

## CONNECTION PIVOT | STEPPING INTO VULNERABILITY

**ACTIVITY TITLE:** Stepping into Vulnerability

**OBJECTIVE:** Leaders will critically apply information from a research study to consider the role of vulnerability in leadership.

### Instructions:

Review Johnston's article, which presents six case studies highlighting the significance of vulnerability and leadership. After reading the article, use the practice scenario below to explore how you should step into vulnerability as a leader.

### Read:

Johnston, S. (2018). Vulnerability and Cultural Leadership. <https://www.cloreladership.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/JohnstonSholeh2018VulnerabilityResilienceCollaborationAHRCResearchPaper.pdf>

### Scenario:

Intel sent shockwaves through the market by announcing a 15% reduction in its global workforce, which will result in approximately 15,000 job cuts. Just days later, Cisco Systems announced plans to lay off 7% of its employees, marking its second round of job cuts in a year as the company shifts focus to rapidly growing areas like artificial intelligence and cybersecurity.

As part of the leadership team, your organization is also exploring layoffs to account for inflation, higher interest rates, economic downturn, recession fears, outsourcing, offshoring, and pandemic over-hiring. During a recent leadership team meeting, Eric, the CFO, reported that sales are down and the organization is nearing a deficit. He said past quarterly projections were not hit, and donor engagement has decreased due to the current political climate.

Sarah, the COO, noticed that the other leaders in the room seemed tense. Numbers are underwhelming, and folks seem guarded, sticking to their professional personas while deflecting responsibility. Sarah realized the team was operating in a transactional mode—focused on outcomes, avoiding deeper conversation, and failing to connect authentically. To break the cycle, Sarah decided to model vulnerability. When Eric turned the meeting over to her, she began with an unexpected approach: “Before we dive further into the data Eric shared, I want to share something personal. I feel like everyone in this room is questioning my ability to lead and maybe blaming me for our financial situation. I’ve been questioning my decisions and the impact my actions have on employees, and I’m struggling with the fear that I’ve let you all down. But I believe we’re all in this together, and the best way forward is to be honest about our challenges. So, let’s take a moment to put aside our roles and talk as humans—mistakes, doubts, and all. I’ll start, but I hope you’ll join me.”

## Individual Reflection Questions:

1. Do you agree or disagree with Sarah's approach to vulnerability as well as modeling taking accountability? Why?
2. How do you navigate the mental impact of having to fire/let go of staff for operational reasons?
3. What does it look like for you to be vulnerable with your colleagues?

## Interpersonal Reflection Questions:

1. Define and discuss what vulnerability looks like for professionals and how and when leaders step into vulnerability vs avoiding it.
2. What are examples of how you've modeled moving from transactional to transformative leadership?
3. What fears or risks might hold you back from being vulnerable as a leader?
4. Identify the risks and benefits of co-creating an environment that normalizes taking an emotional risk.
5. How can vulnerability help you build more authentic and trust-filled relationships with your team?
6. With your team or colleagues, share how you currently build more authentic, trust-filled relationships with each other and identify how you can model this organization-wide?