

Leveraging Vulnerability for Lawyer Well-Being

I grew up in a perfect family. I was trained to be a perfect lawyer. As a young attorney, I worked with perfect people in a perfectionist culture. Mistakes were not tolerated. Showing emotions was unheard of. And seeking support was a sign of weakness. After years of trying to live up to an unattainable “perfect me,” the strain began to take a toll on my physical and mental health. This was the turning point. I needed to make a change, so I began a new journey to improved well-being. A shift within me and events that followed led to profound improvements in my job satisfaction, performance, and personal health.

What is vulnerability? As attorneys, we talk about uncertainty and risk all the time, but rarely in the context of emotional exposure. Admitting to imperfection is an elusive construct in our organizational culture. Brown (2012) stated that while vulnerability is the “core” for our shame, fear, and worthiness, it’s also the “birthplace of [our] love, belonging, joy, courage, . . . and creativity” (pp. 44-45).

It is natural to want to suppress feelings of shame, fear, guilt, and insecurity. But ignoring these powerful feelings requires a tremendous amount of energy, which can be better utilized elsewhere. The dulling of emotions is often associated with depressed mood and dissatisfaction with life. Failing to attend to our vulnerability can put our overall happiness at risk. The bottom line: we cannot self-select which emotions we want to feel and which ones we want to dull. When we ignore or numb the unpleasant ones, we blunt *all* emotions, even the feel-good ones. This can lead to a myriad of unhealthy consequences, including addiction, emotional and behavioral problems, and poor job performance.

I am offering a radical concept for attorneys. Use vulnerability as a key to improving your overall well-being. Unlock your full potential as a thriving attorney, enabling you to find meaning in your work and in life. In this summary, I’ll address the roadblocks we face as a profession and offer you simple strategies to leverage your vulnerabilities and increase your personal and professional power.

THE LAWYER’S ROADBLOCK TO WELL-BEING

We are trained from law school to be perfect. This perfectionism carries over into our practice. We wear a shield that protects us from feeling unwanted negative emotions. But this armor can prevent us from acknowledging mistakes, forgiving ourselves and others, adapting to change, and grieving loss. In short, this armor can compromise our emotional development, our connections with others, our creativity, and our ability to capture an enjoyable workflow.

Many attorneys I coach talking about “feeling used and getting ground up in the process.” Bishop (2018) noted that:

[L]awyers who feel pressure to be perfect or to avoid even the appearance of failure are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety and stress than peers in other professions or in the general population. Similarly, they are less resilient to setbacks that are inherent in practicing within a contentious legal system. (p. 959)

As a result of the fear of failure and unwillingness to be vulnerable, we are stunted in our creativity, our intellectual growth is stymied, and our ability to perform and thrive is thwarted.

It is easy to see how a culture of perfectionism is reinforced in our work culture. It is obvious that it serves our clients and ourselves. As lawyers, we are paid to examine every possibility and benefit with various outcomes, analyze the weaknesses in the arguments on both sides, and minimize risks at all costs. Our clients demand and expect to receive high-quality products and services. And, we have an ethical duty to provide the best representation. Yet, does perfectionism at all costs really serve our clients? If we fear failure and shun “owning up to our mistakes” or expressing our vulnerabilities, it could have a deleterious impact on our well-being and ultimately our work product.

Given this backdrop of the high-performance, hard-charging, perfectionist legal culture, how can one fathom coming forward to share that he/she is feeling overwhelmed or experiencing anxiety, depression, burnout or addiction? The real fear of being judged stops us short. Shame and embarrassment prevent us from sharing our insecurities. The reality is that we are afraid of developing a reputation in our field that we just “can’t cut it” and that this will damage our ability to move up through the ranks or give the appearance that we are weak. However, if we allow the fear of being judged prevent us from coming forward to speak our truth, the real damage can show up later in the form of depression, anxiety, unhealthy coping mechanisms, or compromised work performance.

Lencioni (2010) asserted that being vulnerable with a client can help to establish trust, and thus further strengthen the relationship. It is critical to show our clients that we are confident enough to be worthy of the trust they are placing in our hands by being honest. If we fail to tell a client the hard truth, or pretend that we never make a mistake, we will lose credibility quickly (Lencioni, 2010).

Below are some practical recommendations to leverage vulnerability for lawyer well-being. Note that they seek to address some of central themes on lawyer well-being as outlined in the *ABA’s Report from the National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being*, including removing the stigma associated with seeking help; educating the profession on well-being issues; and taking small, incremental steps to change how we show up for ourselves and how we show up at work (2017).

VULNERABILITY AS A SOLUTION TO IMPROVED WELL-BEING

Let’s be honest here for a moment. Vulnerability is NOT a word we are used to using in our legal lexicon. I know what you’re thinking, this is too “touchy feely,” “too soft,” or even,

“this has no place for discussion in this profession.” But, if we consider for a moment where our profession is headed in terms of the significant increase in attorney addiction, anxiety, depression and burnout, shouldn’t we at least consider a fundamental shift in perspective? Arguably, we are duty-bound to evaluate strategies not previously employed to see if they can improve our ability to thrive while still maintaining and, perhaps even improving, how we serve our clients.

