

Leadership and the theories on how to be a good leader vary across the board. To further understand leadership theories, the book *Dare to Lead* provides the viewpoint of Brene Brown and her work on vulnerability. In her research over the past two decades, she and her team have discovered that leadership vulnerability is vital for it to succeed. However, her theory on vulnerability is not as widespread as other more typical views of leadership. From the Center for Creative Leadership, the leadership theory they hold to is that the amount and type of experience impacts one's leadership abilities. Nevertheless, this theory also stipulates that when one combines learning agility with their experience, that genuinely marks a good leader.

Within libraries, there is the desire to lead the organization and the staff within well. Throughout the book *Dare to Lead* by Brene Brown and the other leadership articles and studies, the common thread was how every organization and person wants to be a good leader. The difference came into the practical application of leadership. In every organization, there are examples of good and bad leaders. Sadly, it is usually the bad leaders that make the most significant difference because they bring the entire team and organization down. One of the interviewees stated that one could always pick out the bad leaders because they were the ones that got bounced around to different branch locations. No one sets out to be a bad leader, but without putting into practice the leadership tips and advice listed in *Dare to Lead* and the other sources, there will be no chance of change.

Brene Brown desired that her book, *Dare to Lead*, be a leadership book that one could finish from a New York to LA flight with a short layover. However, in her book, *Professionalizing Leadership*, Barbara Kellerman argues that leadership is not something that can “be taught or learned quickly and easily...[it] cannot simply be summarized and codified. (162)” Barbara Kellerman believes that the idea of leadership being easily digestible and being

able to master it overnight is what continues to give the leadership industry a “dubious repute.” (162). Though based on the book *Dare to Lead*, this is not the message Brene Brown is trying to get across. She repeatedly writes within *Dare to Lead* that she is still working on these skills despite her twenty-year research.

The hierarchy in library leadership can depend on many different factors, such as whether it is a city public library that is a part of a larger organization or a smaller library responsible for its entire city population. From interviews conducted at Chicago Public Libraries, there was the agreement that the personal branches have fewer leadership abilities in making decisions than those who work in the downtown head departments. The two interviews were both with children’s librarians. When asked if they were willing to answer questions about leadership, they responded with some variation of “I’m not a leader” or “I’m the lowest on the leadership totem pole.” This immediate assumption of not being a leader, and for one of the librarians, not ever wanting to be a leader was enlightening. It shows an underlying trend that if there is no “big title,” you are not a leader in the organization. Other librarians may not hold this viewpoint, but it was curious that the two children’s librarians held this belief.

Nevertheless, according to Zeynep Aycan and Salome Shelia’s studies, they found that leadership worries played a considerable role in people choosing not to move vertically in an organization. These worries about being viewed as a leader with all the responsibility that entails – “conditions of vulnerability, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity” (Johansen, 36) as well as “worries about failure, worries about work-life imbalance, and worries about harming others” (Aycan 23). In the case of both librarians, they used the reasoning that they are shy or not very organized and do not want to make hard decisions as to why they are not a leader.

This view of not being a leader conflicts with the research and practice done in Brene Brown's team and organization. Throughout her book, she explains multiple times that everyone on the team is a leader and has a stake in everything. When everyone on the team comes into a meeting, they must have an idea, even if it changes, because that automatically makes them more invested in what occurs. The issue that may arise within the Chicago Public Library system is that not everyone goes to the "closed door meetings," as one interviewee remarked.

Another problem that arises when comparing the leadership theory of vulnerability to the Chicago Public Library's current state is the lack of leadership. Currently, both the head district librarian and head children's librarian for the city retired, and those two positions remain unfilled. There is a sense of confusion about who is responsible and whom people should report to or ask questions. When interviewing with one of the children's librarians, she stated that it has been frustrating for everyone because there is no clear leader, and so things are lost in the lack of communication. She repeatedly mentioned how she thought back to the now-retired head children's librarian and how she led. There was more flexibility under her leadership because the mentality and understanding were that not every branch was the same because their community makeup was different.

