|  |
| --- |
| **Vulnerability as a Source of Strength** |

**By Sharon Strand Ellison**

**We Can't Be Fully Honest Without Showing Vulnerability**

*There is a power in honesty and we lose it when we hide. Showing our vulnerability is the segue to that power.*

**Introduction**

*I put the tip for all of us first, followed by couples, parents, and professionals. I think it is valuable to read them in order as the information from one area can be generalized to another.*

The message that exposing our vulnerability when we are under attack shows our weakness and puts us in danger is part of the atmosphere we are born into, the air we breathe. Most of us, no matter how dedicated we are to communicating openly, would automatically be inclined to hide our vulnerability at the very moment someone is intentionally putting us down or embarrassing us in front of others. We typically show our vulnerability when we feel safe, usually not when under attack unless we are "breaking down" or "giving in."

I don't think we can tap into our full strength until we see vulnerability as *power* rather than *weakness*, even in the face of someone who wants to hurt us, personally or professionally. Two reasons stand out in my mind. The first is that it is not possible to be fully honest without showing vulnerability. I am hiding part of what *I* think and feel *and* it inhibits me from giving accurate feedback to *you*. If I don't want you to know that you hurt me, how can I communicate with any accuracy about what is happening between us? Second, when I feel vulnerable and try to speak without showing it, I may show bravado or arrogance, thereby prompting you to shut me out or try harder to bring me down.

When I integrate vulnerability and honesty, the softness of my vulnerability melded with the directness of my honesty, moves me out of all defensive posturing. You, the other person, now have more capacity to empathize with me and examine your own behavior. Even if you choose not to, anyone who witnesses the interaction is more likely to see genuineness and wisdom in me. And having spoken from a place of integrity—*integration,*I can walk away with more strength regardless of how you respond.

Following are 3 sets of tips for: **Couples, Parents,** & **Professionals:**

**For Couples — Showing Vulnerability Gives Us the Power to Build Trust**

In the traditional thinking about vulnerability, we only show it when we feel safe, when we can really *trust* the other person. Ideally, intimate relationships are built on such trust. However, in reality, even differences in personality can make it hard for us to understand the other person's reactions. My way of being honest may make you think I am harsh and your indirectness may make me think you are dishonest. In each case, we will feel less cared about, and trust will be damaged.

*As we increasingly hide our vulnerability, we begin an isolating spiral that leads to alienation.*

So what happens next? By the old logic, if I can't trust you, I can't be fully open. So the next time we are in conflict, I close down a little more and hide my vulnerability. It also spreads like mold, so if my trust is broken in one area, I begin to doubt you in others. If you are indirect because you don't want to hurt me, or are afraid of my reactions, instead of making it easier for you to open up, I start accusing you of wanting to deceive or manipulate me. If I am blunt in my honesty, you start accusing me of wanting to dominate you or tear down your self-esteem. And of course, many relationships have incidents that are severely threatening to trust, for example: your having more loyalty to your family of origin than to me, your partner; one of us feeling attracted to someone else; differences in child rearing habits; issues around alcohol or drugs; breaking confidences. Every relationship has breakdowns in trust. If we stop showing our vulnerability when our trust feels damaged, then it will be a given that we become increasingly guarded and walled off from each other.

*Our power to build trust is fueled by our ability to express ourselves openly even when trust is damaged.*

To break the cycle, I have to be willing to show my vulnerability even when I think you're intentionally wanting to hurt me. I can ask you directly, gently, "Are you wanting to hurt me? If so, you are succeeding." And I can tell you about my hurt openly, whether I trust that you will care or not. One person who reported asking this question said that the response was, "Yes!! Just as much as you are hurting me!" Although one person initiated showing the pain, the other, responding first in anger, also admitted wanting to *create* hurt because of *feeling*hurt. If I reacted defensively to this admission, I might retort, "What do you mean 'as much as I've hurt you?!' It's you who is hurting me." This is an example of how couples can compete over who is the perpetrator and who is the victim.

To build trust effectively, it is vital not to slip from openness into defensiveness at any point. In conversation, unlike war, we can be open, show our vulnerability, and still set limits when we need to. In this case, each of these two people became able to talk about their pain, which enabled them to look more closely at the interaction that created it.

**For Parents — Showing Vulnerability without Using It to "Guilt Trip" Our Children**

Every time Hana picked up her daughter Lindy at day care, Lindy would fuss and cry and say she didn't want to leave. Hana was embarrassed in front of the teacher and other parents, so she just coaxed Lindy, saying, "Come on, honey, we're going to have fun too," offering enticing things like going to the park or visiting another friend. Once when they were in the car, she got angry at Lindy. Never did Hana show her own tender, hurt feelings. As parents, we often hide our vulnerability from our children, because we want to be strong and keep our children feeling safe.

