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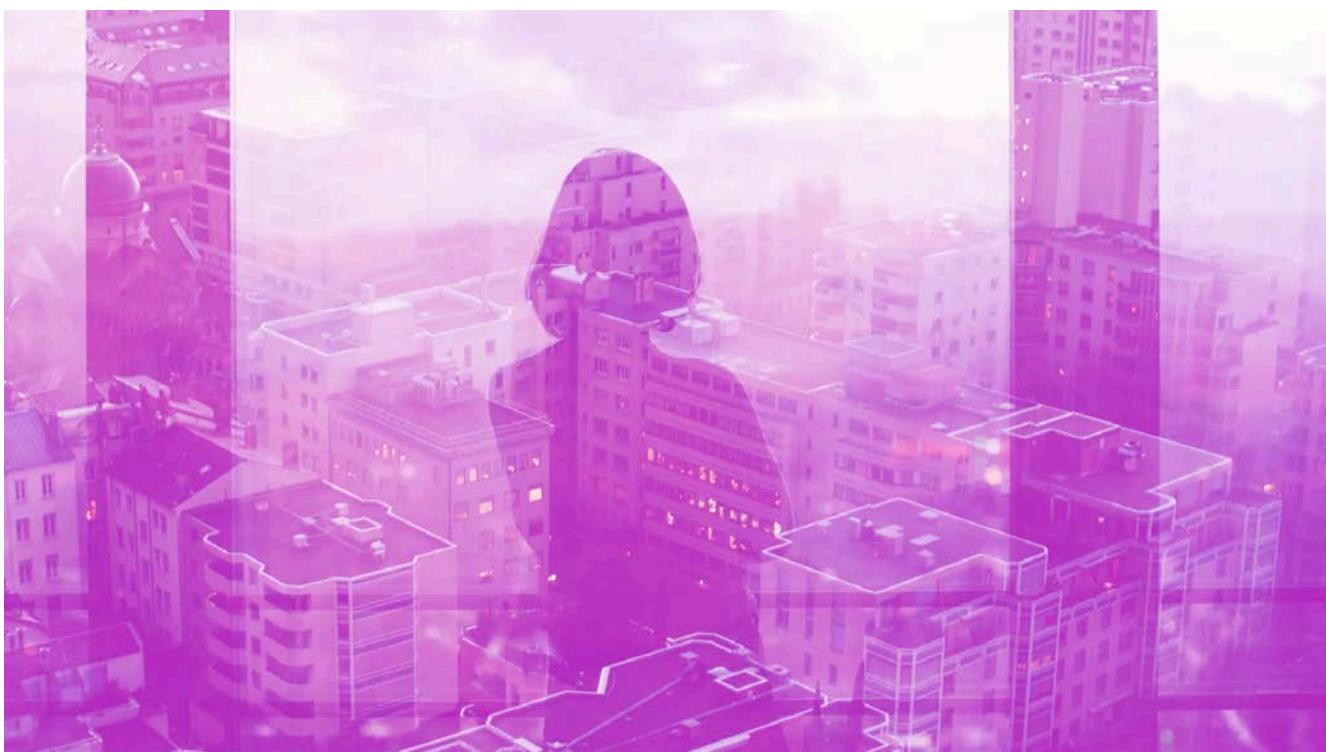
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08-05-2024 | LEADERSHIP NOW

## Only when leaders embrace their vulnerability can they build a truly people-first culture

Here are 3 strategies to build a culture of openness and honesty that enhances team trust, accountability, and performance.



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In past generations, both a company's executive leadership team and their employees were expected to leave personal matters at the door for the sake of professional decorum. Work was simply not the place to be human—it was a place for productivity. This mindset fostered a sterile C-suite culture of emotionless and invulnerable executives and fearful employees. Thankfully, the outdated belief that even mentioning your life outside of work detracts from your career commitment is fading fast. In fact, many in leadership today are going in the opposite direction to harness the power of vulnerability to shape a people-first culture while still delivering results.

This can be a tricky proposition given the decades of conditioning so many C-suite leaders have under our belts. But, if we can embrace vulnerability ourselves and also encourage our teams to do the same, we can cause a vital shift in culture that sparks innovation and builds resilience in the workplace. As the chief revenue officer of Kiavi, a leading tech-enabled private lender to real estate investors, I'm all in for leadership that champions vulnerability. By owning up to mistakes, showcasing our humanity, and encouraging our teams to follow our lead, we can dispel the fear of failure and boost team cohesion and trust—all while generating outsize performance.

C-suite executives have a unique opportunity to cultivate a supportive, people-first culture by being open and vulnerable. Here are three strategies I use to create this kind of environment at Kiavi:

## SHOW UP AS A HUMAN AND BE AUTHENTIC

Despite advances in overall workplace culture, there's still immense pressure, especially for women, to appear perfect and infallible. While

often self-imposed, this kind of stress can have negative consequences both personally and professionally.

Whenever that feeling of being overwhelmed hits, I try to stop for a moment and think: “what is something about me that will never change?” We are often so focused on evolving and becoming the best version of ourselves that we forget that our humanity is a true constant. Being human and imperfect is—and will always be—a permanent part of who I am, and it’s something that we all share. This realization has helped me lead more authentically and create an environment where my team can also embrace their humanity.

In practical terms, advocating for a humanity-based leadership style means acknowledging our shared human experience. This doesn’t mean we are given free rein to slack off or miss our targets, it just means we are all coming from the same place of imperfection.

