined by slowly lowering the moral standards of what they allowed to come in their eye gate. My refusal was motivated by a fear of where inappropriate viewing could take me."

Such an admission isn't easy to make. It implies a weakness and interest in that which is sinful. In a worship setting, I might expect to hear someone whisper, "A preacher shouldn't have those types of thoughts." But in that gathering of men, I felt safe saying it and encouraging those men to stand firm. My admission motivated one man to get involved in a support group and another to start an accountability group.

Even where I feel safe making such a confession, I am reminded to choose my words carefully. Our struggles and temptations should be acknowledged, even confessed, but not detailed.

The goal in confession is not simply to show the congregation that we have weaknesses. They know that. The goal is to show our dependence on the Lord because of our weaknesses, and by our growth in some areas, to offer an example.

Too many confessions will raise eyebrows but not the commitment level of the people. Discreet, occasional acknowledgements, if handled delicately, can have a long-term positive impact.

Christ promises that his power is made perfect in our weakness. If our struggles motivate us to rely on him, they can lead to life change, for the church—and even for the preacher.

—DAVE STONE; adapted from LEADERSHIP journal, © 2004 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.Leadershipjournal.net.

Discuss

1. Do our leaders admit their struggles? Do we encourage one another to confess?
2. What can we do to foster a safe environment to speak honestly about our struggles?
3. Do we want to be honest with one another? Or would we rather not know when our leaders are struggling?

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Ragamuffin*The patched-up life and unshabby message of Brennan Manning.*

Hebrews 4:15

The Imposter's Pursuit

When I first meet Manning, my eyes are drawn to his thick black brows, which only recently have begun to turn white like the snowy hair on his head; his thin, almost absent, lips; and the deep creases around them. He is life-weary, but his intensely blue eyes are young with eternity.

Looking down, I notice a whimsicality coming from the soul of a child. His light denim jeans are cheekily patched up with colorful squares. It's as if to remind himself and me, "Don't think I'm a saint. I'm a ragamuffin, you're a ragamuffin, and God loves us anyway." In his bestseller *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, he writes that "justification by grace through faith means that I know myself accepted by God as I am." He explains, "Genuine self-acceptance is not derived from the power of positive thinking, mind games, or pop psychology. It is an act of faith in the grace of God alone." The jeans are a symbol, then, of faith.

We sit down, and Manning tells me that there's nothing he'd rather do than what he has done for 41 years: help sinners journey from self-hatred to self-acceptance.

He's been there—or, to put it more accurately—he is there, traveling this road daily, never too far from a character he calls the Imposter. Everyone's got one. It's "the slick, sick, and subtle impersonator of my true self." The persona craves to be liked, loved, approved, accepted, to fit in. "It's the self that refuses to accept that my true self, centered in Christ, is really more likeable, more attractive, and more real than the fallen self."

The Imposter has shadowed Manning all through his never-boring days: from Brooklyn, where he grew up; through one semester of journalism studies; through Korea, where he served with the Marines; the Catholic seminary—which he left after seven days because of the dreaded "rising at 5 a.m., chanting psalms in Latin with pantywaist 18-year-old postulants," being ordered to eat beets ("which I hated"), and "stumbling up steps in an ankle-length robe unaware that I had to lift the hem"; through his service with the Franciscans in the United States and the Little Brothers of Jesus in Europe; to New Orleans, where he now lives.

One October night in 1955, Manning dreamt he had it all, an idyll by the world's standards: a wife baking bread, a Porsche in the driveway, four children, and "a gold-trimmed plaque on the wall—the Nobel prize for literature awarded to me." But to him, it was a nightmare. He woke up in cold sweat with a shout, "O God, there has to be more!" This cry is still the prayer of Manning's life.

At 3 a.m. on December 13, 1968, he reports, Jesus spoke to him with these words, "For love of you I left my Father's side. I came to you who ran from me, who fled me, who did not want to hear my name. For love of you I was covered with spit, punched and beaten, and fixed to the wood of the cross." The message of God's persistent love has etched itself in Manning's heart, helping this sinner pick himself up countless times since then. Manning's gift is making people feel this love as though they were sitting on their Abba's lap, safe, in spite of their sin and shame. He puts it this way: "The work that God has given me to do is helping people to enter the existential experience of being loved in their brokenness."

The Imposter thought nothing of the cave vision, and began searching for love and acceptance in the wrong places when Manning was a minister on the campus of Broward Community College in Florida in the mid '70s. When he failed to find the affirmation he craved, he medicated himself with booze and eventually succumbed to alcoholism. After a six-month-long treatment, he became sober and began writing. He says he has had two relapses since, one in 1980 and the other in 1993.

Manning's writings—and the lessons he learned from his capitulations to alcohol—have led to speaking engagements and occasions to lead spiritual retreats. Never one to follow religious conventions for too long before getting restless and deciding to find Christ in a new way, he left the Franciscans in 1982. He developed an affection for a devout native Louisianan; they married and settled in New Orleans. This decision made him "an inactive priest," which means he's not allowed to preach or celebrate the sacraments in the Catholic church.

