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total badass. I often think about this story when I need inspiration to choose courage over comfort so I can serve others.

DeDe writes:

I think one of the most helpful things I've learned from Brené's work is the importance of using the right language to talk about hard things and tackle tough subjects. Conceptually, as leaders, I think we understand vulnerability, and are even personally willing to be vulnerable, but we don't always have the right language or practice in applying such concepts. It doesn't really work to say: "I'm going to be vulnerable here with you right now."

During the first year of my command, I was presenting an award to an airman at a squadron event. At the end of the presentation, I asked if anyone had any questions. A young airman raised his hand and asked, "Ma'am, when is the ops tempo [the pace of current operations] going to slow down, because we are really tired?"

"Yeah," I said. "It has been very busy, and we ask a lot of you." I explained, "It's not just here at Barksdale, though. I just came from a different command, where I heard the same thing. Across our Air Force, leaders know we're asking a lot of you, and they know you're tired."

"Yes, ma'am, we're tired."

While the squadron itself is larger, there were probably about forty airmen at the event that day. I asked everyone who was tired to raise their hands, and pretty much every hand went up.

I thought about Brené's work, and the power it has given me to talk about things that are uncomfortable.

I went on: "I want to share something with all of you

that I read recently that has really made me stop and think. Three days ago, I was reading an article in the *Harvard Business Review*, and it was talking about an organization that was researching companies that were reporting high levels of exhaustion. This team went into these companies to see what was driving such high levels of exhaustion. What they found was that while these employees were in fact exhausted, it wasn't just because of the ops tempo. They were actually exhausted because people were lonely. Their workforces were lonely, and that loneliness was manifesting itself in a feeling of exhaustion."

I stopped for a second and looked out at the group, then continued, "Because that's what happens, right?"

"When we're lonely, we just feel lethargic. We don't really want to do anything; we think we're tired, and we just want to sleep." I paused: "So, if I were to ask you, instead of who's tired, who's lonely? How many of you would raise your hand?"

At least fifteen people raised their hand.

Loneliness is such a hard thing for many of us to admit. I thought maybe one person would raise a hand. But when fifteen people raised their hands, I was shocked. For lack of better language, I had an "Oh shit" moment. I really didn't know what to do.

I stood there, stunned, in front of everyone, thinking: I'm not a therapist. I'm not equipped for this. I certainly wasn't prepared for nearly a quarter of the group to admit such a raw emotion to me. And truthfully, I'm trying to get through some of the same emotions myself. It was uncomfortable, and the discomfort was making me want to move on to a different topic. But that's where Brené's work has given me courage. Five years ago, before hearing her work,

I would never have had the courage to ask that question, and I certainly wouldn't have been prepared to hold space for the answers.

Our Air Force, our military in general, is facing challenges with suicide, with people feeling isolated and hopeless. As leaders we are trying everything we can to reach our airmen and ensure they know that suicide is not the answer. We spend so much time talking with them about available resources, but I'm not sure enough of us are talking about the fact that in the end, a lot of people are just lonely. They're not connecting, and they're not reaching out.

Before I even asked the question, I knew it was going to be very uncomfortable, but I also knew it was an important question to ask. So, I decided to call on courage and vulnerability and stay in the moment.

I decided to be honest with them.

"This breaks my heart. Loneliness isn't something I've talked about with you before. But seeing so many of you raise your hands today scares me a little because I'm not entirely sure what to do with this information. As a leader, if you tell me you're tired, I'm going to send you home, tell you to take some leave, to take some time away and get some rest. But if what's really going on is you're lonely, then sending you off to be by yourself, yet again, means that I could possibly exacerbate the very problem we are so desperately trying to combat in our Air Force, which is that some people are so out of hope, feeling so isolated, that they are doing something irreversible."

My willingness to ask an uncomfortable question opened the door to a great conversation. We ended the afternoon event having had a very candid discussion about

how we build relationships in the unit, how we reach out to others when we're feeling alone, and how we create a community of inclusion. It also provided invaluable insight for the squadron commander and set him on a path to address the right issue: connection and inclusion versus busyness and exhaustion.

