EMPOWERING A CULTURE OF VULNERABILITY THROUGH FOCUSED NURSING EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

Widener University
Laura Dzurec, PhD, PMHCNS-BC, ANEF, FAAN

Jennifer Specht, PhD, RN
There are no conflicts of interest to report.

No sponsorship or commercial support was given to the authors.
“All people are vulnerable” (Sellman, 2005, p. 3), because vulnerability is the essence of the human condition.
Our overall goal:

is to argue that vulnerability is neither good nor bad—it just is;

vulnerability can be perceived as a threat or an opportunity (and it’s usually viewed as the former)
Objectives

1. Describe the nature of vulnerability, highlighting its relevance to workplace success.

2. Discuss the notions of ‘relative advantage’ and ‘relative disadvantage’ in the workplace.

3. Summarize components of an evidence-based model of leadership that supports ‘more than ordinary flourishing’ and exploits vulnerability in the workplace.
Background
Vulnerability: interaction between available resources and life challenges (Mechanic & Tanner, 2007, p. 1220)
Commonly, vulnerability is seen as a relatively negative state, something to be “overcome” (deChesnay, 2005, p. xix).
Within nursing, overcoming vulnerability is a focus for a number of nursing theories (Boyle, 2008; Smith & Liehr, 2008).
In short.....

Vulnerability is susceptibility (Mechanic & Tanner, 2007)
At Issue:

Susceptibility to What??
Humor?

Q: What’s wrong with lawyer jokes?

A: Lawyers don’t think they’re funny and other people don’t think they’re jokes.

Bullying?

“Problems go unsolved and can accumulate into crises, because bullying encourages “fixing the blame rather than fixing the problem”” (Bassman, 1992, p. 140) . . . .

Workers maintain a constant state of hypervigilance (Lutgen-Sandvik & Arsh, 2013, p. 52).
Physical Wellbeing?

One is ‘vulnerable’ when “conditions ...(once) attributed to lack of personal responsibility or discipline... are (later) reframed as...diseases or linked to environmental conditions...less under individual control”  (Mechanic & Tanner, 2007, p. 1222)
In the workplace, vulnerability, viewed as a relative disadvantage, urges administrators to limit susceptibility, thus ‘protecting’ employees.
But protection has downsides

- Employees don’t learn to problem-solve
- Basis of administrator-employee relationship changes
- Related emotions can become problematic
- Doors to opportunity slam shut
A Revised Perspective
Vulnerability as an ADVANTAGE

…“the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change”  (Brown, 2012)
Vulnerability represents susceptibility to opportunity, equally as readily as it represents susceptibility to harm (Brown, 2012).
Similarly, co-worker competence emerges from vulnerability—reflecting not just know-how and aptness, but perceived degree of fit between self and expectations of the workplace culture.
In a supportive context, co-workers can afford to be “more-than-ordinarily vulnerable” (Carel, 2009, p 216). Vulnerability will foster opportunity and workplace success.
In short, we argue that it’s in the way that you use it to shape workplace culture that makes vulnerability ‘good’ or ‘bad.’
Our leadership model promotes vulnerability as opportunity
Perceived Psychological and Structural Support
Absent       Present
A caring atmosphere and direct assistance
Cross, 1981

Essential Contextual Variables:

Disposition—myself
Situation—my interpersonal network
Institution—my organizational policies and expectations
Transitions

A process or period of changing from one state or condition to another; influenced by multiple factors and yielding numerous potential outcomes
Building trust in the face of conflict
Addressing contexts of blame
Working to maximize communication
Staying unemotional
Respecting others
Challenging the process

Korsgaard, Brodt, & Whitener, 2002
Role of the “New” (Grossman & Valiga) Leader—Exploiting Vulnerability:

Shift “the distribution of relative advantage and disadvantage” (Vladeck, 2007, p. 1231):

Assess fit between individuals and context, reflected through disposition, situation, and organization as they transition to new roles

Provide psychological and functional support

Address contextual issues that constrain maximizing vulnerability

Limit a blame context in the workplace
Perceived Trustworthy Structural and Psychological Support:

Absent

Present

Level D Competence

Level C Competence

Level B Competence

Level A Competence

Insecurity in New Expectations

Culture: Disposition + Situation + Institution
Like Eric Clapton said,

"It's in the way that you use it!"
References

Available on request