No Time for Shock or Horror

Beneath Manning's struggle with alcoholism is his struggle with a fiercer foe: self-hatred. One of the greatest regrets of his life is "all the time I've wasted in shame, guilt, remorse, and self-condemnation." He's not

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speaking about the appropriate guilt one ought to feel after committing a sin. He's talking about wallowing in guilt, almost indulging in it, which is "basically a kind of idolatry where I'm the center of my focus and concern."

That's why he says writing *The Glimpse of Jesus: A Stranger to Self-Hatred* was "a tremendously healing experience for me." The key is to let yourself be loved in your brokenness, he says. When he does that, he spends no time in self-recrimination but simply offers the broken action to the Lord, quickly repents, and moves on in the power of the Spirit. It means wasting no time being "shocked or horrified that I failed."

He wrote the book shortly after his divorce from his wife of 18 years, Roslyn. Manning takes the blame for the breakup. "Over the years, with a lot of my travel and with some relapses in alcohol, the marriage deteriorated and we divorced in the year 2000," he says, slowly running his fingers through his hair, with a shadow of pain crossing his face.

He and Roslyn have been to counseling several times. After a yearlong separation, they reconciled, but then separated again for three years, and "at that point, when Roslyn showed no sign of wanting to reconcile or to go to counseling to resume the marriage, that's when I filed for divorce."

Manning's admission of his failings—combined with his ability to make others feel God's love in spite of their transgressions—is one reason for his popularity among those who have paid more attention to their shame than to God. His message is a liberation of the perpetually guilty, those who grew up in churches that preached a lot of sin but little grace.

A Catheter and an IV Bag

One time, shortly following a back injury and surgery, Manning came to Nashville to speak. When his friend, singer and writer, Michael Card, picked him up at the airport, Manning "had a back brace on with a catheter and an IV bag," the singer said. "He was about as fragile as he could be. . . . He looked like a ghost, he was feeling so poorly." Ignoring Card's well-meaning advice to "get on the plane and go home," Manning went to his appointment.

"This wasn't some big thing, it was just a little high school he was speaking at," Card says. "I remember the principal of the high school with his head in his hands weeping because he was so convicted by what Brennan had to share. When I saw his response and the reaction of many of these high school students who are so difficult to reach, I realized that's why he knew this was something that he was supposed to do, even though he wasn't feeling like it. I think that was a very Christ-like example of how great strength comes through weakness."

Yes, even through "the wobbly and weak-kneed who know they don't have it all together"; through the "bedraggled, beat-up, and burnt-out"; through "the poor, weak, sinful men and women with hereditary faults and limited talents," to use Manning's words.

That's the comfort of every ragamuffin.

— AGNIESZKA TENNANT; adapted from CHRISTIANITY TODAY, © 2004 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.ChristianityToday.com/CT.

Discuss

1. What can we learn about brokenness and vulnerability from Brennan Manning?
2. Do we have weaknesses we need to acknowledge? If we're honest about our weaknesses, what impact could it have on our lives and in our ministry?
3. What kind of Impostor rears its head in our lives?

VULNERABILITY**Absence of Trust**

Do you trust one another enough to be vulnerable?

2 Corinthians 11:30

Trust forms the foundation for everything else that happens on a team. Interestingly, though, ministry teams assume trust rather than work on building trust. Stop for a minute and think: can you name five things you have intentionally done in the last month to build trust on your team? Trust takes time, but it doesn't take years. Trust can be broken, but it can also be repaired.

Use this assessment to determine if an absence of trust is preventing vulnerability within your group.

I make an effort to pray for others in this group.

Often **Sometimes** **Never**

I strive to show concern and interest in the lives of others in this group.

Often **Sometimes** **Never**

My character suggests that I am a trustworthy person.

Often **Sometimes** **Never**

I give others the impression I am competent, caring, and sensitive.

Often **Sometimes** **Never**

I'm willing to admit my weaknesses and struggles.

Often **Sometimes** **Never**

I help create an environment in which others feel comfortable being honest and vulnerable.

Often **Sometimes** **Never**

If I have a concern, I am willing to voice it in front of the group.

Often **Sometimes** **Never**

I can voice concerns without being negative or causing greater conflict.

Often **Sometimes** **Never**

I believe that tough conversations are invaluable in developing trust within our group.

Often **Sometimes** **Never**

— NANCY ORTBERG; adapted from LEADERSHIP journal, © 2008 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.Leadershipjournal.net.

Discuss

1. What do we need to do to build trust within our team?
2. Have there been situations in the past that damaged trust within our team? How were they handled?
3. What should we do if we trust *some* of our team members, but not all of them?

VULNERABILITY**Fear of Conflict**

Conflict can be scary—and constructive.

Psalm 37:3

Of all the organizations we work with, churches tend to be the worst at engaging in conflict in an open and honest way. Somehow we've gotten the idea that Jesus was a Mr. Rogers character who just walked around with beautifully permed hair, blessing everyone. One look at the Gospels will show that Jesus was a walking defining moment. His call for transformation was often imbedded in terse, direct language.

