Shame, Attachment, and Leadership

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Abstract

Brené Brown (2015) discusses the impact of shame in the workplace in her book, *Dare to Lead*. While there are several of Brown's strategies that are supported by research and other leadership experts, Brown's strategies are unlikely to work under certain leadership conditions. This paper examines Brown's openhearted leadership approach while exploring how the effects of work environment and attachment styles might impact the effectiveness of Brown's leadership strategies.

Brené Brown is a professor, lecturer, podcast host and storyteller. In 2010, Brown was propelled to superstardom through her viral TEDx talk, *The Power of Vulnerability*, which has since been viewed almost 54 million times (Brown, 2010). Her research centers around the topics of shame, empathy and vulnerability. Her books, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, *Daring Greatly*, *Rising Strong*, *Braving the Wilderness* and *Dare to Lead* are all #1 *New York Times* bestsellers. In *Dare to Lead*, Brené Brown advocates for utilizing the power of emotional vulnerability in the work environment.

Brown states that "vulnerability cannot exist without courage," (Brown, 2018). She tells a story about going to speak with members of the U.S. military and asked them if they could name a single act of courage that they witnessed where the courageous person was not also vulnerable at the same time. No one in the audience could think of an example. Brown defines vulnerability as "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure," (Brown, 2015). Brown states that individuals "armor up," against vulnerability because vulnerability means coming face to face with their own shame.

Brown describes the difference between shame and guilt. In her words, guilt says, "I did something bad." Shame says, "I am bad." Brown describes shame as the "*never good enough* emotion" (Brown, 2018). Guilt can be a positive motivator because it allows us to take accountability for our

actions, make changes, and do better in the future. In contrast, shame makes people shut down and get stuck without taking positive steps to move forward (Goleman, 2003).

One of the specific strategies Brown suggests to reduce the likelihood or impact of shame in the workplace is that if you are tasked with firing someone in your organization, give them a way out with dignity. Some ways to do this are letting the person resign rather than firing them, providing severance pay, asking the person how they want to let their colleagues know about their departure and follow their lead if possible (Brown, 2018). Wood and Karau (2009) found that individuals do perceive differences in level of respect by different exit interview techniques. Employees being terminated were much more likely to feel respected and view their company positively if the conversation was held without a security guard in the room.

Brown states that cover-ups are embodiments of a shame-based culture. In these situations, Brown (2018) says:

> Shame is systemic.
>
> Complicity is part of the culture.
>
> Money and power trump ethics.
>
> Accountability is dead.
>
> Control and fear are management tools.
>
> And there's a trail of devastation and pain. (p. 135).

The way to prevent these outcomes is to create a culture where it is ok to speak of shame, because paradoxically, when shame is spoken, it shatters its power over us (Brown, 2018). As leaders, making decisions from our authentic selves versus our "armored up"-selves helps create positive working environments and our values act as the compass for that.

This leadership strategy is supported by other leadership experts. Retired navy officer who served in the Navy SEALS, Jocko Willink, is a speaker, podcaster, and author of several leadership books

including *Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy Seals Lead and Win*, *Discipline Equals Freedom: Field Manual*; and *The Dichotomy of Leadership: Balancing the Challenges of Extreme Ownership to Lead and Win*. On his podcast with Echo Charles, Jocko said, "Your values and your goals should be aligned…If you think about what your goals are, your goals should be set up in a way that support your values and vice versa," (Willink & Charles, 2018).

Brown suggests that organizations select two or three core values because if you have more than three, the values will often conflict with each other and the appropriate course of action will not be clear. Brené Brown says integrity is, "choosing courage over comfort; it's choosing what's right over what's fun, fast, or easy; and it's practicing your values, not just professing them." While overall, Willink appears to agree with Brown, he does add one qualifying statement. Willink states that for every value you name, you can think of a situation that will require you to go against that value. He uses the example of valuing honesty, but holding a state secret and being held captive by the enemy. Your higher goal is to your country versus honesty in that moment. Another example he uses to illustrate this point is a situation in which you have the value of always backing up your friends, but then your friend does something that's totally immoral. Jocko argues that at that point, it would be wrong to back up your friend.

