

Stronger Together

Leading Marines through empathy, vulnerability, and connection

by LtCol Marianne “LOB” Carlson

In an institution built on strength, resilience, and a mission-first ethos, the concept of vulnerability in the Marine Corps may seem out of place or even contradictory. But in the Marine Corps, a quiet but powerful shift is underway. In August 2024, the Marine Corps updated *MCTP 6-10, Sustaining the Transformation*, and *MCWP 6-10, Leading Marines*, to emphasize a new leadership trait: empathy. This addition signals a recognition that effective leadership requires more than decisiveness and toughness. It requires a genuine concern for the welfare of Marines. However, to truly embed empathy into the leadership fabric of the Corps, one critical leadership quality remains underemphasized: vulnerability. Without it, empathy risks becoming performative rather than transformative. To cultivate authentic, resilient leaders, the Marine Corps must embrace vulnerability not as a weakness but as a courageous act that fosters trust, connection, and the well-being of its Marines.

Know your Marines, and look out for their welfare. This dictum is a foundational leadership principle for the Marine Corps and links directly to the newest Marine Corps leadership trait of empathy. In fact, according to the Commandant of the Marine Corps in his foreword to *Sustaining the Transformation*, this is the leadership principle that the publication is focused on.¹ Coupled with the addition of empathy as the fifteenth leadership trait, the updated publications bring renewed emphasis on the relationship between the leader and the led.

The 2024 update to *Leading Marines* defines empathy as “having a genuine interest in the lives of your Marines, the challenges they face, and their overall well-being. Good leaders strive to un-

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derstand the challenges and stressors their Marines are going through in order to effectively provide support.”² Additionally, in *Sustaining the Transformation*, the authors discuss timeless leadership truths such as “empathy and understanding” to assist junior Marines with complex issues.³ However, the publications omit a critical leadership insight: the connection between empathy and vulnerability. Without vulnerability, empathy cannot fully manifest in action or influence and remains abstract. Vulnerability allows leaders to relate to their Marines’ struggles, not from a distance, but with authenticity and shared humanity. Through vulnerability, leaders can listen without judg-

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ment, connect without pretense, and create the psychological safety necessary for Marines to open up. In this way, vulnerability is not just a companion to empathy; it is the foundation that gives empathy depth and meaning. To truly embrace empathy in the Marine Corps leadership culture, Marine Corps lead-

ers must also learn how to be vulnerable and be willing to show it.

In Brené Brown’s book *Dare to Lead*, she discusses how vulnerability is essential to quality leadership. She defines vulnerability as “the emotion that we experience during times of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. It is not winning or losing. It’s having the courage to show up when you can’t control the outcome.”⁴ Furthermore, she discusses six myths surrounding the word “vulnerability” and dispels each myth by reducing vulnerability to a natural human emotion that everyone experiences. Brown argues that the ones who embrace vulnerability are the ones who can truly know and experience love, belonging, and joy. Finally, she argues that without it, there can be no creativity, innovation, and, most importantly, courage.⁵ For Marines, leading through emotional exposure and uncertainty is often the most personal and powerful kind of leadership the military service can offer. If vulnerability is the cornerstone of courage (one of the Marine Corps’ core values), the Corps should embrace both empathy and vulnerability as transformative leadership qualities.

Vulnerability is often mischaracterized as weakness.⁶ As a result, service members may resist showing vulnerability for fear of appearing weak or unfit to lead. But this false dichotomy between emotional openness and weakness is outdated and dangerous. Vulnerability is a human capacity essential to leadership. Courage to be empathetic cannot exist without vulnerability. To suggest otherwise is to limit the emotional and psychological tools available to military leaders.

In 2022, suicide was the leading cause of death in the Marine Corps, which had the highest rate of suicide among all Services.⁷ In 2023, the

Marine Corps continued to have the highest rates of suicide compared to other Services.⁸ Although the rates declined in 2024, the Marine Corps active component still experienced 48 suicide deaths.⁹ If the Marine Corps makes the concept of vulnerable leadership a priority, maybe Marines would feel more comfortable connecting on a personal level. Maybe Marines would feel a better sense of belonging and joy if they knew they were being heard. Maybe Marines would not end their lives prematurely if leaders embraced vulnerability in their personal leadership philosophies and chose to practice empathy with all who serve.

Vulnerable leadership is necessary in the Marine Corps. Connecting with Marines on an emotional level first requires courage to be vulnerable and then the courage to actively listen and not shut down the conversation because leaders are uncomfortable talking about tough topics. Lacking vulnerability leads to egotistical and self-protective leadership and an overall lack of empathy. Brown argues that if leaders are willing to “put down their emotional armor,” organizations can build a stronger and more effective team based on trust and belonging.¹⁰ To be comfortable with vulnerability, the Marine Corps must incorporate this quality into its leadership development philosophy.

The Marine Corps’ recent embrace of empathy signals an important cultural shift, but empathy without vulnerability risks becoming hollow. True leadership requires the courage to be seen, to listen without judgment, and to create space for connection and trust. In an institution defined by strength and resilience, vulnerability may feel counterintuitive, but it is exactly what is needed to build a more emotionally intelligent, resilient, and cohesive Corps. If the Marine Corps wants empathy to be more than a doctrinal checkbox, its leaders must model vulnerability in words, actions, and development. Only then can the Marine Corps transform empathy from a principle into a practice, one that saves lives, strengthens teams, and honors the enduring leadership principle: *Know your Marines, and look out for their welfare.*

... but empathy without vulnerability risks becoming hollow.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCTP 6-10A, Sustaining the Transformation* (Washington, DC: August 2024).
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCWP 6-10, Leading Marines* (Washington, DC: August 2024).
3. *Sustaining the Transformation*.
4. Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts* (New York: Random House, 2018).
5. Ibid.

6. Louise Younie, “Vulnerable Leadership,” *London Journal of Primary Care* 8, No. 3 (2016).

7. Irene Loewenson, “Marines Grapple with Highest Suicide Rate of All US Military Services,” *Marine Corps Times*, November 13, 2023, <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2023/11/13/marines-grapple-with-highest-suicide-rate-of-all-us-military-services>.

8. Defense Suicide Prevention Office, *Annual Report on Suicide in the Military: Calendar Year 2023* (Washington, DC: 2024), https://www.dspo.mil/Portals/113/2024/documents/annual_report/ARSM_CY23_final_508c.pdf.

9. Defense Suicide Prevention Office, *Department of Defense Quarterly Suicide Report (QSR), 4th Quarter, CY 2024* (Washington, DC: January 30, 2025), <https://www.dspo.mil/Home/Tools/Reports>.

10. *Dare to Lead*.



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