

Heart-Centered Leadership

by Nancy Rosenow



Becoming a heart-centered leader is an inside job, and it's not for the faint-of-heart. It's a process of getting to know and accept ourselves so well that nothing outside of us feels threatening anymore. It's making peace with the fears we find in our heart when we get really honest. The classic children's book, *The Velveteen Rabbit* (Williams, 1958), contains a famous paragraph that describes the process perfectly:

You become. It takes a long time.... Generally by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out, and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.

Heart-centered leaders no longer try to cover up their "Realness" for fear of what others will think. They learn to stop judging any parts of themselves as 'ugly.' They move to a place of greater acceptance and love for themselves first, and then for everyone else in their lives.

That all sounds good, but, wow, it's not easy. It's a process, not an event.

It was a revelation to me a few years back when I finally understood that the judgments I feared the most weren't from others, but from myself. I had been living for years as my own worst critic, looking outside myself for acceptance and validation, all the while keeping up an internal dialogue of criticism and judgment. My greatest fear was that others would 'find out' about my flaws and come to the same conclusion I had — that I may not be worthy enough, perfect

enough, or good enough to be an effective leader. The irony is that the fear of facing my 'realness' kept me from creating the most real relationships with others. I wasn't able to lead as effectively because my fears got in the way. Only when I began to risk revealing all of me was I able to move into a place where my leadership became more loving, collaborative, and yes, effective.

Author Brene Brown, famous for her TedTalk on vulnerability, has written a wonderful book called *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way we Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (2012). "Courage starts with showing up and letting ourselves be seen," she writes. That sounds great, but I know how tough it is to really allow myself to be seen. If others truly see me, then they'll notice the parts of me that are "loose in the joints and very shabby" — in a metaphorical sense. (Okay, a little bit in a literal sense, too, since I'm practicing honesty.) It's only when I can move into a place of acceptance and love for all my 'shabby' places that I can be open to real relationships. Because we all have the places inside ourselves we judge as not-good-enough. Much of the hurt in our world comes from trying to hide those places from each other. More connection and meaning and joy is possible as soon as we embrace our 'shabbiness' as an acceptable part of ourselves.

Find Your Kinder Voice

That brings me to what I believe is the first and most important characteristic of a heart-centered leader: the ability to become intentional in our self-acceptance. I've learned to really pay attention to the voice in my head now, asking it to be much kinder. When I hear self-judgment and criticism, I ask myself if I'd want to talk to a friend that way. While the answer is always "of course not," I've really come to understand that the more my self-talk is filled with negativity and criticism, the more likely I am to turn that



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unkind voice on others, even if I don't mean to. In a school environment, especially, this is a cycle we very much want to break. Consider this: An administrator who is unaware of how self-critical she is passes on her judgmental feelings to the teachers on her staff. The teachers, affected by that negativity, inadvertently pass on those judgmental feelings to their students. And, since we know that the words our children hear from the adults in their lives soon become their own internal voices, the unhealthy cycle lives on in another generation. Or, it stops because we choose to stop it.

Choose Love More Often than Fear

Another vitally important characteristic of a heart-centered leader is the ability to make more choices that are motivated by love instead of fear. Fear and love are always at odds with each other. It's very hard to be truly loving when fear is in control. Almost every day I find myself confronted with the choice to take a deep breath and move through fear into a more loving space, or ride the wave of fear into negativity and doubt. Sometimes, despite my best intentions, fear gets a hold of me and pushes me to the ground. Then I find myself snapping at others, trying to control the uncontrollable, and making decisions I later regret. When I notice that fear has been pushing me around, I get very still and give myself a big dose of love and self-forgiveness. I remind myself that I am human and fear is part of the human condition, even though it's not as powerful as it would like us to believe. I also remind myself that one of my deepest intentions — not just as a leader, but as a human being — is to operate as much as possible from a place of love and acceptance.