It was also a pivotal moment in my own leadership growth. I realized that day that as a leader, if I am comfortable enough to use the right language and say "Are you lonely?" I may be able to create a connection that gives someone hope. It's possible that by using the right language I'll create a connection where maybe, just maybe, they will come and talk to me. And then we can do something about it. Most of the time, if I'm not comfortable with the discomfort that can come from such a moment, and I encounter someone who is having trouble, I send them—and rightly so—to helping professionals, to trained therapists.

Sometimes I fear, though, that in doing so, I am sending the message "I don't know how to deal with this" or "I don't have the space to handle the heaviness of this" or "I have so many other demands that I just can't deal with it." As leaders I certainly believe we all want to do the right thing, but we don't always have the bandwidth or experience to take care of someone the way they need to be taken care of. Sending them to helping professionals is absolutely the right thing to do, but I also think it can add to the feeling of isolation. In some sense, it may feel as if I'm pushing that airman away, and I'm telling them to let the professionals "deal with it." The subconscious message that I could be sending is: You are not with me, and I am not with you.

That day, when I saw all those hands go up, it affected me so much that I tell the story every chance I get. I want

leaders, I want fellow airmen, to hear and feel for themselves how it feels when we use words like *lonely* versus *exhausted*. I've now told the story at least thirty to forty times to different groups, to people of different ranks and professions in the Air Force. I know I've hit a nerve because every time I tell the story, as I look out at the crowd, I see people nodding in agreement. They're connected. You can see it. You can feel it. They are relating to what it feels like to be in the military, to be away from home, and how hard it is to build community with every new assignment. They're enthralled in what I'm saying in that moment, because they too have had their own moments of loneliness. I tear up every time I tell the story because I know it's resonating with them, and I'm sad that we don't talk openly about it more often. In some cases, our lives depend on it.

Now, after almost every presentation, someone will come up to me and ask: "What do I do when I'm lonely?"

I am certainly not an expert on this topic, which in itself is intimidating. I've opened the door to a conversation I don't always feel equipped to address. But that is why Brené's work is so important. We have to have the hard conversations even when we're not ready. I always use Brené's words and tell the asker, "I am a traveler, not a mapmaker. I am going down this path same as and with you." I tell everyone who shares this moment with me that I try to be very deliberate in scheduling plans, that I am very deliberate in building relationships so that when that feeling of loneliness strikes, I have someone I can reach out to. More than anything, I tell them I'm honest about the way I'm feeling and when I'm struggling. Never once, before this event, did an airman of mine come up to me and tell me they were lonely. By starting the conversation, I

believe I've given them permission; I've conveyed that it's a safe topic to discuss. Now when they come to me, and they themselves are vulnerable, I have an opportunity to address it before their loneliness gets to a level of overwhelm and they see no other way out.

Once when I was telling the story, another commander came up to me and said, "I talk to my folks all the time about being disconnected." I looked at her and said, "Why do you use the word *disconnected*? It's such a sterile word. Why not just use the word *lonely*?" I can't say for certain but she appeared uncomfortable with that. I went on, "If I ask an airman 'Are you feeling disconnected?' I don't feel like that airman knows that I truly see them, that I understand what it is they're going through. Because again, *disconnected* is a sterile word. It's a safe word. It's not a word that conveys the true depth of shared human experience like loneliness. Whereas if I ask an airman 'Are you lonely?' I feel as if I am reaching them at a deeper level. I am letting them know in that moment, I am comfortable addressing the messy parts of life and I won't shy away from their loneliness. In a sense I'm telling them: Let's go there together. I am strong enough to hold this for the both of us."

The words we use really matter. But words like *loneliness*, *empathy*, *compassion*, are not words often discussed in our leadership training, nor are they included in our leadership literature.

The Air Force's most current manual on leadership, Air Force Doctrine Document 1-1: Leadership and Force Development, was written in 2011. In the document it explains that our Air Force's current core values are an evolution of seven leadership traits identified in the Air Force's very first

manual on leadership, Air Force Manual 35-15, which was written in 1948. One of the seven traits was humanness.