Vulnerability helps to build resilience and can be viewed as two sides of the same coin.

So, how do we get there? How does one *become* more vulnerable? Three suggestions follow.

ONE: SEEK SOCIAL SUPPORT

Positive social support is critical for building physical and psychological health. Taking the first step in asking for help requires us to be vulnerable. But, how and where do we turn in an environment that may not be set up for showing vulnerability. Our profession is changing. Every state bar now has a judges and lawyers assistance program and many firms are implementing programs around well-being. You can seek encouraging nurturing professional relationships and networks like WVJLAP. Where to turn? Contact the professional development director of your firm. Reach out to a solo practitioner in your region or online. Engage in collegial relationships with those who support you. Colleagues, particularly those outside of our practice group or firm, can act as a confidante, provide validation, and offer a fresh, objective perspective. Sharing your emotions, concerns, and challenges with an external colleague may be a way to get what you need yet protect you from unnecessary exposure.

If embracing your vulnerabilities feels scary, take the small step of sharing with a friend, a family member or an independent professional, such as a therapist or coach. Seek out people whom you can trust, have expertise, provide support, and give honest feedback.

Perhaps this message is resonating with you because you’ve shared a similar journey and overcame obstacles yourself. If so, consider taking the step of providing confidential, non-judgmental guidance, mentorship, and support to a colleague or lawyer friend. Perhaps you have an opportunity to inspire young attorneys coming up through the ranks or someone showing signs of being at-risk.

TWO: EXAMINE YOUR LIFE PURPOSE

Having a strong sense of your life purpose is often described as a feeling of connection to one’s work, to oneself, to others, and for some, to a power greater than ourselves. Our life purpose can be one way to strengthen our “personal resilience as a strategy for surviving and thriving in the face of workplace adversity” (Jackson, Firtko, & Edenborough, 2007, p. 1). Generally, people who have a deep sense of meaning to life, are more likely to be attuned to their overall health and well-being. As lawyers, most of our time is spent at work. Therefore, is it important to consider whether our innate values align with our work, and, if not, explore how we can find greater meaning in our jobs.

Examining life purpose can sound intimidating. But, simply stated, exercises that improve self-awareness can help you sharpen your view of your personal values, interests, and needs. This process allows us to become more confident in expressing what we desire, even if we are insecure or fear judgment. As we develop clarity in these areas, it becomes easier to commit personal resources (passion, time, and money) to a future aligned with our life purpose. You can find many free and useful assessments online to help with this process, including this one: <http://www.viacharacter.org/www/>.

THREE: BECOME SELF REFLECTIVE

Self-reflection requires us to be drastically honest with ourselves. To do this, we must be open-minded to the power of vulnerability. By recognizing and naming our fears, we release the power they have on us. When we develop insight into our negative emotions, we can begin to gain perspective into positive emotions. This new insight into both our positive and negative emotions is a powerful first step to strengthening personal resilience.

Self-reflection has the benefit of deepening our emotional intelligence, a critical business competency. Jackson et al. (2007) pointed out that there is increasing research on the value of emotional intelligence in the workplace. When we develop our own emotional intelligence, we can manage ourselves and our relationships more comfortably. We can deal more courageously with our shortcomings. And we can begin to look for signs in our colleagues who may be struggling.

How do we strengthen our emotional intelligence? Jackson et al. (2007) further suggested journaling as an effective way for “enhancing emotional insight” (p. 6). To get started, try a method known as “free writing.” *Wikipedia* explains “free writing” as a strategy where you begin to write continuously, for five to fifteen minutes, in sentences and paragraphs, without regard to spelling, grammar, or topic. This method allows the writer to simply write, without worrying about the process or product, and a trove of untapped thoughts and insights begin to emerge. Another option is to simply begin to write down your thoughts during the day and later reflect on any actions or emotions associated with them. Examine the thoughts for negative thinking, and ask yourself, would I say this to my child? If not, write down what you *would* say instead. By doing this, you can start to put things in a logical context, recognize the unhealthy thinking patterns, and not go down the path of catastrophizing.

WHAT NEXT?

Don’t be surprised that when you decide to take a step to be vulnerable, your fight or flight instincts kick in—this stuff can be scary! Being able to confront our vulnerability, and the associated thoughts and emotions, allow us to rationally see what is really happening and restores in ourselves a sense of control—a feeling of, “I’ve got this” no matter the outcome.

A holistic approach to life—that is, focusing on balancing the various dimensions of our whole person (work, family, physical, emotional, spiritual), can lower the risk of self-neglect and burnout.

Please be assured that with this idea of vulnerability, I am not suggesting that we reveal everything with everyone and cross the boundaries of oversharing or providing too much information. I am simply positing that we take a small step of expressing our shared human condition of imperfection as we work together in our high-performance culture.

The shining star to embracing the power of vulnerability is that you develop a more personally enlightened approach to work, gain deeper connections with co-workers, and leverage the natural resiliency within you.

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