

YOUR LEADERSHIP

EDGE

LEAD ANYTIME, ANYWHERE.

ED O'MALLEY
AMANDA CEBULA

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CHAPTER 7
MANAGE SELF

Know Your Strengths, Vulnerabilities and Triggers

In Shakespeare’s “Hamlet” Polonius says, “This above all: to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.” Our idea of “know your strengths, vulnerabilities and triggers” is a modern version of that classic advice.

A big part of exercising leadership is understanding and appreciating our humanness. People often assume they understand their strengths, vulnerabilities and triggers. But we tend to look at ourselves last. Rather than focus on our vulnerabilities, we point out the vulnerabilities in others. Rather than attempt to control our triggers, we note every time others are triggered. Rather than appreciate our strengths, we’re envious of the strengths of others.

By knowing your strengths, vulnerabilities and triggers, you have a better chance of controlling them and of being intentional about how they can help — or hinder — you when exercising leadership.



LET'S DEFINE WHAT WE MEAN BY STRENGTHS, VULNERABILITIES AND TRIGGERS.

Strengths, in our context, are those leadership competencies and behaviors that come most naturally to you. We aren't talking just about your personality and career strengths (i.e. humorous, good public speaker, knowledge of a certain computer program, excellent project manager, etc.). We are more interested in getting you to know your leadership-related strengths for:

- Handling conflict
- Speaking from the heart
- Working across factions
- Inspiring a collective purpose
- Understanding the process challenges
- Etc.

Knowing which leadership dimensions come more naturally to you helps you pick experiments more likely to lead to success.

Don't shy from developing additional strengths, but be sure to leverage the ones you have.

Now let's talk about **vulnerabilities**. Notice we used the word "vulnerabilities" rather than "weaknesses." Vulnerabilities are different. Weaknesses are skills you could work to improve, such things as writing skills, time management or knowledge of a subject.

Vulnerabilities exist at a gut level. "Vulnerability" comes from a Latin word that means "a wound." Vulnerabilities encompass areas that make you open to attack — secrets, difficult relationships, past mistakes, private ambitions or personal cravings that could limit your ability to make progress on your

leadership challenge. It's human nature to hide these vulnerabilities, even from ourselves. We expend tremendous energy trying to conceal our vulnerabilities and — if and when they are uncovered — to mitigate, dismiss or minimize them. Here are examples of vulnerability in action.

- ▶ A company's board of directors is losing faith in its longtime CEO. She rose through the ranks and made her mark as the champion for a once innovative product that no longer sells well. Her connection to that product could cause vulnerability for her. She might be unwilling to make tough choices about it because of what the product represents to her career.
- ▶ A legislator's ego and passion lead him to be more out front on a bill he supports but his district overwhelmingly opposes. His ego and passion become vulnerabilities in this situation.
- ▶ A young professional craves acceptance by the more established professionals in her company. She becomes more concerned with how she is perceived by others than whether her work is leading to the outcomes both she and the company desire. Her desire for acceptance is a vulnerability.

A wiser path may be to lean into our vulnerabilities, acknowledging them and embracing them.

WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT YOUR STRENGTHS, VULNERABILITIES AND TRIGGERS?

Participate in a Myers-Briggs Type Indicator assessment.

Read "Type Talk: The 16 Personality Types That Determine How We Live, Love, and Work" by Otto Kroeger and Janet Thuesen.

Don't be ashamed of your vulnerabilities. Acknowledging them (even if only to yourself) can lead to better decisions and better leadership. Understanding her connection to the product might lead the CEO to appoint a vice-president to make the final decisions about the product's future. The legislator might conduct a survey to check his passion against the district's interests. The young professional might get a coach to help keep her desire for acceptance in check.

Triggers are actions, behaviors, events or ideas that simply set you off – negatively or positively – and cause you to react more out of emotion than out of strategy. For example, one of your triggers might be a certain individual speaking up in a staff meeting, a comment your spouse makes from time to time, or the fact that you were or weren't invited to a certain meeting. We all have triggers, and it's hard to lead if we can't manage them.

*Mindfulness helps us manage
our triggers and responses.
By increasing awareness of your
triggers you create a “buffer zone”
between the trigger (or impulse)
and your reaction.*

It is hard to do adaptive work, to learn, to be open to new ideas and to explore multiple ways forward. This is made harder when you act without thinking. Inability to control your triggers is a surefire way to fail in exercising leadership.

*Between stimulus and response there is a space.
In that space is our power to choose our response.
In our response lies our growth and our freedom.*

– VIKTOR E. FRANKL

TIPS TO MANAGE TRIGGERS

- Recognize when you've been triggered and count to 10 before responding.
- Think about what triggers you before heading into a meeting where you know it will happen. Make a plan to handle it.
- Have a totem or object you can look at when you're triggered to remind you of how you really want to behave.
- If a particular person triggers you, adopt a perspective that pushes against the feelings that set you off. For example: "This person really cares about this work and his passion comes through when he speaks." This might help you hold a different point of view when your normal reaction would be: "He is trying to derail this conversation!"

HOW CAN I BE MORE AWARE OF MY STRENGTHS, VULNERABILITIES AND TRIGGERS?

- Engage a leadership coach.
- Ask those who know you best what they think your strengths, vulnerabilities and triggers are.
- Debrief after a meeting with someone you trust. Ask questions such as, "In that situation, in what ways did I seem vulnerable?"
- Set aside time to reflect. Be honest with yourself.
- Think about how you normally respond to a trigger. What do you normally do? How do you respond?

A human being has so many skins inside, covering the depths of the heart. We know so many things, but we don't know ourselves! Why, thirty or forty skins or hides, as thick and hard as an ox's or bear's, cover the soul. Go into your own ground and learn to know yourself there.

— MEISTER ECKHART



I try to be an involved citizen, but every time I attend a community meeting the people get me so frustrated. Several times I have just walked out! I really care about my community, so what do I need to do so I can be more engaged?

- SAMUEL, A CITIZEN WHO CARES

Dear Samuel,

How much do you really care? By walking out of the meeting – by not controlling your triggers – you are choosing your own comfort over helping your community. Here are two approaches to consider.

First, be a grownup. Don't collect your toys and go home. Life is full of people and situations you don't like. Those who lead learn how to hang in there anyway, because they care more about the issue than their own comfort. Suck it up, and stay in the meeting.

Second, find another way to engage. Community meetings are important, but our experience is you'll have far more impact if you build relationships with local officials. Ask them to coffee, learn their interests and help them understand your perspective. Leadership is about relationships. Build them.

Good luck! And remember, your community needs your involvement, but as a thoughtful, relationship-building citizen, not as someone stomping out mad.

Onward!