

# Understanding Vulnerability

By Dr Mark Crosweller AFSM

Vulnerability, though often misunderstood or avoided, lies at the heart of what makes us human. It shapes our relationships, our ethical obligations to one another, and the quality of our leadership. Vulnerability is not a weakness to be eradicated, but a universal human condition—one that, when recognised and expressed wisely, deepens relationality and reduces suffering. However, when vulnerability is denied or suppressed, the consequences can be profound, both for individuals and for the organisations they serve.

## The Nature of Vulnerability: Positive, Negative, and Universal

Vulnerability is not confined to the marginalised or disadvantaged. It is a pervasive feature of human life. Regardless of our status or strength, we are all susceptible to harm, misfortune, limitation, or the inability to cope and adapt. Vulnerability does not simply refer to the suffering we experience now, but to the future possibility of suffering—the anticipatory awareness that something may harm us at a later point. This distinction is crucial. It means that vulnerability offers a space of possibility, a “space of opportunity.” In the gap between recognising a future threat and its realisation, leaders have the chance to take preventive or mitigating action. Vulnerability, therefore, is not merely a burden to be carried; it is a moment of ethical decision-making and compassionate influence.

Vulnerability carries both positive and negative potentials. Positively, it opens pathways to compassion, trust, love, and relational connection; negatively, it can expose us to harm, violence, exploitation, and emotional pain. The danger arises when vulnerability is perceived only as a liability. In such cases, individuals and organisations develop habits of denial, avoidance, or defensiveness—referred to as invulnerability. This posture of invulnerability can lead to harmful patterns that suppress empathy, distort relationships, and deepen suffering.

## The Socio-Cultural Shaping of Vulnerability: Masculinity, Power, and Institutional Habitus

Understanding why people—and especially leaders—avoid vulnerability requires an examination of the cultural and institutional forces that influence their worldviews. A range of sociological perspectives show how organisational environments shape whether vulnerability is welcomed or repudiated.

*Masculinity as a Cultural Force:* Research into United States wildland firefighters reveals that organisational

cultures shaped by hyper-masculinity tend to reject vulnerability. Within such cultures, heroism and toughness are valorised, while sensitivity and self-awareness are suppressed. Risk-taking becomes a badge of honour. Vulnerability is socially punished, seen as incompatible with competence or control. These norms push individuals to adopt an idealised identity—“the heroic firefighter”—that leaves no room for uncertainty, hesitation, or emotional exposure.

A similar pattern was observed in Japan following the 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and Fukushima nuclear crisis. Political and economic elites dismissed calls for a more care-centred, community-centred response, choosing instead a rhetoric of control and reassurance—“nothing to see here.” This denial of vulnerability was tied to cultural expectations of masculine resilience, rationality, and strength. The vulnerability of citizens was downplayed, and opportunities for more compassionate leadership were lost.

*Institutional Habitus and the Reproduction of Invulnerability:* Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, institutions embed patterns of behaviour—habitus—that shape how leaders think, act, and relate. This habitus is not formally taught or intentionally chosen. It is absorbed gradually, imperceptibly, as “the way things are done around here.”

Over time, leaders are socialised into a worldview that prizes invulnerability: confidence, decisiveness, control, and emotional distance. The institutional habitus reinforces the illusion that risk can be tamed and that vulnerability is a threat to organisational authority and legitimacy. Through repeated exposure to these cultural norms, leaders internalise the belief that vulnerability has no place in professional life.

This is compounded by social cognition processes: ideas that are repeated, emotionally congruent, and institutionally reinforced are more easily absorbed and replicated. Conformity then becomes a powerful force, shaping leaders’ identities and behaviours. The result is an organisational culture where invulnerability is normalised, often at significant cost to individuals, relationships, and institutional integrity.

## The Benefits of Vulnerability in Leadership

Despite cultural pressures to appear invulnerable, recent research shows that many leaders recognise vulnerability as a source of value and strength. When asked whether they saw themselves as vulnerable personally or professionally, 75% responded affirmatively and described its positive impacts.

*Humanity and Relationality:* Leaders observed that showing vulnerability made them more human and relatable. It fostered authenticity, approachability, and emotional connection. When leaders acknowledge their limitations, uncertainties, or mistakes, it signals trustworthiness and creates space for others to do the same. Vulnerability invites compassion and helps cultivate deeper relational bonds that strengthen organisational cohesion.

*Learning, Creativity, and Better Decision-Making:* Many leaders noted that being vulnerable allowed them to admit mistakes, reflect critically, and improve their practice. Organisations that embraced vulnerability tended to have less bullying, more openness, and greater psychological safety. These cultures fostered creativity—“vulnerability opens a creative space instead of a space of expertise”—and supported more thoughtful, collaborative decision-making.

*Limits and Risks:* Yet vulnerability is not without risk. Leaders who showed vulnerability sometimes exposed themselves to bullying, criticism, or undermining behaviour. Some described being berated or dismissed when they admitted uncertainty or emotional strain. Others spoke of health challenges, burnout, or overwhelming pressure exacerbated by organisational expectations of stoicism. Vulnerability can become

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dangerous in environments where empathy, trust, and integrity are lacking.

Nevertheless, leaders recognised that refusing to acknowledge vulnerability could be even more harmful—both to themselves and to their ability to understand and support others.

## How Invulnerability Increases Suffering

In stark contrast, leading from invulnerability was found to cause significant and widespread harm. Fifty-five percent of leaders reported that vulnerability was viewed as a weakness within their organisations. Only 45% saw it as a strength. The consequences of viewing vulnerability as weakness were severe.

