

The Lonely Side of Leadership No One Warned Me About It

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Today I'm going to talk about a reality that leadership training programs all but ignore. Yet it's commonplace in upper leadership circles. I know. I've dealt with it personally. And I'll share more about that later in this program.

I'm referring to the loneliness which easily besets leaders. We're going to discuss what makes leaders vulnerable to loneliness, what causes it, and some steps to take to minimize it. Lonely leaders can be effective. But loneliness will inevitably limit their full potential.

What we undertake in the next 15 minutes is therefore sure to upsize your leadership.

Needless to say, leaders face an array of challenges. Some of them the leader anticipates. Every text on leadership talks about them.

But then there are unspoken challenges, ones which we rarely talk about, but which thrust themselves upon leaders unexpectedly.

For me, the most unexpected challenge was the loneliness which came with demanding leadership roles. I never saw that coming. And no one warned me about it in advance.

The loneliness of leadership struck me suddenly, at 37 years of age, when I became president of a college teetering on the edge of bankruptcy. I remember peering across the campus from the window of my office, knowing that no one else in that community could understand the complexity of the problems which I faced. There was no one to whom I could talk to who would truly understand.

Not every leader experiences such loneliness, may I add. Or they may not feel it with the intensity that I did. But after decades of coaching and counseling top-level leaders, I've found that the phrase "lonely at the top" speaks of a stubborn reality. Loneliness in leadership is far more prevalent than we generally realize.

Two years after I came to campus, I attended a master mind group of college and university chief executives. Some were presidents. Others were chancellors. There were 18 of us in the gathering. During our dialogue on the second day, the facilitator made a request. He asked

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everyone to list on a sheet of paper the three greatest issues with which they contended daily. He then took up the papers and we compiled the results.

Of the 18 people in the room, 17 listed personal loneliness as their number one challenge. I was the lone exception. I had listed it as number two. When the compilation was finished, loneliness was the only issue which appeared on all 18 lists. From that point forward, I realized that loneliness is endemic among leaders.

About 20 years later, I happened to have a hallway conversation with Ken Blanchard at a conference we were both attending. He and I briefly discussed his most recent book. In the course of our conversation, I mentioned that I was toying with the idea of two books.

One would be aimed at leaders and entitled “Lonely at the Top.” I wanted to build it around interviews with prominent leaders who would be willing to talk openly, but anonymously, about their loneliness and how they had coped with it.

Then, I would aim the second book at spouses of top leaders. These spouses, I had learned, frequently experience loneliness themselves, brought on by the way that their mate’s leadership role has impacted their marriage. My working title for the second book would be “Lonely at the Side.”

I will never forget how much Ken’s face lit up when I shared this idea. Excitedly, he said, “Those books need to be written. If you decide to go ahead, give me a call and I’ll help you line up interviews.”

I never followed up on his invitation. But his hearty endorsement of the concept erased any doubts which I might have held about the relevance of the topic. Given his close acquaintance with hundreds of top leaders, his words confirmed my suspicion that loneliness was indeed a broad leadership issue. And I believe it still is.

All of which is to say, I’ve been thinking about this subject for many years. Yet in all of that time, I’ve written little about it and have spoken of it in keynotes on very few occasions. But I came across an article this past week which regenerated my sense that we need to be more forthright about the challenge of loneliness in leadership.

Interestingly, the article was not about leadership at all. Rather, it was a review of recent research into the neuroscience which underlies loneliness. Loneliness may be neglected as a topic in leadership literature, but it’s hardly a neglected subject in the field of psychological research. Loneliness is such a prevalent mental and emotional health problem that it has received extensive study.

The thrust of this article was that the human brain thrives on connections. It learns and develops by building new connections continually. And it builds these internal connections as a by-product of how we relate to and connect with the external world. Internal connections are a direct extension of connections experienced externally.

Loneliness, according to this author’s interpretation of research, is the brain’s cry for greater connectedness with the world – and especially the people – around us. When connections with people are diminished, our brain becomes somewhat impaired in constructing the internal connections essential for its well-being.

The brain signals this need for greater connection by generating a sense of loneliness. That being true, it might not seem plausible that loneliness would be a significant problem for leaders. After all, the very essence of leadership is engagement with people. If loneliness results from inadequate connections with people, why should leaders be vulnerable to loneliness?

The answer is found in the difference between engagement with people and connection with them. At a networking event, I may engage dozens of people in conversation. But I don't necessarily leave feeling a deep connection with them. If we never again encounter one another, I will feel no great loss.

Engagement and deep connection are therefore entirely different matters. Only when interpersonal connections are strong and vibrant do we feel that we can talk openly about our private struggles. And from what I've experienced personally and what I've observed in others, leaders build a rigid wall of privacy around their loneliness.

Several factors account for this. For one, leaders feel pressured to hide their loneliness out of fear that their people might view it as weakness. Loneliness is out of character with what people generally associate with traits of great leaders. We may have coined the phrase "lonely at the top" generations ago. But in general, the public has never given it credence as a substantive reality.

