

Demystifying Vulnerability-based Trust

Below is a compilation of Patrick Lencioni's words.

At the core of organizational health is the concept of trust. Without it, a leadership team can't become cohesive. And without that, an organization can't become healthy, and can't come anywhere close to reaching its potential.

Of course, the key to building trust on a team is vulnerability. If leaders, and ultimately their team members, cannot be genuinely vulnerable with one another, if they cannot be uncomfortably honest about their strengths, weaknesses, mistakes, needs for help, they will not develop trust.

Of course, the key to being vulnerable is humility. People who cannot come to terms with the truth about themselves—and truth is the essence of humility—will not be comfortable with vulnerability.

Beneath organizational health, beneath teamwork, beneath almost all enduring, great endeavors, is genuine humility. It is and has always been the most attractive of human virtues, and it guards the gate of the greatest human frailty: pride.

Patrick Lencioni defines vulnerability-based trust as "a place where leaders comfortably and quickly acknowledge, without provocation, their mistakes, weaknesses, failures, and need for help. These leaders also recognize the strengths of others, even when those strengths exceed their own." They create a culture where the team around them is willing to make mistakes, take responsibility for any mistake, and accept coaching, without confusing it for criticism. They willingly do so because the people in charge set the example.

Culture of Vulnerability-based Trust

- Team members admit their mistakes.
- Team members acknowledge their weaknesses to one another.
- Team members ask for help without hesitation.
- Team members ask one another for input regarding their areas of responsibility.
- Team members acknowledge and tap into one another's skills and expertise.
- Team members willingly apologize to one another.
- Team members are unguarded and genuine with one another.
- Team members can comfortably discuss their personal lives with one another.

Principles of developing Vulnerability-based trust

- **Leader Goes First:** People need to see the leader take the first leap of faith and model vulnerability. When a leader is willing to go first, it gives everyone else permission to do the same.
- **Share What's Genuinely Unflattering:** Our society is used to seeing the social media image, showing the highlight reel of carefully pruned candid photos. You build real trust when you're open about something that isn't flattering about yourself or your work. This isn't about self-shaming or martyrdom, it's about demonstrating clarity, honesty, and comfort with your own developmental areas and limitations.
- **Practice Confident Humility:** Confident humility means being secure in what you know while staying open to learning more. When new information emerges, you're willing to change your position. It's not about being right—it's about getting it right.
- **Never Tease or Weaponize:** The fastest way to destroy trust is to use someone's vulnerability against them. If a person shares something personal and it's later teased, mocked, or referenced in a way that triggers shame, psychological safety disappears instantly.

Examples of Vulnerability-based trust exercises

Be creative in selecting articles, books, videos, podcasts, questions, worksheets, or short readings. If the exercise invites people to share something unflattering, practice confident humility, avoid teasing or weaponizing vulnerability, and remember, the leader always goes first. When those principles are followed, you can't do it wrong.

- **Personal Histories Exercise:** This exercise is typically introduced during the initial offsite and is valuable to revisit periodically. It's as much about becoming comfortable sharing your own story as it is about others hearing it. The activity offers a low-risk way for team members to understand one another at a deeper level and helps prevent the fundamental attribution error; the tendency to attribute others' behavior to their character rather than their circumstances.
- **Explore Personality Assessments together:** Reciprocally shared Personality Assessments between Team Leader and Team Members. It accelerates the development of vulnerability-based trust and helps the team work more effectively by allowing everyone to play to their strengths. Always ask for permission before sharing results. A few options include:
 - Caliper
 - CliftonStrengths
 - Culture Index
 - DISC
 - Enneagram
 - Kolbe-A
 - Myers-Briggs
 - Predictive Index
- **Use Brené Brown's Work:** Watch her 2011 TED Talk "The Power of Vulnerability" or her 2019 Netflix special "The Call to Courage," then invite each team member to share what resonated with them and why. Reading her book *Dare to Lead* and/or using the free *Dare to Lead Read-Along Workbook* will also provide countless opportunities to spark meaningful, trust-building conversations.
- **Team Assessment Report:** The primary purpose of this report is to help your team identify its strengths and areas for improvement. While the assessment is quantitative and data-driven, its greatest value lies in the qualitative insights it provides and the meaningful discussions it sparks around key issues. The report is grounded in the principles outlined in *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* by Patrick Lencioni.
- **Team Effectiveness Exercise:** This repeatable exercise helps ensure that every team member is seen and valued within the group context. It creates a structured forum for giving one another focused, direct, and actionable feedback on how individual behaviors can enhance overall team performance.