*Dehumanisation and Bullying:* When vulnerability is equated with incompetence or fragility, harsh cultures form. Bullying, belittling, ostracism, and punitive responses to perceived weakness become commonplace. Individuals who express vulnerability may be denied opportunities, isolated, or pushed out of the organisation. Vulnerability becomes mischaracterised as illness or deficiency, reinforcing stigma and deepening harm.

*Suppression of Learning and Responsibility:* Invulnerability stifles learning. Errors are denied, responsibility is shifted, and systemic issues are obscured. Fear replaces openness, while leaders cling to the appearance of competence rather than the pursuit of understanding. The organisation becomes brittle, defensive, and resistant to growth.

*Loss of Compassion and Increased Suffering:* Perhaps most critically, invulnerability erodes empathy and compassion. It diminishes leaders' ability to recognise suffering—both their own and that of others—leading to decisions that compound harm. One leader recounted a devastating example: after a catastrophic fire that destroyed homes and caused deaths, a senior organisational figure told affected communities that they “should have done more to prepare themselves.” Such responses reflect a profound loss of relational capacity and moral responsibility.

Invulnerability also increases mental health risks, as individuals hide distress, internalise pressure, and suffer in silence. Masks of strength conceal inner turmoil, and leaders lose touch with the vulnerabilities that would otherwise ground their judgement and humanity.

## Vulnerability With Wisdom

It is important to emphasise the importance of wise vulnerability. If vulnerability is to be a source of relational connection and ethical strength, it must be approached with attentiveness, boundaries, discernment, and mutual respect.

*The Practice of Vulnerability:* Vulnerability is not simply an idea to be understood; it must be lived. Wisdom about vulnerability emerges through experience—through the felt reality of uncertainty, risk, exposure, and emotional openness. Practising vulnerability involves recognising that outcomes cannot be predicted or controlled. It requires the courage to step into relationships where transformation, rather than certainty, is possible.

This practice also demands clarity of intention, healthy boundaries, and attentiveness to what situations, relationships, and contexts are appropriate for vulnerable disclosure. Without these qualities, vulnerability may be misunderstood, manipulated, or met with hostility.

*Moving Toward Relationality and Flourishing:* Vulnerability is a path to becoming—becoming more compassionate, more grounded, more connected, and more attuned to one's own humanity and that of

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others. It provides the basis for ethical relationality, enabling leaders to support flourishing, well-being, and integrity within their organisations and communities.

## The Challenge for Leaders

For leaders, the central challenge is to expand their understanding of vulnerability in all its complexity. They must cultivate awareness of the cultural and institutional forces that push them toward invulnerability. They must learn to recognise how vulnerability and invulnerability affect suffering—reducing it through openness and relationality, or increasing it through denial and suppression.

Seeing vulnerability as positive allows leaders to build trust, compassion, and genuine relational depth.

Seeing it as negative generates fear, disconnection, and harm. Navigating this tension wisely is the foundation for ethical leadership.

## Five Lessons for Leaders

### 1. *Vulnerability Is Not Weakness—It Is a Universal Human Condition and a Space of Ethical Opportunity.*

Vulnerability is not limited to the marginalised; it is universal. Everyone carries the possibility of harm, uncertainty, and limitation. For leaders, recognising vulnerability—both their own and others’—creates an ethical “space of opportunity” where wise, compassionate, and preventive action becomes possible.

Leaders who acknowledge vulnerability make more humane, grounded, and morally attuned decisions.

### 2. *Cultures of Invulnerability Harm People and Organisations.*

When institutions equate vulnerability with weakness, leaders become defensive, emotionally distant, or controlling. This leads to bullying and dehumanisation, suppression of learning, avoidance of responsibility, diminished empathy, decisions that deepen suffering. Invulnerability creates brittle organisations and increases risk. Leaders who participate in or perpetuate these norms inadvertently amplify suffering.

### 3. *Socio-Cultural Forces Shape How Leaders Experience and Express Vulnerability.*

Research on firefighting, disaster responses, and institutional cultures reveals that hyper-masculinity, performance expectations, and organisational habitus push leaders toward emotional suppression. Unquestioned norms about strength, stoicism, and certainty train leaders to reject vulnerability, even when openness would foster trust, compassion, and ethical clarity. Understanding these forces helps leaders resist unhealthy cultural expectations and reclaim authentic relational leadership.

### 4. *Vulnerability Strengthens Leadership Through Humanity, Learning, and Relational Connection.*

Recent research indicates that 75% of leaders saw vulnerability as personally and professionally positive. When expressed wisely, vulnerability builds trust and emotional connection, fosters authenticity and psychological safety, enables learning, creativity, and better decision-making, reduces bullying and defensiveness, and supports more reflective and compassionate leadership. Vulnerability humanises leaders and strengthens the relational fabric of their organisations.

### 5. *Leaders Must Practise “Wise Vulnerability”—Courage with Boundaries and Discernment.*

Vulnerability is powerful but must be expressed with wisdom. This includes clarity of intention, appropriate context and timing, healthy relational boundaries, and awareness of risks in hostile environments. Wise vulnerability is not emotional dumping or unguarded exposure; it is intentional openness that fosters trust, compassion, and relational depth. For leaders, this means embodying vulnerability in ways that reduce suffering, strengthen relationships, and model ethical courage.