

How Leaders Can Have Both Thick Skins AND Tender Hearts

Leaders are often applauded for and encouraged to develop “thick skin.” A leader with “thick skin” is not crushed by criticism nor destroyed by disappointing results. The pain, the criticism, the challenges seem to “roll-off” the leader’s skin without seeping into the leader’s heart. While a leader with “thin skin” is often paralyzed by challenges or criticism, a leader with “thick skin” is able to handle adversity, push through challenges, and continue to lead in the midst of a difficult season.

In the same way, people long for and benefit from a leader with a “tender heart.” A leader with a tender heart is sensitive to others, wants the best for them, rejoices when they rejoice, and mourns when they mourn. A leader with a “tender heart” cares deeply for the people he/she serves alongside.

Is it even possible for a leader to have both, to possess thick skin and a tender heart? Those two are often painted as contrary to one another, as if a leader must choose between being “thick-skinned” and “tender-hearted.” But a leader must not choose between the two. The best leaders are both.

With regards to thick skin and tender hearts, here four types of leaders. Which type are you?



Thick skin/ tough heart

Some leaders are able to ignore criticism and push through disappointment because they really don’t care. They don’t care about people at all. They are apathetic to the commitments they have made. They are able to go to sleep through challenges because they have no passion. Some leaders have “thick skin” because their hearts are calloused.

Thin skin/ tough heart

Some leaders cannot handle criticism or even godly rebukes from others, and yet they dole it out exponentially more than they receive. They are narcissistic, and a narcissistic leader is

easily hurt but never concerned about hurting others. They have thin skin because their worth is connected to their name and renown, but their hearts are cold and calloused to others. They care infinitely more about their reputation than they care about those they want a reputation for serving.

Thin skin/ tender heart

A leader with a tender heart is compassionate, loving, and focused on people. Their concern for others' feelings can, at times, result in thin skin. Because they want the best for people, they can easily move into foolishly thinking everyone can be happy at all times. Leaders with a tender heart and thin skin can become a slave to the opinion of others and ultimately fail to lead with conviction.

Thick skin/ tender heart

A leader with *both* thick skin and a tender heart is one who loves people but does not find his/her identity in what people think of him/her. A leader with thick skin and a tender heart is trustworthy and effective, compassionate and focused. This leader sees no contradiction between conviction and compassion, between thick skin and a tender heart. Such a leader is rare, too rare. We benefit greatly from following leaders with thick skin and tender hearts. Thick skin is a great asset for a leader, unless it is the result of a calloused heart. Thick skin combined with a tender heart results in passionate and compassionate leadership.

How can we have *both* tender hearts and thick skin? How can we be this type of leader?

Only by following Jesus.

Only by following Jesus can you love people *and* not be crushed if they don't love you. For this type of leader, thick skin is the result of security, worth, and identity placed in the Lord and not in people. If our identity is in Him, we are not destroyed when our leadership is questioned, when people we serve don't appreciate our service. At the same time, we are not aloof or calloused toward people because the Lord has our heart, and loving and trusting Him always results in a tender and compassionate heart for people.

Don't choose between thick skin and a tender heart. As a leader, you need both. But only by walking daily with the Lord can a leader have thick skin and a tender heart.

> [Read more from Eric.](#)

Would you like to learn more about developing a tough skin and a tender heart as a leader?
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