When asked to complete the sentence, "In my organization the messages and expectations about vulnerability are..." the librarians went completely different directions. One said that the word "vulnerability" was not often used except in training on sexual harassment and caring for and protecting the vulnerable. While the other librarians said that there are such rigid rules and guidelines that if a branch wanted to do anything else, one would have to go through all the red tape before anything could change. Both librarians did not see vulnerability as a part of the overall Chicago Public Library's DNA. They saw leadership as someone who had gone

through the ranks and had compassion and understanding that vulnerability was about vulnerable people in society.

In both interviews, the librarians did not see vulnerability as a part of a leader's makeup. They would call it humility rather than vulnerability and describe vulnerability as supporting those in the vulnerable community. However, when asked to describe a leader's characteristics, their descriptions echo those Brene Brown has listed. The idea of a strong leader is a good listener, observer, good delegation skills, confident, and can make decisions are all characteristics found throughout leadership theories. Brene Brown defines a leader "as anyone who takes responsibility for finding the potential in people and processes, and who has the courage to develop that potential" (Brown 4).

While it is easy to agree with Brene Brown's definition of a leader, more often in organizations, particularly in the libraries interviewed, the current leadership lacks the second half of her statement. The ability to have "the courage to develop that potential" in the organization's people and processes is a skill that is harder to live out. In a leadership intervention study, the goal was to develop managerial leadership based on previous research that "managers are vital players in the implementing evidence-based practice" (Tistad 477). In *The Essential Role of Leadership Development*, the title or role of a leader was an expectation for everyone in the field, not just those at a specific job level (Freeman 2272).

Leadership is a hierarchy that affects what happens in every aspect of an organization. What is allowed by the top leaders trickles down and affects all staff. This trickle-down effect dictates how middle management leaders may respond and act towards their teams, which will impact the organization's full potential. In *Identity leadership going global*, the social identity leadership theory holds that leadership is a social construct based on people's social groups. That

when there is a sense of social identity, it leads to change for the group and the organization's behaviors. (van Dick 697). In both interviews, there was the affirmation that the specific branch managers and teams worked well together but that the breakdown happened further up the proverbial ladder. One of the interviewees expressed that when a team works long enough together and gains that trust, they can persevere and continue despite poor leadership from higher-ups. From interviews conducted to in-site visits, there was the underlying sentiment that there is a disconnect between those in higher positions of leadership to those who interact within their library communities daily.

The librarians interviewed believe that their leadership does care and wants to attend to their employees' fears and feelings. The problem is that some factors get in the way of the leaders doing so in their organizational culture. The common answer between the two was time. They stated that when the branch manager has the time and a fully staffed library, they can check in with everyone and get their work done. However, this seemed not always to be the case, and because of so many staffing shifts, especially in the downtown office, more administrative tasks get the focus. The focus on the administrative tasks and providing the resources and materials every branch needs is overwhelming, so the leadership is just trying to stay on top of everything. Hence, the culture is more about managing ineffective and unproductive behavior.

There was also the opinion that when the leadership has unrealistic expectations, too much red tape, unclear communication, and constraints that the branches have no control over creates an organizational culture that creates more fears and feelings and leads to ineffective and unproductive behavior. They stated that they thought personality played another large role in how people lead those around them and interacted with one another. One librarian believed that it did not matter how much training people have; their personality will continue to shine through.

Brene Brown would disagree with that belief. She writes that creating and investing in empathy will significantly alter how a leader and their team interact and lead to positive change within the organization. When people use vulnerable leadership, they allow people to put down their guard and be willing to talk things through rather than only being the dreamer, the optimist, the realist, the reality-checker, or other labels people assign themselves.

Based on *Dare to Lead*, the current leadership should begin learning how to lead through vulnerability. It will most likely involve the leadership starting for themselves and then implementing the book and workbook's tools. However, it can quickly evolve into involving the entire leadership team and continue moving to each local branch. This leadership theory complements the transformational leadership theory outlined by Guhr, Lebek, and Breitner. The transformational leadership theory is the leader who creates an environment where they encourage and promote collaborative thinking and working together.

