# The Surprising Secret to Authentic and Powerful Leadership

OpenTable CEO Christa Quarles says vulnerability is what actually gives you strength.

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## A Note From The Editor

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*In this series, Open Every Door,* Entrepreneur *staff writer Nina Zipkin shares her conversations with leaders about understanding what you have to offer, navigating the obstacles that will block your path, identifying opportunity and creating it for yourself and for others.*

Thinking about leaving a stable paying gig for a chance at startup success? OpenTable CEO Christa Quarles has been where you are.

Quarles got her start in banking but in 2009 got the chance to jump into something completely different, when che came on board as the CFO of a social gaming startup called Playdom.

In less than a year on the job, the company was acquired by Disney and Quarles spent the next three years overseeing business operations for the mobile gaming wing of the media

giant.

She left Disney to join Nextdoor as the company's chief business officer for a year before joining OpenTable as the reservation booking platform's CFO. In 2015 she was made the company's interim CEO before officially taking the helm of the company.

Quarles shared her insights about understanding when to take risks and how gaining more power gives you the opportunity to be more vulnerable.

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**Can you talk about a moment in your career that you had to advocate for yourself? How did you approach it?**

Relatively early on when I was still working in investment banking, I had risen up through the ranks relatively quickly and it was a fairly cut and dry understanding of your value to the company. I was relatively young as an analyst and maybe because I was a woman, though I don't know that for certain, I ended up getting paid a whole lot less than I thought was actually fair. And it was the moment where it felt so unfair relative to my contribution and my performance that I felt the need to raise it. I think I took everybody by surprise.

The reality was by pushing, by being vocal, by knowing my value and my worth specifically, I did end up getting more money and I did end up getting more of what I thought was my due. The lessons there is if you don't know your value, you can't credibly ask for it or advocate for it.

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**What was a mistake you made and how did you move forward from it?**

My big lesson for myself was not staying stuck. That was something that was really scary for me because I felt like I've got to make it work, I've got to figure out. I've got to make this happen. Even if you feel a measure of safety in [that position], there is always something better on the other side. It's super scary because you don't know what the other thing is. But it is always better.

**How have you grown and changed as a leader throughout your career?**

I think earlier on I was probably more tepid. I didn't own my voice as much. I would also say that as my power improved and increased so did my my risk-taking in many ways. I may have waited for something to be perfect or know what the answer was before I spoke up. And now I have a sense, so let's just move on that.

It's getting a lot more comfortable taking risks and exposing yourself and being vulnerable and putting yourself out there. Because the more power you have amassed, you can be a lot more more vulnerable. That is authentic leadership.

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**Over time, how has your view of success and failure changed?**

There are definitely areas where the outward measures of success were highly motivating to me. What title I have, how much money you made, what's the outcome of this startup, what could it be worth? There's just a bunch of externally driven measures of success. And then you start realizing, gosh I come in here most of my waking hours, I'm dealing with this all the time and that doesn't feel like success.

Success in my mind now is am I changing the lives of the people that I interact with on a daily basis? Am I feeling like I'm having an impact? Are we able to change and connect

people in a way that we weren’t able to do before? They become a lot less quantifiable and more my internal tunnel barometer of: Does this feel good? Am I having impact? Am I happy doing this? Does this job bring me joy? When your eyes light up and when you feel joyful in work all of the other external measures come after that.

I think it gets back to the win-at-any-cost mentality that you see in Silicon Valley. I definitely want to win but not at any cost. When you lose yourself, when you lose your values, when you lose what’s most important to you, for me that isn’t worth it.

**Is there a piece of advice a mentor gave you that you still take to heart today?**

You’ve got to be in a position to take risk. I have done that where I’ve left very secure, highly paying Wall Street jobs to go work at a startup. That was really risky, yet it felt like the right transition for my career. After leaving the banking world, I went from working at a startup to becoming CEO of another within six years. You don’t do that if you’re not taking risks along the way. And I think you’ve got to put yourself out there and ask, what is possible? I always felt like a bet on myself was a good risk to take.

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