Les and Leslie Parrot, Christian psychologists who work primarily on marriages, insist, "Conflict is the only way to intimacy." That startling claim has enormous implications for teams as well as marriages.

Use this assessment to determine whether a fear of conflict is inhibiting intimacy within your group.

Just because I disagree with someone doesn't mean I need to say anything to them.

True False Not Sure

Personality conflicts are bound to happen at times—but they don't need to be addressed within the group.

True False Not Sure

If I know someone feels strongly about something, I'm less likely to speak my mind honestly.

True False Not Sure

Certain personalities dominate our group, preventing some perspectives from being expressed.

True False Not Sure

When two parties disagree, resolving the issue is always peaceable and simple.

True False Not Sure

I think there are things in the past that we didn't handle properly.

True False Not Sure

I have spoken my mind when I have disagreed—and I have no regrets.

True False Not Sure

There are issues we need to discuss in order to truly develop intimacy within our team.

True False Not Sure

—NANCY ORTBERG; adapted from LEADERSHIP journal, © 2008 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.Leadershipjournal.net.

Discuss

1. In what instances should conflict be addressed publicly?
2. In what instances should a conflict be addressed in private?
3. As a group, how can you work together to remove a fear of conflict?

VULNERABILITY**Avoidance of Accountability**

Vulnerability must lead to accountability.

Romans 3:19

Holding people accountable is hard work, and it's not usually fun. In fact, I worry a bit about people who enjoy it too much. But we need it. And it's hard to have community or leadership without it.

In fact, most of us who have been leading for very long will have memories of a time when a leader we respected held us accountable. What might have been an awkward and embarrassing conversation at the time, in retrospect, was a turning point in our development. Everyone needs accountability, and community is obligated to help.

This assessment presents pairs of opposing opinions. Circle the statement that most closely matches your viewpoint.

When I know someone is struggling, I offer to pray for them.

When I know someone is struggling, I pray with them and offer to help them make necessary changes.

Even if I'm praying for someone, I don't like to ask personal questions that could seem intrusive.

When I'm praying for someone, I often ask them follow-up questions—even difficult ones.

Holding people accountable isn't fun or easy, but it's necessary—so I'll do it.

Holding people accountable may be necessary, but that doesn't mean *I* need to be the one to do it.

I tend to assume that someone else is holding someone accountable—at least, I *hope* they are.

I make a point to help people find accountability—offering to help them as much as possible.

When I'm struggling, I seek out accountability.

I will accept accountability only if confronted by someone I trust—but I don't seek it out.

I think accountability is key to spiritual growth.

I don't think accountability is really necessary—at least not for everyone.

We're all accountable to God, so why do I need to tell everyone else my business?

We're all accountable to God, but I know we need others to challenge and support us in times of struggle.

—NANCY ORTBERG; adapted from LEADERSHIP journal, © 2008 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.Leadershipjournal.net.

Discuss

1. Does our group hold each other accountable? If no, why not?
2. Should accountability be done in a group setting, or limited to pairs of individuals?
3. How can we work to be more accountable to one another? How would that impact our group?

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When to Declare One's Doubts

One pastor was uncertain about publicly questioning his calling.

2 Corinthians 5:20

The Case Alan Taylor had recently moved to Seattle to start a pastorate at Broadmoor Presbyterian Church. He was excited for a change of ministry scene, and his daughter Nikki had recently entered a funk, so Alan and his wife also hoped the move would help her. Plus, Ralph Bates, the chair of Broadmoor's pastor nominating committee, had talked up the church's rich history while telling Alan, "I believe you're the man we need to restore the eminence of our church." At Alan's very first elder meeting, however, things changed. Ralph, far from being an ally, became Alan's chief antagonist, opposing his new initiatives at every turn. In fact, the entire church was resisting change, even though Alan thought that was the reason he was called there. In the midst of this, Nikki's depression deepened. He began to wonder if his move to Broadmoor had been one big mistake.

- What Would You Do?**
- ◆ Is it wise to be honest with your church about doubts for your calling there when support is thin?
 - ◆ Can you glean objective counsel from people in your own church?
 - ◆ How long can you sit on doubts like this before telling somebody what's going on?

What Happened Alan felt that he hadn't done enough research before accepting the call to Broadmoor. Therefore, he knew he wanted more input before making a decision about leaving. But he decided to talk to people outside Seattle.

"I wanted unbiased feedback," he says. "The people I called weren't friends in town who naturally wanted me to stay or competitors out to get my job. They affirmed my call and gifts, and when the need arose, they weren't afraid to call my bluff. I needed penetrating—even blunt—counsel, not just people to shake their heads and say, 'Ain't it awful!'"

Reaching out to distant counselors not only gave Alan more objective advice, but it also provided more confidentiality. The congregation at Broadmoor wasn't pulled into the uncertainty felt by Alan, but he still found the support he needed.

One revered role model challenged Alan to consider any blind spots in his perspective. Another friend helped Alan "buy time" by suggesting that a short-term ministry at Broadmoor might be God's intention. Their encouragement helped Alan to hang on, the storm gradually passed, and Alan ended up staying at Broadmoor.

