Vulnerability and Leadership
February 2013 Assignment

Vulnerability is hard. And, we are all vulnerable whether we like it or not.

As we ask you to do some work on vulnerability and leadership we are keenly aware that we are asking you to do something hard. We can hear you… “Vulnerable… yeah I’m vulnerable. There is SO much I can’t control, and if I focus too closely on that fact I will not be able to function. I cannot lead from a place of vulnerability. Don’t ask me to.”

This is all real and so is the fact that vulnerability is what allows for courage and strength and makes possible risk, innovation, and leading on challenges that defy simple solutions. You will remember that Heifetz tells us that adaptive challenges are those that demand leadership with courage and the ability to take risk. As leaders, we cannot have the answers; we have to brave the opportunity to uncover the many competing possibilities for solutions, encourage and manage conflict, fail in attempts to meet the challenges, learn from mistakes and maintain relationships through it all. In adaptive leadership you are challenging attitudes, values and behaviors—your own and others. That takes some ability to embrace your inevitable vulnerability.

When you are able, you make choices everyday about leaning into your vulnerability or not. There are always good reasons for both. We want you to explore this and connect it to your leadership and how you live it out in the world. What do your choices around vulnerability have to do with your leadership?

We do this work in in coaching, where we explore your fears, hopes, limitations and strengths, and you make plans to meet yourself where you are and to grow. Over the coming months, as we near and have our fifth seminar, do our last coaching sessions and move toward the inevitable close of this group in this configuration, we think it is important for you to move some of that work into the public space of your class.

As you will note in the talk that you will watch, vulnerability (your ability to be fully seen) allows for and supports connection while shame (a sense of unworthiness and lack of belonging) unravels connection. We acknowledge that asking you to be vulnerable with your fellow Fellows again may feel scary and we also remind you of the Johari Window model. The more you expand that first window pane (that which you know and others know about you), the greater your strength and the strength of your group. We urge you to take the risk to explore and to share.

Here is the assignment…

- Watch Brene Brown’s TED talk on the Power of Vulnerability at [www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html)
- Explore one area of your shame or sense of unworthiness. (As Dr. Brown notes, all humans have shame -- The only ones who do not are incapable of empathy, otherwise known as sociopaths.)
- Think about a leadership situation that challenged your shame or sense of unworthiness
  - You should explore one particular situation in the context of your leadership in family, civic/community, or professional work. Context matters and informs our choices, and we may make different choices in different contexts. We want to look at that.
- Think about the choices you made in the face of that challenge. Did you face shame and choose to be vulnerable? Did you hide shame and avoid vulnerability?
- What were the consequences of your choices? For you? For others?
- How was the leadership situation affected by your choices?

Bring your thoughts and notes on this with you to the seminar. We will work on this Thursday evening in small groups and share the learnings in large group.
Thank you for taking on this task.