

## Modeling a Culture of Vulnerability

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In one of her many pieces of literature on the issue of vulnerability, Brene Brown (2012) said “vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage. Truth and courage aren't always comfortable, but they're never weakness” (p. 37). Indeed, when faced with the myriad social pressures coming with college and fraternity/sorority affiliation, displaying vulnerability seems like a task requiring a tremendous amount of bravery from our students. Ultimately, that is the core of vulnerability - it requires bravery because it is a risk. Unlike the risk we are often trying to encourage our students to manage, this is a positive risk. The risk of vulnerability can deepen the bonds between chapter members, create stronger friendships and romantic partnerships, and allow our students to be the most authentic versions of themselves. As advisors, we must frame the positive risks of vulnerability as an opportunity for our students. In order to encourage the practice of vulnerability though, we also need to be modeling the way for our students by practicing risk-taking in our advising techniques. It is one thing to tell students of the value of risk taking and vulnerability; it is another thing entirely to model it as a core element to our praxis.

There are several ways in which I believe we can best model a culture of vulnerability through our work as fraternity/sorority professionals:

1. Establish ground rules early in the advising relationship, and then stick to them. We cannot build trust with our students and encourage them to be vulnerable with us if they cannot trust us to follow our own established standards.
2. Practice intrusive advising requiring vulnerability in all advisor/advisee interactions. No meetings with our students should only include discussions about their positions. If we are to model a culture of vulnerability, we should be requiring it from them in every meeting. Ask about class. Ask about their friends. Ask about future plans. Make sure you are first and foremost advising a student, not a leader who happens to be a student.
3. Match the vulnerability they offer about their complete lives (rather than only their lives in that leadership position) with as much transparency and vulnerability about your own. There is, of course, the caveat to stay within the boundaries of professionalism, but we must be prepared to take risks and offer up bits of ourselves if we are to create truly deep and vulnerable relationships with our students.
4. Never forget to treat students like the adults they are. A swift blow to a developing vulnerable relationship will be if a student feels they are being treated with condescension. Even when they challenge our commitment to holistic student development, we must never lose track of their status as independent, capable, decision-making adults.

After establishing this modeled culture of vulnerability with our students, we can build on it by asking them to expand this vulnerability beyond the advising relationship to their chapter or council. Fraternity/sorority life is constantly changing, and we need to constantly re-examine the things our communities and organizations are doing well, as well as the areas for growth.

Every time it occurs, this re-examination is a risk-taking act requiring tremendous amounts of vulnerability. That being said, if we have effectively established a culture of taking risks towards being vulnerable, we can ask our students to apply those skills to examining their own organization's culture and interactions with others with a lens of honesty. For example, we all know fraternity and sorority members can be petty – to themselves, to other chapters, and to un-affiliated students – but we also know they can do really incredible things as part of the mission of fraternity. An honest examination of the good and bad things chapters and communities are doing requires the type of honesty that can only arise in a community which is already modeling vulnerability. Therefore, it is our job to not only model this culture, but continually reconnect our members to the value of it, particularly in the mission of continually strengthening the collegiate member experience and impact on campus.

We need to support not only the act of self-awareness, but the aftermath as well. As I'm sure many of us can testify, a culture of vulnerability often arises, at least initially, with a focus on the negative issues. It is important we are creating a balanced view of vulnerable honesty. We need to constantly remind students there is good that comes with challenge, particularly through the act of centering the whole student, rather than just the student leader. This balance can be promoted through a variety of practices, including making time for personal check-ins in every organization meeting to honor the value of leaders' whole selves in their leader role, or ensuring students are reflecting on highs and lows for their week (not just their week as a leader) during every meeting.

Ultimately, we should be encouraging them to develop real relationships, not just working relationships. This is the reason we need to model a culture of vulnerability – to live out the mission of friendship upon which our organizations were founded. This culture will of course come with pushback from members who would rather project an image than take the risk to be vulnerable and honest about their own lives and the state of the organization. As advisors, we can challenge this pushback by creating buy-in through the practices mentioned earlier in this article – establish trust, live our values, model the same vulnerability we ask of our students, and constantly show them why vulnerability matters. As challenging and emotional as it can be, it is the ultimate act of bravery allowing our students to connect to insights about the ways their organizations grow, and ultimately moving the fraternal movement forward.

## References

Brown, B. (2012). *Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead*. New York, NY: Avery Publishing.