- Discuss**
1. How else could Alan have responded to this situation?
 2. Would it have been a good idea to confront Ralph in private about his adversarial attitude?
 3. If one of our leaders expressed doubts, how would we respond?

— JAMES D. BERKELEY; adapted from *Making the Most of Mistakes*, © 1987 by Christianity Today.

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Truth-telling Value

Being fully truthful sometimes requires admitting feelings that might not seem appropriate.

Proverbs 21:28

Character Check *Ask the Lord to help you be more open with others.*

In Business Terms

I first learned about the value of honesty in prison.

Not when I was *in* prison, but when I visited a prison with my sociology class in high school. Everyone, especially the guys, was acting totally cool, as if we'd been to lots of prisons, and prisoners didn't scare us, and we could handle ourselves. You know, smart remarks, jokes, all the guy baloney.

We were escorted into a room with three prisoners with whom we were going to talk. We all took our chairs in a circle and sat and stared at each other, everyone looking as cool as ever.

After introducing the men, the teacher asked if we had any questions. There was a long silence.

Margie, a tall, thin girl who appeared as in control as the rest of us, said, "I don't know about anyone else, but I'm kind of scared."

Everyone laughed—not at her, but with her: we were all feeling the same thing. And all of us, like Margie, had been putting on an act. Now, because of her honesty, we didn't have to.

With that, a genuine conversation with our hosts began.

- Discuss**
1. What are some situations that make us uncomfortable?
 2. In what situations have we pretended to be bolder than we really felt?
 3. Are there times we could benefit from admitting we're scared? Or nervous? Confused? Concerned?

— MARK GALLI; © 2007 Christianity Today/BuildingChurchLeaders.com

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Winning Through Weakness

In the Bible, the apostle Paul shows his humanness, making his words even more powerful.

2 Timothy 4:16–18

Character Check *How might this kind of openness draw me closer to God?*

In Business Terms Unwittingly, perhaps unconsciously, we sometimes feel our titles, our positions, and our responsibilities mean we have to perform in the exact manner expected of us. In so doing we dehumanize ourselves.

Being vulnerable means we are standing totally open as a human being—not as a pastor, not as a senator, not as a leader, not as a follower—just as a human being. There is nothing that elicits a response from people more than to feel they are dealing with someone who is on their level, who feels what they feel.

Richard Halverson once reminded me of this, saying, "I am more and more aware that Christ living in you is what really creates the ability to be sensitive and responsive to people."

I don't think the Lord taught anything to his followers that is not achievable. Christ did not say, "Come and follow me, but you'll never really make it because I'm God and you aren't."

- Discuss**
1. Do we sometimes feel like our titles or positions define who we are?
 2. Does the concept of "standing totally open as a human being" scare you? In what ways?
 3. Do we encourage vulnerability in others? Are there times when we could be more sensitive?

— MARK O. HATFIELD; © 2007 Christianity Today/BuildingChurchLeaders.com

VULNERABILITY**Can I Trust You?***Strengthening the three legs of trust.*

Nehemiah 1:11

"I just don't understand," Tom lamented. "My board is saying they don't trust me. But I'm not dishonest, and I would never intentionally do anything to hurt my church because God clearly called me to plant Community Fellowship."

Tom didn't know what to do, but he definitely knew something wasn't quite right. Although his church was experiencing explosive growth, Tom was perplexed by criticisms of his ministry at the leadership level. Board meetings were growing increasingly tense, and questions of Tom's integrity became more frequent. The more insecure he felt, the less he communicated with his board, which led to even louder murmuring among those "in the know" at the church. But Tom had no idea how this had happened, or what could be done to change it.

Tom's situation is not unique. In my work with churches and ministry leaders, I have frequently discovered an underlying current of mistrust within the organization, a current that subtly but surely erodes a church's foundation.

Trust is critical to a church's health and, ultimately, to its ministry effectiveness. When people in a church don't trust each other or their leaders, the church becomes a diseased organism that will poison those who come into contact with it, or shrivel up and stop producing fruit—often times both.

And while mistrust can and does exist at all levels within a church, its leaders generally set the tone for organizational health. Unfortunately, many leaders do not realize that trust has several key components. This misunderstanding becomes clear in situations like Tom's. Often times, when a leader is told that she is not trustworthy, she mistakenly takes it to mean that she is being accused of dishonesty or deceit.

But I've become convinced that a leader's (or group of leaders') credibility stands on not just one, but three legs; when any one of those three legs is broken or even wobbly, trust quickly erodes; a leader's credibility is called into question, and the church's health is compromised.

These three legs are character, competence, and communication.

1. Character.

This component of trust is the most obvious, and the one that is most often singularly equated with trust. Character can be defined as a leader's sense of moral fortitude, an inner compass that determines how a person acts when no one else is looking, and it is often described externally as a person's reputation. In ministry, there is no dispute that great leaders are people of good repute who exhibit strong, godly character. A person of weak character, on the other hand, will by definition be dishonest or double-tongued.