We expect leaders to have everything under control. Or to put it another way, when things get out of control, the first people we blame are the leaders. Men and women in leadership thus feel an invisible prodding to maintain an image of having mastery of themselves as well as their job. Acknowledging their loneliness is tantamount to saying, "I don't have control of a critical part of my emotional life."

While people will make allowances for a leader yielding to negative emotions in the wake of great personal tragedy – the death of a young child or a mate's prolonged disease, for instance – otherwise, people count on leaders having a firm hand on their emotions. Sensing that, leaders are hesitant to disclose their loneliness.

But why this loneliness in the first place? Why this loss of connection that intensifies the loneliness? Much of it has to do with the nature of the job. Leaders, especially those near the top of the organizational ladder, bear ultimate responsibility for the success or failure of their organization. This ultimate responsibility puts tremendous pressure on anyone in such roles.

But just as isolated as I felt, peering across the campus and knowing that no one else understood the thorny complexity of the decisions on my desk, top-level leaders sense the same isolation in their own context. And in large, hierarchical organizations, they may be so physically and psychologically separated from day-to-day operations that their sense of isolation is intensified.

Second, those in top management never seem to have the pleasure of solving a routine problem. I learned early on that lower and middle level managers are usually eager to tackle issues whose resolution is reasonably straightforward. But they readily defer more hairy issues to higher levels of management. As a result, problems which typically end up on top management's plate are hairy indeed.

And their solution often necessitates a tradeoff which will make winners of some parts of the company, losers of others. Any time such tradeoffs are implemented, the ultimate decision-maker (or decision-makers, as the case may be) are easily accused of playing favorites.

Senior executives thus learn to be guarded in forming close friendships within the organization, to lessen any appearance of favoritism when tough decisions must be made. But this guardedness limits the opportunity for the leader to build an internal circle of trusted confidants.

Moreover, particularly difficult decisions facing a leader commonly involve confidential information or considerations. This reality puts further restrictions on the leader's freedom to confide in others while deliberating a set of options. The result is additional reinforcement of the sense of isolation.

Ideally, leaders would build deep connections away from work to compensate for their sense of isolation on the job. Unfortunately, for many leaders the demands of the job limit their personal and social life. Not unusually, the quality of their family life suffers, which is why years ago I envisioned that book entitled "Lonely at the Side."

So, what are my takeaways today. First, if you regularly struggle with loneliness in your role as a leader, don't assume that you're the only leader struggling with it. Vulnerability to loneliness goes with the territory.

Second, take the presence of loneliness as a signal that you need to expand or deepen your interpersonal connections. Embark on a plan to remedy that situation. Identify one or two acquaintances with whom you would enjoy deeper connection. Then create opportunities to spend time with them. Identify peers in other organizations – even other industries – with whom you would like a connection. Reach out to them. Meet them for breakfast. Take them to lunch.

Be upfront with them. Tell them that you are seeking an opportunity to solicit their perspective on some particular challenge you're facing. If they are unwilling to make time for you on that basis, then they are not someone whose outlook and values will serve you well over the long term. Move on to an overture to someone else.

And third, muster the courage to tell at least one other person about your struggle with loneliness. It's amazing how just articulating the depths of your loneliness out loud to someone can cause it to diminish. Once one other person knows about your loneliness, you're no longer alone in contending with it.

And fourth, do not allow your effort to minimize loneliness to keep you away from solitude. Being alone and being lonely are not at all the same. Solitude, properly utilized, is unequalled in its power to give us insights and perspective, including a perspective on how to deal with our loneliness more effectively.

Moreover, solitude spent in nature can have its own curative effect on loneliness. To be psychologically and emotionally healthy, we not only need connections with people. We also need connections with nature.

Crowded city life, with concrete and pavement everywhere, strips us of opportunities to immerse ourselves regularly in nature. It may therefore require notable effort to find a place for invigorating solitude in nature. But by renewing a deep connection with nature – or even

establishing one for the first time – we access one of life’s most powerful tools for renewing our spirit and our sense of well-being.

And let me close with a promotional note. To satisfy their need for interpersonal connection, leaders in recent decades have increasingly turned to long-term relationships with a personal coach or to membership in a peer-to-peer mastermind group. This approach allies them with people who are conversant with their workaday challenges and who are experienced enough in similar situations to offer sage counsel.

But mastermind groups must be chosen carefully. They have become highly popular in the past 20 years. And because they can be started so easily and so quickly, they are not always led by people with noble motives. Sadly, I’ve met organizers of mastermind groups whose motivation was purely personal financial gain.

They may only give lip service to building a community of trust, respect, and mutual support with the overarching purpose of optimizing the effectiveness of every member of the group. And that’s what a true mastermind association should achieve.

In addition, organizers like this are less likely to control membership in the group through careful screening. And they may be lax in enforcing the kind of accountability which makes for a successful mastermind community. Participation in the groups like these organizers put together do little to foster a sense of connection.

I’ll have more to say about this in the near future, because I will soon be offering mastermind groups for the first time. Because I want them to be of very high value to the participants, I’m designing them very carefully and very methodically. Thus, it will be a few weeks before I’m ready to announce a start date for the first one.

Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at www.LeaderPerfect.com.

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