To Take More Risks, Reframe Your Flaws as the 'Juicy Stuff'

Lessons on vulnerability from a Buddhist nun, Brené Brown and the CEO of Sweetgreen

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In Western society, we often classify things in black or white: Good or bad, strength or weakness, success or failure. But in Tibetan Buddhism, there's a saying: The peacock eats poison and that's what makes the colors of its tail so brilliant. In the metaphor, "poison" refers to all the particular characteristics that trip us up as we strive to be better. We're conditioned to disparage these parts of ourselves as flaws or shortcomings, but Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön offers another take. She simply calls this "the messy stuff." Or sometimes, even better: "The juicy stuff."

In her book *Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living,* Chödrön writes, "In the Buddhist teachings, the messy stuff is called 'klesha,' which means poison. Boiling it all down to the simplest possible formula, there are three main poisons: passion, aggression and ignorance. We could talk about these in different ways—for example, craving, aversion, and 'couldn't care less.' Addictions of all kinds come under the category of craving, which is wanting, wanting, wanting—feeling that we have to have some kind of resolution. Aversion encompasses violence, rage, hatred and negativity of all kinds, as well as garden-variety irritation. And

ignorance? Nowadays it’s usually called denial.”

When we encounter these feelings, Chödrön’s advice may seem counterintuitive: “Whatever you do, don’t try to make the poisons go away, because if you’re trying to make them go away you’re losing your wealth, along with your neurosis. All this messy stuff is your richness.” She adds, “There’s nothing really wrong with passion or aggression or ignorance, except that we take it so personally and therefore waste all that juicy stuff.”

Instead of rejecting your flaws, touch what’s beneath them.

To be clear, Chödrön is not saying that your road rage, your donut addiction, your defensiveness, or your fear-masked-as-perfectionism are the best parts of who you are. What she’s suggesting is that when one of your “poisons” is triggered, as opposed to acting out or repressing the instinct, you can “use the situation as an opportunity to feel your heart, to feel the wound. Use it as an opportunity to touch that soft spot. Underneath all that craving or aversion or jealousy or feeling wretched about yourself, underneath all that hopelessness and despair and depression, there’s something extremely soft.”

When Chödrön says there’s nothing really wrong with the juicy stuff “except that we take it so personally,” she’s saying that the destructive stories we tell ourselves about our flaws often send us spiralling. This deliberate suspension of the storyline is essentially the practice of mindfulness. But the next step—touching the universal, human “soft spot” beneath—takes it further.

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Let’s get vulnerable.

Mindfulness is a necessary stop on the path to vulnerability—a state of emotional exposure that opens you up to the world, and encourages everyone around you to do the same. The importance of vulnerability in all aspects of life has been backed by decades of research from wisewoman Brené Brown. In her most recent book, *Dare to Lead*, Brown zeroed in on leadership in the business world, with 150 interviews from C-Suite Executives. According to the *Washington Post*, the book’s biggest takeaway was this: “Truly daring leaders… are prepared to be vulnerable and listen without interrupting. They have empathy, connecting to emotions that underpin an experience, not just to the experience itself.” Which sounds a lot like “touching the soft spot.”

In the business community, many leaders talk about vulnerability. But truly seeing emotional exposure in practice is much rarer. In 2007, during a period of extreme instability for Starbucks, CEO Howard Schultz was famously frank with employees, and has since said, “I think the leader today has to demonstrate both transparency and vulnerability, and with that comes truthfulness and humility.” After her husband died suddenly in 2015, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg was open about her bereavement at work, forging a new level of depth with her colleagues. And in 2018, *NYT* Corner Office columnist David Gelles had a conversation with Elon Musk that he called “one of the most extraordinary interviews of my career.” Gelles explained that, “In all the conversations I’ve had with business leaders over the years, not until Elon Musk got on the phone had an executive revealed such vulnerability. By speaking with such candor — choking up, pausing repeatedly to regain his composure — Mr. Musk made clear just what a steep toll his work was taking on his personal life. It was a reminder that despite all their efforts to make the public believe otherwise, C.E.O.s have feelings, too.”

Of course, at that time, Musk's erratic behavior was making headlines and tanking Tesla stocks. As of last week, however, Tesla's stock had not only rebounded, but passed $500 a share for the first time. Paradoxically, there are risks in showing too much vulnerability. But without vulnerability, there are no risks.

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To take more risks, don't hide your flaws.

Your company doesn't need to be in crisis, and you don't need to go through a life-defining trauma to benefit from more vulnerability. All of us have "soft spots" beneath our less idyllic behaviors that are worth getting acquainted with, and in 2018 Jonathan Neman, CEO of restaurant chain Sweetgreen, did just that. He wrote an essay for *Entrepreneur* about an experience he had with swallowing his personal "poisons." He agreed to let his leadership coach interview 17 of his closest friends, family members and employees about what they perceived as his strengths and shortcomings. It was plenty uncomfortable to review their feedback on his flaws, but after that, he took it one step further.

He actually sat down with all his loved ones and colleagues, and discussed their feelings directly. "I'd never felt more vulnerable, talking with people about my weaknesses laid out bare," he wrote. "And yet it prompted the greatest realization of the project. I'd always wanted Sweetgreen to be a company that takes risks—because risks are what'll keep us fast-moving and innovative. And yet I didn't exactly understand how to create that culture. This process changed that. It made me recognize that to take risks, my team needs to feel autonomy, and to feel comfortable doing things that might fail. That means they need to see me fail first. I set the tone—and so

this report, full of vulnerabilities I must own and discuss, is actually a tremendous first step in that process.”

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