2. Competence.

Even if a leader demonstrates honest and trustworthy character, he or she might not be competent for the task at hand. In Tom's case, he was an amazing and truly inspiring visionary, but he was not at all gifted in the areas of strategy and day-to-day execution. In these areas, Tom was not trustworthy. It's not that he was dishonest, but he was unreliable—not as deep-seated as a true character flaw, but a variation of untrustworthiness nonetheless. As a result, even though his character was above reproach, trust in his leadership began to break down.

3. Communication.

The final leg of trust is communication, and in my experience, this is often the most easily overlooked element of trust, because it exists at the most basic, everyday level of leadership. But it is precisely because it exists at such a basic level that communication is so foundational to leadership trust.

If a leader does not communicate well (and by "well" I mean with honesty and frequency at all levels in the organization and along all stages of an issue or task), colleagues and congregation alike will start to wonder if a deeper problem exists. And it is this first question that starts to weaken the foundation of trust.

Now, one incident of mis- (or missing) communication generally isn't enough to cast a cloud over otherwise impeccable character and competence. However, a pattern of spotty communication allows doubts to surface: "If Pastor is not communicating about this, what else is he withholding from us?" Trust erodes, and eventually character itself gets called into question.

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I know of more than one ministry leader who has been accused of deception (which is a character issue), when the entire problem could have been avoided with more diligent communication around the matter at hand, be it a fundraising campaign or other financial matter, a moral issue, or the process of change within the church. In Tom's case, his communication "sin" was one of omission; fortunately, he recognized the problem in time to reverse most, although not all, of the damage that had been done to that point.

For most leaders, as with Tom, the first step is simply awareness. As a ministry leader, recognize the importance of trust. Next, learn the difference between the three legs, and their different roles in facilitating trust. Finally, learn to recognize when one or more of the legs are broken or in danger of breaking down in your ministry, and how to repair them. The result will be a stronger foundation, a healthier church, and greater ministry effectiveness.

—ANGIE WARD; adapted from LEADERSHIP journal, © 2006 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.Leadershipjournal.net.

Discuss

1. As a group of leaders, how would we honestly assess our character?
2. As a group of leaders, how would we honestly assess our competence?
3. As a group of leaders, how would we honestly assess our communication?

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Support Groups May Be Worth the Trouble

Groups can encourage vulnerability—and healing—in your church.

Romans 5:3

The Cost

Other pastors frequently ask whether I believe they should start this or that support group. I have two responses: First, I know of no more effective ministry than support groups. Second, before starting one, a church should count the cost. To estimate the cost of a group, I ask these questions:

How will this group affect other church ministries? One church, well-known for ministry to the divorced, has been so effective that divorced people now account for approximately half of the church. And a majority of the children in the church now come from divorced homes.

These children need extra attention and individual help; they often struggle with major emotional problems. This puts a heavier load on the children's ministry and the church's counseling services. As discipline problems increase, recruitment of children's ministry workers becomes more difficult. The church now finds itself drained of both financial and human resources.

Had the church considered the effects of such an outreach, it may have made the same decisions, but it would have better prepared for such difficulties.

When we considered offering a group for male sexual abuse victims, we projected an increased demand for counseling services, as well as a need for airtight security around the children's ministries. In our case, we weren't administratively prepared to deal with these costs.

What church tensions might emerge? Our congregation offers three different support groups for sexual abuse victims. As a result, such people perceive us as "safe," meaning they think we'll be sensitive to their traumas and needs. Consequently, as a percentage of our congregation, we have more abuse victims than do most churches.

The presence of such victims in our church, however, puts other members on edge. Each support group attracts a unique population, and each population causes the congregation unique anxiety.

In addition, if a church is successful with such a ministry, its demographics may shift, and that can lead to resentment among (or loss of) long-time members.

Can we deal with well-intentioned but troubled volunteers? One couple came to our church after they saw a public service announcement for one of our groups. One day in the hall the woman told me, "God has led us here to work in your counseling ministry. My husband and I can do a lot to train you and your workers for this ministry."

We explored what she meant, and then I asked, "Can you name other churches you've worked with?" Later I called one pastor whose name she had given me, and I learned she had previously approached him in the same manner. Sensing she was unstable, he had her meet with a church counselor, who later recommended, "This couple will have to deal with some personal issues before they can be considered for church leadership."

So she and her husband left that church and, as I later discovered, moved rapidly from church to church for several years before landing in ours.

I decided to meet with them for lunch to discuss their past and to see if we could help them build a credible foundation for ministry. I told them what I had learned. I haven't seen them since.

Hurting people often avoid their pain by trying to heal the pain of others. Such people need the church's help but too often reject it when they're not allowed to become leaders. Well-meaning church leaders looking for willing volunteers often fail to see the dangers such people represent to the church and to themselves.

What church resources will the group require? A local church told me they were starting a *therapy* group (versus a support group) for abused women. They envisioned a group of ten women who would meet at the church; in addition, a program for their children would be provided and individual therapy for group members offered.

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Their vision was wonderful but not terribly realistic. I suggested they think about what would be required for the group:

1. Leadership.

Such a therapy group requires at least two trained therapists to lead it. Most churches will have to pay the therapists' fees, generally between \$15 and \$40 a person per session.