C-suite executives are human, too—we have bad days, make mistakes, and sometimes lack confidence. Organizations that place leadership on an untouchable, unemotional pedestal can inadvertently foster a culture of fear—an environment that stifles productivity, hinders growth, and detracts from a positive company culture. I have found that sharing my own professional insecurities and doubts with my team has reduced their feelings of imposter syndrome and made them more comfortable seeking help when needed.



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**LEADERSHIP SHOULD CREATE A SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR OPEN COMMUNICATION**

One of the most valuable lessons I learned from my first manager was that mistakes happen and are perfectly acceptable, so long as you're honest about them. She used to tell me, "If you mess up, just own it, and I'll have your back to fix it. But if you try to hide the mistake so that I don't know about it, I can't help you fix it."

I still honor that lesson all these years later, and I have found with my own teams that creating a safe space for admitting mistakes is essential. We all have off days or miss something we shouldn't. It's important to give people the benefit of the doubt—even if it is not always reciprocated. Team members should feel safe to express their worries and mistakes with their coworkers and leaders without fear of judgment. Again, this doesn't mean that mistakes are normalized and excused. It just means that when they happen, the whole team is able to work together to solve them and learn from them—ultimately building the trust and mutual respect needed for high-performing teams.

C-Suite executives should also lead by example by admitting their own mistakes and demonstrating how to learn from them. This encourages a culture of continuous improvement and reduces the stigma around failure. For example, I recently shared on a large call to my team my intention to be better about meeting new hires and speaking with customers more regularly. The response from my team was overwhelmingly positive. People appreciated that I admitted to areas where I felt I was falling short and shared my plans to address them. Showing that type of vulnerability can have a huge impact on team dynamic—it builds comradery and makes you more approachable as a leader and less intimidating.

## **PROMOTE PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH THROUGH VULNERABILITY**

Even the most qualified people experience moments of self-doubt. It's been my experience that people who are the best at their jobs are more likely to be highly self-critical. Knowing that admired leaders also struggle with these feelings can be incredibly reassuring, especially for junior leaders and employees first starting out.

Recognizing and openly addressing personal and professional challenges is a powerful form of vulnerability that can drive substantial growth for both individuals and organizations. This openness encourages continuous learning and development by identifying areas for improvement and offering opportunities for feedback and support.

Confronting these challenges head-on can enhance personal development and job satisfaction, build greater resilience and adaptability among employees, and cultivate a culture of continuous improvement and excellence. By embedding vulnerability into an organization's culture, companies can cultivate a more empathetic, innovative, and growth-oriented environment that prioritizes the

well-being and development of their people while still delivering on company goals and performance.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Stephanie Casper** is chief revenue officer at [Kiavi](#), one of the nation's largest private lenders to residential real estate investors with more than \$20.5 billion in funded loans. Kiavi harnesses the power of data & technology to offer real estate investors a simpler, more reliable, and faster way to access the capital they need to scale their businesses [More](#)

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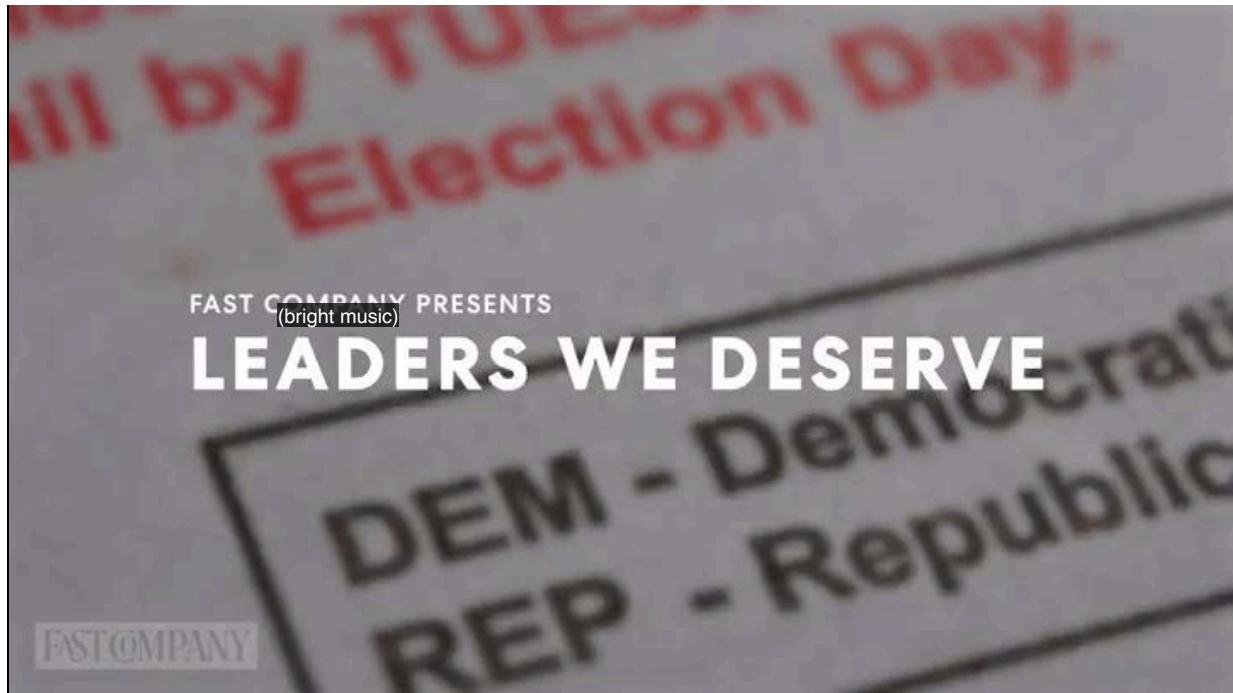
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