

Viewpoint: For leaders, the power of sharing creates a means to convey trust and compassion

By Debbie Epstein Henry – Contributor
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I recently chaired a virtual board retreat as the new president of The Forum of Executive Women, a nonprofit organization comprised of the top 500 women in business in Greater Philadelphia. I had planned to start with an ice breaker, asking each of the 30 directors to share one word that best captures the feeling they are currently experiencing. That was before my father was diagnosed with Stage IV pancreatic cancer.

With the board retreat date approaching, I wrestled with whether to confess what was on my mind. As we went around the Zoom screen, I listened intently as my new board members revealed their struggles and aspirations. At the end, I surprised myself and shared my word, “authentic.” Barely holding back the tears, I expressed my profound sadness at my dad’s bleak prognosis but also my immense gratitude for not only my dad but also my husband and three sons, my mom and two siblings, and the nine grandkids who were all stepping up to provide support and love.

While I consider myself gregarious, when life gets challenging, I go inward and only disclose my challenges with an intimate few. This time, it was different. As a leader, I felt I had no choice but to go public. Here’s what I learned as a result.

Don’t Leave Them Guessing. When you work closely with colleagues, they know when something is wrong. It’s not fair to leave them wondering whether it’s something they did. By being honest, you can figure out the best way to work together.

Gain Clarity of Who is With You. When you share a difficulty, you can assess who is loyal and truly cares. These are the people you want to keep close.

Distill What is Important. Facing a crisis helps you prioritize what is essential and what is dispensable. Freeing yourself of tasks that are not necessary helps you zero in on where you can contribute.

Build a Legacy. While it's not natural for many of us to accept help, by doing so, we're giving others the chance to develop their own leadership skills. By stepping aside, you'll not only be helping yourself, you'll be helping others.

Relieve Yourself of the Secret. It's a relief to tell people what you're going through. Once you do, you recognize what a burden it is to keep things from others.

Embrace the Blend. Recognize that our personal and professional lives are blurred and stop trying to artificially separate the two. While it's not helpful to "overshare," having your colleagues know more about your personal life will help you work more seamlessly together.

Cultivate Gratitude. By articulating and appreciating all that is good in your life, it will help energize you and those around you to face your struggles with more resolve.

Be Present. As a planner, I know how hard it is to be in the moment but there is real value in relishing today and focusing on what we can do now to make our circumstances as good as possible.

Model a Supportive Culture. Once I conveyed my sadness, I was struck by how many colleagues came forward to communicate the challenges they are facing and those they have overcome. Leaders who model transparency and openness give others permission to seek support and understanding.

While I wavered about getting personal at the board retreat, in doing so, I learned a valuable lesson in leadership. When leaders are willing to be vulnerable, the whole team ultimately gains strength. The power of sharing creates a means to convey trust and compassion — precisely the skills that leaders want to develop in colleagues so that together, we can deliver value and create impact.

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