A support group, on the other hand, does not delve deeply into psychological issues. It's more concerned with the sharing of experiences and mutual care. It doesn't require a professional psychotherapist and thus is less expensive.

2. Oversight.

If a professional therapist leads the group, he or she should in some way be accountable to the church, usually through a staff member. If a lay volunteer leads the group, the church should provide trained supervision. In either event, group leaders need administrative oversight from either a staff person or key lay leader.

3. Curriculum.

Therapists themselves set the format of many therapy groups, so many groups do not need a curriculum. However, this church wanted to provide a related program for children. Such curriculum is difficult to find; the church would have had to develop one or hire a specialist to do so. Each option demands substantial time and money.

4. Childcare.

A church will want to provide facilities and staff to care for any children of participants. Without childcare, a church shuts out many would-be participants, especially single and lower-income parents.

5. Facilities.

A therapy group requires a private and comfortable meeting room. Since the group experience could spark trauma in an individual, it's good to have private rooms nearby so that people can be individually counseled on the spot. In addition, childcare facilities should include cots or mats for children staying up past bedtime.

What problems might be exposed in the group? One church formed a support group for parents of troubled youth. As a result, that problem received some attention in the congregation. Whether you call it concern or gossip, it brought out the problems of one leader's family, who were not attending the group and whose teenage son was involved with drugs.

Many considered this a positive thing; a problem was finally out in the open and could be handled. However, some people didn't like the way the problem was brought out, nor did they think it right that it was not dealt with until some group members began talking. The friends of the family began to distrust such a group. Many thought the group was "dragging people through the mud."

What expectations might be raised? The more any church gives its people, the more they expect. When I served a small rural church, I was grateful for the chance to use an IBM typewriter on a mimeograph master to produce a handout. Today, I expect the quality of a laser-copy printed from a computer, duplicated on a high quality, multicolored duplicator. The same dynamic can occur with support groups.

When I first came to my current ministry, the idea of *any* group excited the congregation. Shortly after we started our first group, a member of the church timidly asked whether we could start another. When the answer was "Not at this time," they were happy the answer wasn't "No!"

Four years and numerous groups later, people ask me almost weekly to start new groups or provide new services. When I cannot begin a new group, or when counseling requests are referred or put on a waiting list, people are offended. The more we offer, the more congregants expect, and the more upset members get when something cannot be provided.

The Payoff

Just as a house or car has a high cost with a significant benefit, so support groups have proven to be worth our while. As our divorce recovery groups illustrate, they foster:

Healing. Larry was hurting when he came to our divorce recovery group. His wife had abruptly pronounced their marriage over, and soon he found himself divorced. The members of divorce recovery groups are, by definition, gashed and wounded. Their grief is as real as any cut or bruise. Over the following weeks, the group gave Larry the support, acceptance, and living skills that brought hope and the beginning of health.

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Evangelism. Although she didn't have a church background, Angela came to one of our groups. In the course of the sessions, she saw faith at work in others and sensed her own need for Christ. She began visiting the church on Sunday mornings and was baptized approximately a year after beginning with the group.

While our groups are open to anyone—without pressure to attend the church or to believe in Jesus—our caring enough to offer the group often earns us a hearing. It's not unusual for group members to begin attending the singles fellowship, Sunday morning worship, or other activities, and eventually commit themselves to Christ.

Deeper faith. Once wounds begin to heal, group members experiencing the grace and forgiveness of Christ often find their faith increasing.

Strengthened family members. Many recovery group participants have family members who are also hurting. When Ginger attended the divorce recovery group, she was concerned about her two children, both in elementary school. She wanted similar support for them. We provided that in the Children of Divorce group, which we offer periodically.

Janet, a member of our church, was talking to a friend at work when the subject of churches came up. When Janet mentioned she attended ours, her friend exclaimed, "Oh, you go to the support group church!"

When she told me about this episode, I thought, *That's not a bad way to be seen.* People in our community view us as champions of the cause of the weak and needy, an image that well fits the church of Jesus Christ.

—RANDY CHRISTIAN; adapted from LEADERSHIP journal, © 1997 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.Leadershipjournal.net.

Discuss

1. When we hear the term “support group,” what response does that evoke? Is it something we value? Fear?
2. Is there a need for support groups (or *more* support groups) in our church? Have any needs been overlooked?
3. How could we do a better job of creating environments that will encourage vulnerability and healing?

VULNERABILITY**In This Together***How opening oneself up to others can lead to healing.*

Proverbs 12:18

In my early attempts to communicate "I am one of you"—and thus build a relationship with my congregations—my basic approach was to preface every point with "I struggle with this too." I never gave examples, or if I did, they were trite and sterile.

But in a sermon about loneliness, just before Easter one year, I stumbled upon a more effective way of opening myself up to the congregation—and thus connecting with them on a heart level. My text was from Matthew 26: Jesus, the night of his arrest, saw his closest friends desert him.