With practice, I have been able to keep fear from controlling me so much. I've learned that fear is quite the liar; it often tries to convince me that I can't take the time for human connection and

loving interactions because there's an 'emergency' that's more important, or that 'things will fall apart' if I don't try to exert more control. Over the years, I've started dealing with fear's lies in a gentler way. I treat them like I would a young child... with reassurance and firmness. Often I'll say out loud to myself: "I choose to be loving right now. Love is more powerful than fear."

Believe in Your Own Strength of Heart

For many years, leaders were taught never to appear too emotional. In the past, administrators were often judged as too weak if they ever discussed concepts as 'squishy' as leading in a heart-centered way. Recently, though, this misunderstanding has been turned on its head, as more and more has been written about the need to enlist both head and heart in service to effective leadership. In addition to Brene Brown's work, other popular titles in recent management literature include: *Leadership from the Inside*



Photograph by Bonnie Neugebauer

Out: Becoming a Leader for Life by Kevin Cashman (2008). Heart-centeredness is no longer being judged as weakness, but instead as a source of strength. A new understanding is coming into awareness as leaders increasingly embrace the fact that their effectiveness is grounded in a strong relationship with themselves. The third characteristic vitally important to a heart-centered leader is that she believes in the deep value of her own strength of heart.

A few years ago when I wrote a book about heart-centered teaching, a number of educators contacted me to say I'd touched on a subject they'd been afraid to talk about openly. Many told me they longed for more heart-centered relationships among fellow staff members and with their students, but worried they would be judged harshly if they ever expressed those sentiments. I'd like to think we've now moved into a new era of understanding where no one need apologize ever again for valuing heart-centeredness as a crucial and strong component of effective teaching and leading.

Believe in Everyone's Strength of Heart

Once we as heart-centered leaders have come to accept our own 'Realness,' learned to choose love over fear more often, and come to believe deeply in our strength of heart, then we're ready to support others in doing the same. As we let our staff learn to know more about our 'shabbiness,' we invite others to reveal more of themselves, 'warts and all.' This opens the door to closer connection and keeps people from expending so much energy trying to hide insecurities. With the staff I lead, we have two traditions I value greatly. One is a time when people are invited to tell stories. We choose three names at random each month and those people tell us a story about their 'Realness' in whatever way they choose. There are no rules, no pressure, just an invitation to tell us more about their authentic selves. Over time the stories have become richer and more meaningful as people have 'dared greatly' to 'show up and be seen.'

We also have a tradition of spending some of our staff meetings talking to each other about the 'mistakes' we've made and what we learned from them. As it became more and more acceptable to discuss things that didn't work, it became increasingly obvious that having the courage to 'fail' (by the world's standards) is a prerequisite for doing important work. Heart-centered leaders help others accept honest mistakes as an important part of a learning orientation to life. It's a joy to work with a staff that has the courage to be 'Real.' No one judges others as 'ugly.' And if that ever happens, the heart-centered leader knows that it's because the person who judges does not yet understand.

Celebrate Often

Heart-centered leaders know they must help set the tone they want in their organizations by focusing more on what's working well than on what's not. Management guru Tom Peters, author of many acclaimed books such as *In Search of Excellence* (Peters & Waterman, 2006) and *The Pursuit of Wow* (1994), has been widely quoted as saying, "Celebrate what you want to see more of." Heart-centered leaders are great celebrators. They rejoice in effort as much as achievement. They notice courage, kindness, commitment, and celebrate those qualities often and exuberantly. They don't wait for the 'big success' to plan a party, for they know that the loving energy people bring to their work is actually more important than any particular achievement.

Organizations led by heart-centered leaders become interdependent, mutually supportive, and joyful. That doesn't mean people don't work hard, get discouraged at times, or face challenges. What it does mean is that any challenge is secondary to the sense of purpose and pleasure felt by a shared commitment to an important mission. Heart-centered leaders feel the mission of the organization deeply and speak of it often. And since each person in the organization is valued for being 'Real,' the mission grows and strengthens as more and more people help define its richness. Work is done with a sense of purpose and dedication to something that transcends each individual. The satisfying feeling of contributing to the greater good flourishes. Now that is something truly worth celebrating.

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