My first reaction was "Huh? What is humanness?" Intrigued and curious, I set out to find the 1948 document. Interestingly, it took me a few hours to find the 1948 manual because it was not located in any of the leadership files. It was actually buried in the historical documents of the Air Force Chaplain Corps. As I was reading the document, I was struck by how much emotion I was feeling from the words on the page. So I started to pay more attention. The pages were full of words and phrases like: *to belong, a sense of belonging, feeling, fear, compassion, confidence, kindness, friendliness, and mercy*. I was amazed.

Here's this military document that's talking about leadership with mercy, and kindness, and belonging, and love. Yes, the word *love* was in this military leadership manual. I decided to do a word search for these words and phrases to see how often they were used. A discussion of feeling—how men would feel—was referred to 147 times. The importance of creating a sense of belonging was mentioned 21 times. The fear of combat, the fear of exclusion, the fear a life in the profession of arms will bring was mentioned 35 times. Love—what it means as a leader to love your men—was brought up 13 times. I won't go through the entire document, but suffice it to say this document used a language that speaks to the human experience when it was instructing leaders on how to lead people.

I went back to our current manual on leadership and searched for the same words. Unfortunately, such words weren't used. Over and over again each search turned up zero. These words that address the real emotions of people

have been completely removed from our language on leadership.

Our most current manual on leadership uses phrases like *tactical leadership*, *operational leadership*, *strategic leadership*. Important concepts, no doubt, but the concepts provide little guidance to our young leaders on how to deal with the many complexities of how people, of how our airmen, process the experience of being in the military during a time of war. In sanitizing our language, I think we've decreased our comfort with expressing those feelings and holding that same space for others.

I'm comfortable using a word like *lonely*—a sometimes awkward and uncomfortable feeling and word for us to talk about—because I am willing to sit in that discomfort and give them permission to be in it with me.

When I first started learning from Brené's work and talking about it, specifically the power of vulnerability in leadership, people would look at me like I was crazy. I realized then I wasn't going to be able to talk about it on a large scale, so I decided I would start small, and I would use her work with just my six squadron commanders. I felt that if I did nothing more than help these six people become leaders with different tools to navigate the challenges of leadership, then I would have done enough.

With these six leaders, we have dug in—and because of that, there have been a million moments where Brené's work has changed the way we are leading people.

If you read either DeDe's story or the story about how my team and I worked through our rumble and think *This is way too kumbaya*, ask yourself if you're underestimating the courage

these types of conversations take, or maybe diminishing the effort so you don't have to give it a shot.

If you read these stories and think *I'm not sure I could ever do this work with my team*, I have a suggestion. Make copies of this section, ask your team to read it, then bring them together for forty-five minutes. Ask a few questions: What did you think? Would putting any of this language or these tools into practice be helpful for us? If so, what would we need to do it? This is a great opportunity for **container-building**. If the team thinks there's nothing helpful here, ask why not. This is a daring opportunity to surface fears, feelings, and stealth expectations and intentions, or just to hear better ideas.

If you read these stories and think *Who has the time?* I'd ask you to calculate the cost of distrust and disconnection in terms of productivity, performance, and engagement. Here's what I know to be true from my experience and what I consider to be one of the most important learnings from this research: **Leaders must either invest a reasonable amount of time attending to fears and feelings, or squander an unreasonable amount of time trying to manage ineffective and unproductive behavior.**

What this means is that we must find the courage to get curious and possibly surface emotions and emotional experiences that people can't articulate or that might be happening outside their awareness. If we find ourselves addressing the same problematic behaviors over and over, we may need to dig deeper to the thinking and feeling driving those behaviors.

After the third one-on-one addressing the same issue, it's easy to make up the story that this person is just being difficult or even testing us. But what I've found in my own experience is that we haven't gone deep enough. We haven't peeled away enough layers of the onion. And once we start peeling, we have to leave long