"What does it feel like to be abandoned and left all alone?" I asked. I then told of the loneliest period of my life, in the months and years following a broken engagement with a girl I had dated throughout high school. Afterward, I was overwhelmed with the people who wanted to talk with me about lost loves—tales of divorces, infidelities, engagements, and near engagements. Everyone, it seemed, had been hurt by a love that had grown cold and died. In telling about my loneliness, we all went home a little less lonely that day.

However, as much as I want to connect with my listeners, no one really wants to hear the details about my current inner battles with doubt, pride, dissatisfaction, anger, lust, or ambition. No one really wants to see me emotionally disrobe in the pulpit. Perhaps it's enough to allude to current battles. But that can never include even the sketchiest details about sexual temptation. And stories about current financial struggles are tricky; they can too easily be interpreted as dissatisfaction with my salary or the church.

I've concluded that if I'm going to connect with people in the pulpit, perhaps the best way is to tell stories of victory over temptations in the past. If I've found God sufficient in moments of pain or loss or insecurity, if I'm safely past the point where people might wonder about my spiritual or emotional stability, then I try to pass on that wisdom to my listeners.

I don't care about being vulnerable—a popular word among preachers trying to be relevant these days. My motive is not to be perceived as real or authentic. The cliché "Sharing the gospel is just one beggar telling another beggar where he found bread" is still one of the best descriptions of the preacher's task.

I Know You're Here

A young woman left my office smiling one day. She had just unburdened herself by telling me her secret of bulimia, which had kept her down for more than a decade. She said my seven-week series of messages on our freedom in Christ gave her the courage to tell me about it. Over the course of the series, I had tried to raise every issue I could think of that might keep someone in bondage to their past. During one message from Romans 8:1–2 on "Our Freedom from Condemnation," I said, "Maybe you were abused as a child, and made to feel it was your fault. Maybe you were told you were stupid, and were constantly criticized by your parents.... There is hope for you in Christ. There is freedom from condemnation."

That young woman confided in me that she became bulimic, in part, because of her inability to live up to the standards of perfectionist parents. That one line in a sermon had caught her by surprise. "How did you know I needed to hear those very words?" she asked.

"I guess the Holy Spirit knew you needed to hear them, so he gave them to me to say," I replied for the second time that day.

Just a few hours earlier, I had met with a man who, also for the first time, told me his shameful secret of being molested as a little boy. "I never heard anyone bring that up in a sermon before," he told me. "I figured that I must be the only damaged goods in this congregation. But when I heard you say it right out loud like that, I figured it must affect a lot of people or you wouldn't have bothered to mention it. So I figured maybe we could talk about it without your being disgusted with me."

While a seminary student learns in his first pastorate that a person's appearance offers little or no clues to a person's soul, I'm still amazed at how outward appearances can deceive. I've ministered in an affluent, well-put-together suburb, a transitioning urban area of dwindling hope, and a small-town, rural church where poverty hung like dust. In all three places, I've encountered similar pain, confusion, bondage, and fear. In any

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setting, preaching must free people from the pain of the past, communicating, "I know you're here, I'm not surprised by your past, and this is for you, too."

When I approach the pulpit with the intent of administering spiritual care to people I love, when I'm appropriately honest about my spiritual ups and downs, when I demonstrate that the Christian life is attainable and doable, when I communicate, I know you're here, some tremendous benefits emerge.

—ED ROWELL; adapted from LEADERSHIP journal, © 1998 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.Leadershipjournal.net.

Discuss

1. Can you think of a time when vulnerability—on your part or someone else's—led to positive change?
2. If we were to admit our most serious struggles, would that be beneficial or detrimental? Why?
3. How can we be more open with one another?

VULNERABILITY**I Have Something to Say**

Vulnerability leads to growth for the entire group.

Proverbs 23:16

Introduction:

Admitting struggles and concerns can be a scary and risky thing. But it's also powerful, productive, and invaluable. Vulnerability, however, should be met with sensitivity. When one confesses a struggle or weakness, or when they admit their doubts or fears, meeting their vulnerability with anger, frustration, or a thoughtless dismissal can be very damaging. When someone takes a risk and willingly makes themselves vulnerable (in an appropriate setting), be supportive, encouraging, and willing to listen.

Instructions:

Read the scenario below. Establish who the leader (Pastor Joe) will be during this activity. Everyone else can improvise and assume roles during the activity. Everyone should participate even if they don't assume an established role. When one person shares a concern, others should practice being responsive to their vulnerability: asking questions, affirming them, asking for clarification, thanking them for their honesty, etc.

Scenario:

Pastor Joe organized this meeting—with all the leaders from his church—to discuss the \$25 million gift that has just been bequeathed to the church. In his excitement, Pastor Joe has outlined a plan to build a larger church and increase the salary of everyone on staff (because of the added responsibilities that come with a new facility). Pastor Joe has also started a list of all the other things your church can buy now that God has blessed you with this gift. But instead of sharing Pastor Joe's enthusiasm, you, the various leaders present for this meeting, respond by sharing your concerns regarding your church's ministry, mission, etc.

