

## How Learning To Be Vulnerable Can Make Life Safer

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Tommy Chreene with his horse, Lady, at home in Meaux, La. Chreene spent 26 years working on offshore oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico. While working on the Ursa project, he was part of a program designed to get the workers to open up emotionally with one another. *Edmund D. Fountain for NPR*

Men who worked on oil rigs lived by certain rules. They were tough. They worked under any conditions. They didn't ask questions. It was this way as far back as Tommy Chreene, 60, who started working on rigs in the Gulf of Mexico back when he was 15, can remember.

Back then, it wasn't unusual to see someone die on an oil rig. Chreene remembers the death of one man who had just finished a shift. He was standing before an enormous pipe that the workers twisted into the ground and held in place with a handle. The man kicked the handle, and the tension on the pipe released. It caught the man's ankle as it whipped around.

"In about three seconds, it spun him around about 80 times," Chreene says. A few feet from the man was a post, and "his head was hitting that post like a rotten tomato."

They got 15 minutes to mourn after watching their friend and colleague die, but that was it. "I mean, that hole cost a lot of money," he says. "We got to go to work."

Even though the men faced the risk of death every day, Chreene says they never showed any vulnerability. This made the work even more perilous, because the men didn't ask for help, didn't admit if they weren't up to a certain job.

But in the 1990s, the oil companies started exploring in much deeper water — more than 3,000 feet below the surface of the Gulf. That meant whole new challenges, logistically and technologically.

In 1997, Shell began building a deepwater platform, Ursa — a \$1.45 billion behemoth that would stand 48 stories tall and, when completed, would become the world's deepest offshore well. Rick Fox, the asset leader for Ursa, says executing something this vast was a struggle, beyond the scale of anything they'd ever attempted. Something needed to change, he says, if Ursa was going to be built and operated safely.

"We had to look at the organization and see if we could do something better," Fox says. "And who knew what that was going to open?"

Then Fox got a call from a woman named Claire Nuer. She was a leadership consultant, a Holocaust survivor and a devotee of California New Age circles. She had heard about the seemingly insurmountable project, and she said she could help. When Fox started talking about technical problems like drilling schedules, she stopped him. She said he wasn't dealing with his real problem: his fear. The change Fox needed, she said, to make Ursa work, was in how the men dealt with their feelings.

That wasn't going to be easy. These men had been raised on the rig code, at work and at home. Fox was raising his son, Roger, with it, although it was getting in the way of their relationship. Roger remembers the first time he heard the term "Phillips head screwdriver," when his dad had asked him to get one.

"I didn't think to say, 'Hey, Dad ... I don't know what you're talking about,' " Roger Fox says. "So I went to the shop to look for something, I had no idea what it was, and felt stuck 'cause — I didn't want to be vulnerable."

"We're guarded. We're fearful. We're so angry at each other because we don't see each other, really," Fox's son, Roger, says now.

Nuer felt that management problems had a lot more to do with interior struggles than with the kinds of things typically taught in business school. Creating environments where people supported each other, she thought, would free them to make great contributions. For people to make those kinds of fundamental changes, it helped to have the involvement of not just their co-workers but their family members, too.

Fox was moved by Nuer, and convinced his son Roger to attend one of her seminars with him in California. There's a recording from back then where Roger tells his father that he's intolerant of weakness. "Yeah, that would be me," Fox replies. "Roger, you know, I take this really seriously. It's ruined a lot of our good times together."

Fox says the session worked. It transformed his relationship with his son. He thought that if Nuer could cut through 18 years of family tension, then she just might be what he needed for the Ursa project.

Over the next year and a half, while Ursa was under construction, Fox had more than a hundred oil rig workers come to Shell's headquarters in New Orleans. Nuer's company and other groups came and put the men through a series of exercises designed to open them up.

George Horn was one of those men. He was not receptive to sharing. "This has nothing to do with an oil field. What is this for?" he says. A lot of the men felt the same way. One exercise asked them to draw their families and personal timelines and stand before the group and talk about it.

"They began to tell the story of their lives, and some of them are not real happy," Horn says.

The men told stories of failed relationships and alcoholic parents. They talked about how they were hungry as children. "It felt vulnerable. You put your personal life out there for everybody to hear and everybody to see," Horn says.

Once one man did it, others followed suit. They drilled deeper and deeper. Tommy Chreene, who had a tough reputation, broke down and wept before the group as he talked about his son's terminal illness. "I was weeping like a baby," he says. "And nobody ever come to me and said, 'Aw, you big crybaby.' "

The sessions were long and intense. The men went through the exercises from 6 in the morning to 11 at night. Mark Gatlin, one of the workers, says one of the Ursa managers completely dissociated during a session.

"I guess through the exhaustion or the constant, you know, diving into emotion kind of thing. He absolutely forgot — he just kinda woke up and said, 'Where am I?' " Gatlin says. The man forgot his own name, who he was — everything. They sent him to a doctor, and he recovered.

Some of the men had to stand face to face and ask questions like, "If there was one thing you could change about me, what would it be?" Gatlin says he heard some pretty rough responses: "I had people tell me I don't listen. I had some people tell me, 'You talk too much.' I'd say, 'Tell me more.' "

Gatlin says he started realizing things about himself he had never noticed before. The men were learning about each other and about themselves. Later, they learned about running an oil platform safely. Robin Ely, a Harvard business school professor, and Debra Meyerson, a professor at Stanford, began studying Fox and Nuer's experiment.

In an article in the Harvard Business Review, Ely and Meyerson write that the men had changed. By allowing themselves to become vulnerable to one another, they had altered "their sense of who they were and could be as men."

Ely says that as the men became more open with their feelings, other communication was starting to flow more freely. "Part of safety in an environment like that is being able to admit mistakes and being open to learning — to say, 'I need help, I can't lift this thing by myself, I'm not sure how to read this meter,' " she says. "That alone is about being vulnerable."

That helped contribute to an 84 percent decline in Shell's accident rate companywide, Ely says. "In that same period, the company's level of productivity in terms of numbers of barrels and efficiency and reliability exceeded the industry's previous benchmark."

The old way of being an oil rig worker — the the stoniness, the complete self-reliance — Ely thinks it was endangering the workers and holding back efficiency.

And the men themselves changed. "They're opening up and becoming more themselves," says Art Kleiner, an author who has studied corporate cultures for decades. He says the men let go of the self-image of a steely rig hand and embraced a different version of themselves.

"[Fox] did it," says Floyd Guidry, one of the Ursa workers. "Built a new kind of person. Maybe not a new physical man, but a new mental man."

The men are glad for the change.

"I'm so grateful my son did not have to wait till he was 40-something years old to have the experience of being able to question his own habits and his own way of thinking about things," Fox says. "My son is a beautiful human being, and I cannot get enough of being around him."

Horn feels the same way: "I'm glad the old way's gone. It was no fun whatsoever."

Horn says that after his stepmother's funeral, his son told him, " 'It could be a total stranger. I'd still cry for them. I have empathy for those I don't even know.' So where did he learn that? You know, instead of all this tough-guy stuff that you're raised with in the South. Did he learn that from me? I don't know."



Shell's Ursa platform, 130 miles southeast of New Orleans, was the largest in the world when it was finished in 1999.

*Phil Carter/Courtesy of Shell*