On the other hand, when, as parents, we do show our vulnerable feelings, we often do so to try to manipulate the child into doing what we want without setting effective limits. For example, Hana might have said, "Lindy, honey, please don't cry when I come; you make me feel bad. You don't want other people to think I'm a bad parent, do you?" Here, the vulnerability will still be invisible, overshadowed by the manipulation. Lindy will learn that when people do share their feelings, she is being controlled.

*When a parent shares vulnerable feelings openly, without any attempt to control or manipulate, even little children can instantly deepen their understanding and maturity.*

While I think we have to decide which of our vulnerable feelings are appropriate to share with a child, we can often share more of them, and to a greater degree, than we think, even with very young children. As she worked on resolving this issue with greater clarity, Hana said to Lindy in the car one day:

"When I come to get you, I want to just be excited to see you, but I'm always afraid you will fuss and cry, so I get nervous about coming. When you do get upset, then I get mixed up between being sad and being angry at you all at once. And I feel embarrassed because I worry that the other kids and the grown-ups might be thinking I'm not a good parent."

I can express my vulnerability to my teenager in the same way: "When you won't talk to me I get terrified that I'll lose control over what is happening to you. I feel helpless and don't know what to do, so I often try to force you to talk." In either case, with either a young child or a teenager, it is vital that once we express our feelings, we don't continue to hit them over the head with them.

If Hana is still in a tantrum, then it would be time for limit setting, *not*reminders of how bad she is making mommy feel! In this case, when Hana stated her feelings openly, without trying to convince Lindy to change her behavior, she said that Lindy looked at her with wide eyes, as if receiving a revelation, and said spontaneously, "I'm sorry mommy, I like to be with you too. I just don't like to leave my friends." The next time Hana came to pick her up, Lindy said, "Hi mommy, can you wait just minute while I say goodbye to my friends?"

**For Professionals — Regaining Your Power When You Feel Intimidated**

**Showing Vulnerability Can Equal Being Heard — Up and Down the Hierarchy**

One of the issues I often hear about is people expressing how hard it is to give feedback to employees they supervise and/or their own supervisors. I think that most of us have not resolved the authority issues we had with our own parents, so hierarchical situations bring up old issues and patterns from our childhood. It's hard enough resolving conflict in any situation; issues around the power of authority can be an intense complicating factor.

As an employee, I may not want to be truthful about what I am feeling, because it could make the supervisor angry and he/she might retaliate. I might not get my raise, or a promotion. I might even get fired. If I am the supervisor, I might hesitate to give truthful feedback for countless reasons. I don't like conflict any more than my employee does, I am afraid he/she will get defensive. I don't want to say something that will cause wider ripples, such as the employee going to HR or a union representative.

*Hierarchical relationships often intensify people's unwillingness to show vulnerability*.

I believe the same principles that apply to family relationships apply to professional relationships. When people don't show their vulnerability, they damage trust and become alienated. In hierarchical work relationships, the damage that comes from hiding vulnerability means that people will not be able to give each other feedback effectively. Not giving and receiving feedback effectively and efficiently damages people's ability to function with increasing competence, be happy in their work, and feel a sense of community.

A few simple words that express softer feelings of vulnerability can make all the difference when giving feedback. In one case, Bill, the supervisor, had been having a great deal of difficulty giving feedback to Gary, his employee. Gary seemed to always respond defensively, justifying his behavior and arguing. This made Bill get more tense each time; the harder he tried to establish his authority with subtle admonitions or more direct threats, the more Gary resisted.

*Showing vulnerability can have the power to dissolve barriers in hierarchical relationships*

As Bill worked to develop his management skills, he decided to try something new. He told Gary, "I am always nervous when I need to give you feedback about how you are doing your job because I anticipate you will hear it as critical and off base. Whenever you don't agree with what I say, I try to prove my authority by getting more directive. While my job does require that I give direction and feedback, I want to do my part better. I'd like it if we could both walk away from a conversation feeling respect for each other."

Gary didn't say too much at first, just, "OK. Thanks." Bill said he felt much clearer and less triggered the next time he talked to Gary, and Gary listened better, argued less. Starting from the moment Gary shared some of his own vulnerability, their relationship took a gradual uphill path. An employee can also approach giving a supervisor feedback by starting with her/his need to talk about something and fear of doing so. Supervisors also often feel less criticized about their own competence when they see an employee's vulnerability.

Even a single sentence can be effective. One time Sally told Anna, an employee she supervised, "This is hard for me" while she was giving her some feedback. Anna told Sally, "I felt different the minute you told me it was hard for you. I felt less criticized and more supported. I was able to hear what you said so much more easily."

**Sharon's Closing Thoughts on Vulnerability, Power, & Trust**

When we become alienated and untrusting we often act as "enemies." We hide our vulnerability and lose our compassion. The spiral of emotional and even physical violence can then spin out of control like a hurricane, unchecked. Sometimes the hurricane remains inside each person, sometimes it spills out and creates open warfare with innocent bystanders becoming victims — at home, at work, among nations.