Roles (Note: not every role is essential, so participants can choose one that suits them or they can participate by responding as others assume roles):

- Pastor Joe—he/she will need to respond as the others share their concerns, doubts, etc.
- Someone who believes that they all need to take their jobs and these meetings more seriously
- Someone who worries that this additional money will make them complacent
- Someone who doesn't want more money because they feel like they're already overpaid
- Someone who wishes the church were more engaged with the community—and they fear that building a larger building will be counter-productive
- Someone who is doubting their ability to take on more responsibility—they feel overworked already
- Someone who feels like they've lost their passion for ministry
- Someone who admits to being proud—or believes Pastor Joe is proud—of the church's status—and they feel like building a larger church will exacerbate the problem
- Someone who feels lost in the shuffle and insignificant—they don't feel valued or appreciated
- Someone who thinks Pastor Joe makes decisions on his own and doesn't value their input

Interactions:

After everyone has read the instructions and the role of Pastor Joe has been established, Pastor Joe should stand up—pretending as if he/she has just finished outlining his plan. Pastor Joe will say, “So ... what does everyone think?”

At this point, others will begin expressing their concerns (based on those listed above or anything else that is appropriate). The group should interact with one another; this activity should not be limited to one-on-one exchanges between Pastor Joe and other speakers.

After everyone has shared their concerns, end the activity. Then spend some time debriefing. Talk about how your group would really respond to these concerns. Discuss, for example, whether or not you would be willing

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to speak up if you felt this way. Conclude the activity by spending time in group prayer, asking God to give your group strength, courage, and the discernment to know when to be vulnerable with one another.

—TYLER CHARLES; © 2009 Christianity Today/BuildingChurchLeaders.com

VULNERABILITY**Further Exploration**

Helpful resources on racial reconciliation in the church and the community.

Websites:

BuildingChurchLeaders.com. Leadership training resources from Christianity Today.

- “Conflict & Healing” Case Study
- “Accountability for Church Leaders” Practical Ministry Skills
- “Mentoring New Leaders” Practical Ministry Skills
- “Confidentiality” Training Theme

LeadershipJournal.net. This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

Books:

Confessions of a Pastor: Adventures in Dropping the Pose and Getting Real with God by *Craig Groeschel*. One pastor’s life changed when he focused on getting real and stopped worrying about how others perceived him. (Multnomah, 2006; ISBN 978-1590527208)

Posers, Fakers, and Wannabes: Unmasking the Real You by *Brennan Manning*. Find freedom in the understanding that God has seen our worst and still loves us. (NavPress, 2003; ISBN 978-1576834654)

Redeeming the Past by *David Seamands*. Challenges readers to deal with unresolved emotional and spiritual issues in their past. (David C. Cook, 1987; 978-0896931692)

Safe People by *Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend*. Encourages people to find safe relationships that encourage growth and stability. (Zondervan, 1996; ISBN 978-0310210849)

Transparent: Getting Honest about Who We Are and Who We Want to Be by *Sarah Zacharias Davis*. A collection of insights that urge readers to admit their struggles and shortcomings. (Revell, 2007; ISBN 978-0800731717)

VULNERABILITY**Retreat Plan**

How to create a weekend retreat on the theme of “Vulnerability.”

BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS expands easily into a retreat format. Here is a sample retreat schedule you may follow for the “Vulnerability” theme. The purpose of this retreat is to help leaders practice racial reconciliation, both within the church and in the community at large.

Friday Evening

- ◆ 8–8:45 p.m. **Opening Session:** Hand out copies of “Ragamuffin,” the interview with Brennan Manning on pages 4–6, and allow time for each person to read it. Then form groups of three or four. Have each group discuss the questions at the end of the interview. Reconvene for the last 20 minutes and have the groups share their comments and consider what that may mean for the church.
- ◆ 9–9:45 p.m. **Bible Study:** Close the evening with “Dropping the Mask,” the Bible study on page 3. Photocopy and pass out the study, or use the handout as your notes.

Saturday Morning

- ◆ 9–9:45 a.m. **Devotional:** Set the tone for the day by handing out (or presenting) “Truth-telling Value” (p. 10). Discuss the questions at the bottom of the page, and have a time of honest prayer—whether it’s individual or group prayer.
- ◆ 10–11:00 a.m. **Activity.** Use the activity “I Have Something to Say” on page 19 to explore how your group would (and should) respond when someone is willing to be vulnerable.
- ◆ 11:15–Noon. **Assessment:** Hand out “Absence of Trust,” the assessment on page 6, to each participant. After everyone has read and completed the assessment, have them discuss their responses and whether or not they think they need to be more vulnerable.
- ◆ Noon. Lunch

Saturday Afternoon

- ◆ 1–2 p.m. **Final Group Session:** Close the retreat with the case study “When to Declare One’s Doubts” on page 9. Have each person spend some time alone to quietly read and respond to the questions on the handout. Have the group come together to share what God has taught them. Then pray together, asking God for guidance and wisdom as you take new steps together.

You can create similar retreat plans for any of the other BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS themes. Simply determine what you want to accomplish and select the handouts that support your objectives.