There are certain circumstances in which Brené Brown's leadership perspective will likely be unsuccessful. Consider the following scenario:

A patient in her hospital bed stops breathing. One nurse calls a code. Another nurse beside her runs into the hallway and yells at the first staff member he sees, "Gonna need a crash cart. Call a crash cart right now."

"On it," she responds.

Medical staff rush into the room where the first nurse is already performing chest compressions. The doctor takes the lead saying, “Pulse less v-tach. Let’s get ready to shock. Give me 150 joules biphasic.”

A nurse picks up the defibrillator paddles. “Everyone clear? Everyone clear?”

Thump!

The monitors beep furiously.

“Her heart rate is rising above 200,” says a resident.

“We’re going again,” the doctor calls. “Wait a sec. Let’s rumble with this. How are you all feeling right now? Let’s all write down on a piece of paper what we are most afraid of and give ourselves permission to acknowledge that fear, and act courageously and imperfectly.”

The above scene was adapted from *Rookie Blue* season 5 episode 1, except for, as you might have guessed, the last sentence (Cameron, 2015). This particular scene was selected because it was rated by a surgical resident at Columbia as being very accurate (Onishi, 2018). My intention in its inclusion is to provide the reader with a visceral feeling of how awkward and inappropriate Brown’s leadership recommendations are in high pressure, high stakes environments. In the West, most individuals are quite insulated from life and death situations and may not even perform manual labor at their workplace. But that doesn’t mean that such jobs to not exist, or that leadership is not required in such jobs.

Brown’s research shows that by naming shame, the effects of shame lessen. She specifically describes the meeting process of identifying fears before a meeting as a way to lower the grip shame has over an individual (Brown, 2018). Brown’s advice will likely hinder leadership in fast-paced environments where immediate decision is necessary. Such environments may include things like a military operation, a paramedic medical situation, an emergency-room, or surgical setting, firefighting or

other emergencies with life or death consequences such as a ship sinking, a serious aircraft malfunction, etc..

To be clear, Brown has spoken to military leaders about her leadership style and interventions. When designing a military operation, away from the blood and fog of the battlefield, Brown's leadership perspective could be useful. Overall, leadership in extreme circumstances must look different from Brown's techniques in order to be effective. There are several factors that can influence how effective or ineffective her leadership tools may be.

Attachment style is one factor that influences how a person shows up as a leader. Attachment style as a construct was first defined by John Bowlby and later expanded upon my Mary Ainsworth. It describes the relationship in which children attach to their primary caregiver with four major styles, secure, anxious, avoidant, and fearful avoidant (Bretherton, 1992). Secure individuals are the most psychologically healthy and have a relationship with their primary caregiver that is generally positive and consistent. Anxiously attached individuals have a primary caregiver relationship that is characterized by instability. At times, the caregiver will respond to the child in a way that builds connection and at other times the caregiver is misattuned. As adults, the impact of this unpredictable environment fosters things like anxiety, a lack of self-worth, heightened emotional expressiveness and emotional dysregulation. (Ambruster, 2016). Avoidant individuals had caregivers who consistently respond to distress in insensitive or 'rejecting' ways, such as ignoring, ridiculing or becoming annoyed," (Benoit, 2004). These children learn to "avoid their caregiver when distressed and minimize displays of negative emotion in the presence of the caregiver," (Benoit, 2004).

These early attachment patterns are so powerful that they influence how we relate to others and ourselves, as adults. Of particular interest given Brown's research is the predictive ability of attachment style in relationship to experiencing shame. Individuals with insecure attachment styles, anxious or avoidant, are more likely to experience shame than secure attachment styles (Atkins, 2016).

At first glance, it may seem that having a workplace of securely attached individuals would create the ideal work environment. Secure individuals are characterized as the most emotionally intelligent attachment style, are less likely to have mental illness, and have a positive view of coworkers and leaders (Hamarta, Deniz, & Saltali, 2009; The Attachment Project, 2020). However, it turns out that teams made up of only secure individuals are not rated the most effective. Lavy et al. (2014) found that heterogeneous teams, teams made of secure, avoidant, and anxious individuals, were linked with better task performance when team cohesion was high. Each attachment style has different strengths and weaknesses that they bring into the work environment.

