

Vulnerability Loops, 'The Culture Code', - Daniel Coyle (2018)

"Exchanges of vulnerability, which we naturally tend to avoid, are the pathway through which trusting cooperation is built... Cooperation does not simply descend out of the blue. It is a group muscle that is built according to a specific pattern of repeated interaction, and that pattern is always the same: a circle of people engaged in the risky, occasionally painful, ultimately rewarding process of being vulnerable together." – Daniel Coyle

The Vulnerability Loop

Imagine that you and a stranger ask each other the following two sets of questions.

Set A

- What was the best gift you ever received, and why?
- Describe the last pet you owned.
- Where did you go to high school? What was your high school like?
- Who is your favourite actor or actress?

Set B

- If a crystal ball could tell you the truth about yourself, your life, the future, or anything else, would you want to know?
- Is there something that you've dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven't you done it?
- What is the greatest accomplishment of your life?
- When did you last sing to yourself? To someone else?

At first glance, the two sets of questions have a lot in common. Both ask you to disclose personal information, to tell stories, to share. However, if you were to do this experiment – its full form contains 36 questions – you would notice two differences.

The first is that, as you went through Set B, you would feel a bit apprehensive. Your heart rate would increase; you would be more uncomfortable. You might blush, hesitate, perhaps laugh out of nervousness. It is not easy, after all, to tell a stranger something important you've dreamed of doing all your life.

Vulnerability Loops, Cont.

The second difference is that Set B would make you and the stranger feel closer to each other – around 24% closer than Set A, according to the experimenters. The questions were developed by psychologists Arthur and Elaine Aron. In its full form, the experimental generation of interpersonal closeness also includes four minutes of silent gazing into each other's eyes. The original experiment involved 71 pairs of strangers, and one pair ended up marrying. They invited the entire lab to the ceremony.

Where Set A allows you to stay in your comfort zone, Set B generates confession, discomfort, and authenticity that break down barriers between people and tip them into a deeper connection. Where Set A generates information, Set B generates something more powerful: vulnerability.

At some level we intuitively know that vulnerability tends to spark cooperation and trust, but we may not realise how powerfully – and reliably – this process works, particularly when it comes to group interactions. So it's useful to meet Dr Jeff Polzer, a professor of organisational behaviour at Harvard, who has spent a large chunk of his career examining how *small, seemingly insignificant social exchanges can create cascade effects in groups.*

“People tend to think of vulnerability in a touchy-feely way, but that's not what's happening,” Polzer says. ***“It's about sending a really clear signal that you have weaknesses, that you could use help. And if that behaviour becomes a model for others, then you can set the insecurities aside and get to work – start to trust each other and help each other. If you never have that vulnerable moment, on the other hand, then people will try to cover up their weaknesses, and every little micro-task becomes a place where insecurities manifest themselves.”***

Polzer points out that vulnerability is less about the sender than the receiver. “The second person is the key,” he says. “Do they pick it up and reveal their own weaknesses? Or do they cover up and pretend they don't have any? It makes a huge difference in the outcome.” Polzer has become skilled at spotting the moment when the signal travels through the group: “You can actually see the people relax and connect and start to trust. The group picks up the idea and says, ‘OK, this is the mode we're going to be in,’ and it starts behaving along those lines, according to the norm that it's OK to admit weakness and help each other.”

Vulnerability Loops, Cont.

The interaction he describes is called a **vulnerability loop** — a shared exchange of openness. It's the most basic building block of cooperation and trust. Vulnerability loops seem swift and spontaneous from a distance, but when you look closely, they all follow the same discrete steps:

1. Person A sends a signal of vulnerability.
2. Person B detects this signal.
3. Person B responds by signalling their own vulnerability.
4. Person A detects this signal.
5. A norm is established; closeness and trust increase.

... Most of us instinctively see vulnerability as a condition to be hidden, but science shows that when it comes to creating cooperation, vulnerability is not a risk but a psychological requirement.

“What are groups really for?” Polzer asks. “The idea is that we can combine our strengths and use our skills in a complementary way. Being vulnerable gets the static out of the way and lets us do the job together without worrying or hesitating. It lets us work as one unit.”