One of the most challenging skills outlined in this book will be having tough conversations and allowing the space for people to be honest about their fears and feelings. The typical work culture speaks about making places a safe space for people to express new ideas and bring up thoughts; however, this does not always come to fruition because of fear and shame. However, when approached differently, this fear and shame can be utilized to produce excellence rather than cause people in the organization to think they are not leaders, such as the two interviewees. When the fear and shame are named and then seen as motivators, it allows people to move with confidence and connect their hearts and minds to be braver at work.

There is the concept that Brene Brown states that organizations should put into practice, which is the willingness to “rumble.” Rumbling means having a serious conversation, no matter if it is challenging. When an organization “rumbles” together, that means everyone is willing to

lay aside all the armor they have built up and have an honest conversation to move forward. In *Consequences of differentiated leadership in groups*, it was found that when leaders were collective-focused, there was an increase in group efficiency and effectiveness. In agreement with that study was the one conducted by Kunze, Barend de Jong, and Bruch. They found that “individual-focused differentiation” harmed the organization and the “affective commitment and voluntary helping.”

Brene Brown stresses that including the team in the “rumble” creates a better working team and avoids communication gaps. This concept of “rumbling” does not mean that people can be cynical about a concept without providing any other suggestions, nor does it mean that people speak in a hurtful manner towards others in the organization. “Rumbling together” means talking everything out and being honest and kind. According to Brene Brown, being kind means being honest and straightforward by saying what needs to be said even if it is hard. Being unkind is only giving half-truths or not saying something because the desire not to hurt the recipient’s feelings is catastrophic to the team in the long run. This unkindness gives birth to mistrust and backroom gossip.

Overall, this research does not provide an unbiased pulse on the Chicago Public Library system’s state based on two children’s librarians’ interviews. However, based on the two interviews where the interviewees have different levels of experience and education, there seemed to be room for improvement for the leadership team. In the case of the two open head positions, this will determine how the library organization in Chicago moves forward, both during this difficult time of COVID-19 and in the ever-shifting dynamic of technology and the library culture. This leadership disconnect does not mean that the Chicago Public Library system is in trouble. Instead, there is room for improvement both in the specific branches and on an

organizational whole. Schoemaker states that it may be a leader's first instinct to hold onto "extrapolative planning" to carry on with their usual planning and budgets in times of uncertainty. However, he continues to be successful in leadership; it involves "testing various hypotheses" during difficult times. This "testing of various hypothesis" idea is one that works alongside Brene Brown's vulnerable leadership theory. Leaders can test their leading and new programming methods that need to occur during COVID-19 and new technology.

Although the two interviewees both claimed and believed that they are not nor ever will be a leader, this is not true. A children's librarian leads every time they hold any programming. They are leaders in how they respond to a patron, a coworker, or a higher up. In *Dare to Lead*, being a leader is not just the title held. It is how one handles the responsibility given for that position. When there is confidence in the organization's mission and vision, it will impact one's response to various situations. Daring to lead means doing the brave work, having tough conversations, and being in with a whole heart. It means having "the courage to walk into our story and own it, [so that] we get to write the ending. [Rather than] when we don't own our stories of failure, setbacks, and hurt-they own us" (Brown 240). Owning our own stories and utilizing our failures, setbacks, and hurts will allow the library staff to thrive and provide community impacting resources and programming.

Interview Questions

Do you think anyone can be a leader?

What are the characteristics of a leader?

How would you define vulnerability?

Does vulnerability affect leadership why or why not?

What is the hardest part of being a leader?

How do you lead others in tough times?

What does support from leader ship look like?

In my organization the messages and expectations about vulnerability are...

When you reflect on how you want to show up and be seen as a leader what do vulnerability and courage look like for you?

Is there a culture where people assume the roles of optimist and realist, the dreamers and the reality checkers, etc.? if yes what language would you use to describe the roles?

Renee Brown states leaders must either invest a reasonable amount of time attending to fears and feelings or squander on an unreasonable amount of time trying to manage ineffective and unproductive behavior. In reference to this “what gets in the way of leaders doing this in your organizational culture?

Do you have any other thoughts about leadership that I did not ask about?

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