Avoidantly attached individuals are often well-suited for work environments characterized by dangerous situations. Emotions can paralyze. Avoidant individuals are the fastest to take action in a crisis. As children, avoidant individuals often spent time alone to avoid stress and recharge after stressful interactions (Smith, 2020). In the workplace, this shows up as them being extremely capable of working independently. They also are better able to focus and get the job done, perhaps as they are not spending their energy being as vigilant of the social environment as their anxiously attached coworkers (Lavy, S., Bareli, Y., & Ein-Dor, T., 2014).

Anxiously-attached individuals constantly scan to interpret the emotions of others around them. Often, these people-pleasing tendencies manifest themselves in their creating less friction in the workplace (Seltzer, 2008; Smith, 1999). In childhood, it served anxiously attached individuals to monitor their own actions to better manage the reactions of their parents. This can manifest in the workplace by anxious individuals being more aware of their own deficiencies than other attachment styles and more aware of risks (The Attachment Project, 2020). Secure and anxious persons described themselves as more curious and held more positive attitudes toward curiosity than did avoidant persons (Mikulincer, 1997).

One of the challenges of implementing Brené Brown's intervention in the workplace is getting it to work for individuals with low emotional vocabulary. This is not exactly a strength nor a weakness of Brown's method, or perhaps one might conceptualize that it's both. An individual's emotional vocabulary represents how adept they are at naming their feelings. The two basic emotional responses boil down to pain and pleasure, a phenomena that has been observed in all sorts of animals, especially our mammalian relatives (Ekman, 2007). Toddlers can distinguish feeling "good" from feeling "bad," but it takes time for kids to label different shades of emotions. Even separating "sad" and "mad" from feeling "bad" takes time, and then it takes skill to be able to recognize the difference between mad and sad, typically because they often co-occur and anger often masks underlying sadness or fear (Pratt, 2016). Then there are different words to describe anger. One might feel "frustrated," "jealous," "contemptuous," "resentful," "exasperated," etc. (Santiago, et al., 2015; The Junto Institute, 2016). The more accurate and specific emotional terms one uses is indication of a high emotional vocabulary.

Individuals with low emotional vocabulary typically have avoidant attachment. Naming one's own emotions and then communicating them to others is the cornerstone of Brown's method. It can be a daunting task to be vulnerable and letting others know your emotional landscape, and Brown discusses that resistance repeatedly. However, as intimidating as it might be to share one's own emotions, if a person does not have the tools or awareness to identify their own emotions, Brown's method will likely feel impossible to them. In *Dare to Lead*, Brown does not lay the groundwork of how to identify one's own emotions. Some individuals will need to develop their emotional vocabulary before Brown's methods will be accessible to them. The good news is that this is not impossible. Psychologists have developed several interventions that improve emotional vocabulary and attachment style is not fixed. It is possible to learn to become more securely attached, no matter what one's defining childhood experiences were (Benson, 2021).

Brené Brown owns a consulting firm where she and her staff offer speaking engagements and company training in Brown's leadership methods. She also gathers much of her leadership data from such engagements. It would be interesting to measure if there was any difference in ratings of her workshops as they vary by attachment style. It is possible that anxiously attached individuals might rate her interventions highly because they address underlying negative emotions which anxious people typically sooth by interacting with others. Avoidant individuals may not enjoy Brown's suggestions as she does not offer them much credit for the strengths that their attachment style can bring to the workplace and because they may perceive the idea of incorporation and development of emotional vocabulary to be both difficult and superfluous to their job duties. However, because avoidant individuals experience shame more than secure individuals, it is possible that they might respond positively to an intervention which addresses those largely unconscious feelings (Atkins, 2016).

CONCLUSSION

Shame creates a toxic work culture associated with cover-ups, lack of ethics, and lack of accountability. Addressing the sources of shame, as Brown suggests, are ways to ameliorate these circumstances and improve workplace performance. The core of Brown's work is whole-heartedness which reifies empathy, understanding, and authenticity. At the same time, it is crucial to not under estimate the gifts of individuals who are less proficient in emotional awareness, both of themselves and others. Specifically, we must give credit to the avoidantly attached among us who are the most independent, the most task focused, the quickest to respond in danger, and who at some point in an emergency, will likely be the ones to save our lives.

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