

tired of spending time and energy overthinking their actions and managing interpersonal politics at work.

If this is starting to sound at all touchy-feely, rest assured that it's nothing of the sort. It's not about holding hands and singing songs and getting in touch with your inner child. It's ultimately about the practical goal of maximizing the performance of a group of people. And it's entirely achievable for both teams that are just coming together for the first time and those that have been working in a less-than-trusting environment for years.

### *Personal Histories*

The first part of learning to build vulnerability-based trust is a small step that is necessary because to ask people to get too vulnerable too quickly is unrealistic and unproductive. While truly vulnerable team

At the heart of vulnerability lies the willingness of people to abandon their pride and their fear, to sacrifice their egos for the collective good of the team.

members eventually have to get comfortable revealing who they are, they need to start in a nonthreatening way. That's why, during an off-site session, we take teams through a quick exercise where we ask them to tell everyone, briefly, a few things about their lives. In particular,

we have them say where they were born, how many siblings they have, where they fall in the order of children, and finally, what the most interesting or difficult challenge was for them as a kid. Again, we're not interested in their inner childhoods, just what was uniquely challenging for them growing up.

This discussion takes just fifteen to twenty minutes, and it always works. No matter how many times I've done it with a group of leaders, I expect them to say, "Come on, Pat, we already know all about one

another." And yet that has never, ever happened. Some of the people may know one or two people on the team well, but every time I've done this with a leadership team, people sitting around the table are genuinely surprised at what they didn't know about their colleagues' backgrounds.

This inevitably leads to a newly found sense of respect because of the admiration that comes when someone realizes that one of their peers endured and overcame a hardship or accomplished something remarkable. More important, team members begin the process of getting comfortable with vulnerability when they realize that it is okay, even gratifying, to tell their peers something about themselves that they had never mentioned or been asked about before.

In addition to making people feel more comfortable being vulnerable, this discussion serves to level the playing field on the team. There is something powerful and disarming about hearing the CEO of a company talk about being bullied because he was a chubby kid or that his family struggled with grave poverty. As a consultant, I always find it amazing to witness how quickly the dynamic of a team can change after a simple twenty-minute exercise as people who thought they knew one another develop a whole new level of respect, admiration, and understanding, regardless of their job title, age, or experience.

### **Backstories**

Members of an executive team at a large insurance company were struggling with their CFO, a relatively older guy who didn't give his colleagues much freedom when it came to managing their budgets. The consensus was that he didn't trust the people on the team to make decisions, so he felt the need to micromanage them in any situation involving expenditures. The level of frustration among the team, directed at the CFO, had been building for years and didn't seem likely to diminish.