



## KETS DE VRIES INSTITUTE

### VULNERABILITY AS THE KEY TO TRANSITION FROM YOUNGNESS TO GRAVITAS

HANNEKE C. FRESE, KDVI ASSOCIATE

For those people who seem to be effortlessly successful, but at some point begin to wonder if the construct they have built for themselves will hold, here is a reflection suggesting that the key to maturity and wisdom, which are aspects of gravitas, may well be learning to be appropriately vulnerable.

If you passed Karl in the company's cafeteria you could be forgiven for thinking he is one of the ambitious MBA graduates who recently joined this unique, global organisation: his youthful looks, the bounce in his step, scanning the crowd for familiar faces to acknowledge colleagues and be acknowledged in return. Karl, however, is in his early 40s and on the high potential succession list for the CEO position.

Leaders, who embrace "youngness" as a way of pushing out the boundaries and be safe as others forgive them for their mistakes and flaws, may find it hard to accept help and support from others, i.e. to show vulnerability. It can feel counter-intuitive as they act out their divine youth, adore the attention and revel in the admiration of others.

The root of not moving beyond youngness as the years pass has its origin in early childhood and is an ingenious survival technique to continue to ensure love and attention from caregivers. You can visualise the two year old child that begins to figure out in his or her subconscious, how this power equation works. What might it be like to always enjoy this freedom to act and explore, to be admired and forgiven? Isn't it clever? As the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein so rightly observed: "[One of the many interesting and surprising experiences of the beginner in child analysis is to find in even very young children a capacity for insight which is often far greater than that of adults](#)".

Successful leaders adopting the construct of youngness can readily articulate the biography of where it started. They reveal that they have always been "young": the youngest in class in elementary school and one of the best pupils, the youngest violin player to win an award at the home-town's musical festival or, as in Karl's case, the youngest on the high potential slate for CEO of the company. Often there is a red line through the lives of men and women who have adopted youngness as an essential and very useful part of their persona. The need for a constant and reliable stream of admiration that is part of the youngness construct is an element of narcissism, although possibly benign. Once a leader has gained insights into their psychodynamic wiring they can reflect on the true measure of their narcissism with its excessive need for admiration, a grandiose sense of self-importance, preoccupation with unlimited

success, being special and unique, being someone who can only be understood by like-minded people, and who operates with a sense of entitlement.

We go back to Karl and listen in. His 360° feedback report highlights his youngness and he receives the feedback calmly and immediately understands the dilemma. “Well,” he says when he has processed the information. “I am not sure that being young will be helpful going forward. I am ambitious after all and “young” may not be what the board looks for when they appoint the next CEO! I shall focus on being seen as someone who has gravitas.”

The whole notion of quickly replacing a core ingredient of his persona with something else that is more useful intrigues me. It shows the need to continue to have a differentiating “halo” effect. It confirms the psycho-dynamic need of the individual, i.e. attracting attention to uniqueness. Without a differentiator that sets the individual apart from the tribe and elevates him or her, the ego is restless and at risk of losing its bearing. This desire for differentiation can easily become a derailer and is the antonym of gravitas: it is frivolous and has an association with being shallow and manipulative.

But is this not too harsh, too black and white an observation?

Clearly for some, youngness is a useful and playful state, be it often subconscious. Surely for others, who live in awareness, this construct may well be a burden as others project the role of youngness on the individual, demanding the dance to continue. One hopes that one day the individual can break the spell and be released from the pattern, moving the locus of control to the self rather than to an external condition.

I believe we intuitively know and feel when the other person has gravitas: a word executive search consultants love. Those who are experienced as having gravitas have dignity, poise, and are seen as mature and possibly even wise.

Gill Corkindale [compares gravitas in the corporate world with statesmanship in politics](#). You may or may not have it intrinsically but can develop it over time. Some roles of authority, such as doctors, professors or public leaders in any profession may provide a ready platform to build gravitas for the incumbent.

The coaching process of exploration into the self helps leaders to become more curious about how life’s ups and downs have shaped them. They can begin to look for patterns that have developed over the years, starting in the family of origin and maybe even in generations before, passed down with the genes, traditions and the family narrative.

However, the key to the paradise of gravitas is vulnerability and therein lays the challenge to leave the demanding ego behind and move to a next stage in adult development where the ego is more at peace.

Leaders who are comfortable showing vulnerability are often seen as authentic and trustworthy. They do not feel the need to show that they are perfect. By accepting that vulnerability is part of their persona and identity, they show *gravitas*: i.e. one of the [Roman virtues](#), along with [pietas](#) (duty, religiosity or loyalty, devotion), [dignitas](#) (dignity) and [virtus](#) (virtue).

When we receive feedback, such as that others perceive us as young and assuming we drop our defences to allow ourselves to be vulnerable; we can begin to integrate new insights into who we are. However, just as many roads lead to Rome, there are multiple ways to move towards *gravitas* with youngness only one potential avenue. Feedback or insights into other personality aspects such as overly aggressive behaviour or avoiding conflict may well lead to a similar developmental shift.

Once we have taken time to truly understand the underlying psychodynamic, a whole playing field opens up. We can enlarge the “public space” in which we operate and breathe through, moving from the subconscious to the conscious, from the invisible depth to above the water line.

Allowing vulnerability to create a deeper understanding of the ego is a gift to help us develop as adults; maybe even become someone who others experience as a person with *gravitas*.