

“Dare to Lead”
Brene Brown
Book Note by Dave Kraft

Studying leadership is way easier than leading.

I define a leader as anyone who takes responsibility for finding the potential in people and processes, and who has the courage to develop that potential.

We need braver leaders and more courageous cultures. Just under half of the leaders we interviewed initially talked about courage as a personality trait, not a skill.

As Marcus Aurelius taught us, “What stands in the way becomes the way.”

Here are the ten behaviors and cultural issues that leaders identified as getting in our way in organizations across the world:

1. We avoid tough conversations,
2. We spend an unreasonable amount of time managing problematic behaviors.
3. Diminishing trust caused by a lack of connection and empathy.
4. Not enough people are taking smart risks or creating and sharing bold ideas
5. When people are afraid of being put down or ridiculed for trying something and failing, or even for putting forward a radical new idea, the best you can expect is status quo and groupthink.
6. We get stuck and defined by setbacks, disappointments, and failures,
7. Too much shame and blame, not enough accountability and learning.
8. Choosing our own comfort over hard conversations is the epitome of privilege, and it corrodes trust and moves us away from meaningful and lasting change.
9. Organizational values are gauzy and assessed in terms of aspirations
10. Perfectionism and fear are keeping people from learning and growing.

Our job was to identify the specific courage-building skill sets that people need to address these problems.

To listen with the same passion with which we want to be heard. Show up with an open heart and mind so we can serve the work and each other, not our egos.

Courage is a collection of four skill sets

1. Rumbling with Vulnerability
2. Living into Our Values
3. Braving Trust
4. Learning to Rise

Our ability to be daring leaders will never be greater than our capacity for vulnerability.

Self-awareness and self-love matter. Who we are is how we lead.

Fear is the emotion at the center of that list of problematic behaviors and culture issues, but feeling fear is not the barrier. The true underlying obstacle to brave leadership is how we respond to our fear. We have to cultivate a culture in which brave work, tough conversations, and whole hearts are the expectation, and armor is not necessary or rewarded. We have to be vigilant about creating a culture in which people feel safe, seen, heard, and respected. Daring leaders must care for and be connected to the people they lead. Care and connection are irreducible requirements.

When our organization rewards armoring behaviors like blaming, shaming, cynicism, perfectionism, and emotional stoicism, we can't expect innovative work.

The skill sets that make up courage are not new; they've been aspirational leadership skills for as long as there have been leaders.

I've never met a brave person who hasn't known disappointment, failure, even heartbreak.

Having the courage to show up when you can't control the outcome.

Across all of our data there's not a shred of empirical evidence that vulnerability is weakness.

If you are not in the arena getting your ass kicked on occasion, I'm not interested in, or open to, your feedback. If you're criticizing from a place where you're not also putting yourself on the line, I'm not interested in what you have to say.

Get clear on whose opinions of you matter. We need to seek feedback from those people.

Don't grab hurtful comments and pull them close to you by rereading them and ruminating on them. Don't play with them by rehearsing your badass comeback. And whatever you do, don't pull hatefulness close to your heart. Armor is too heavy a price to pay to engage with cheap-seat feedback.

When we define ourselves by what everyone thinks, it's hard to be brave ~ C.S. Lewis

The people on your list should be the people who love you not despite your vulnerability and imperfections, but because of them.

Myth #1: Vulnerability is weakness.

Not one person has been able to give me an example of courage without vulnerability.

Myth #2: I don't do vulnerability.

Myth #3: I can go it alone.

By authentic I mean the kind of connection that doesn't require hustling for acceptance and changing who we are to fit in.

Myth #4: You can engineer the uncertainty and discomfort out of vulnerability.

Once we try to strip uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure from the relational experience, we bankrupt courage by definition.

Myth #5: Trust comes before vulnerability.

If you're stupid enough to let someone know where you're tender or what you care about the most, it's just a matter of time before someone uses that to hurt you. We need to trust to be vulnerable, and we need to be vulnerable in order to build trust. Trust is in fact earned in the smallest of moments. Trust is the stacking and layering of small moments and reciprocal vulnerability over time.

Myth #6: Vulnerability is disclosure.

Creating what we call a safe container by asking the team what they need to feel open and safe in the conversation. This is one of the easiest practices to implement, and the return on the time investment is huge yet I rarely see team, project, or group leaders take that time.

Google's five-year study on highly productive teams, Project Aristotle, found that psychological safety—team members feeling safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other—was “far and away the most important of the dynamics that set successful teams apart.”

Amy Edmondson coined the phrase “Psychological Safety.”

In psychologically safe environments, people believe that if they make a mistake others will not penalize or think less of them for it. Most people feel a need to “manage” interpersonal risk to retain a good image. We simply prefer approval over disapproval. Items that frequently show up as things that get in the way of psychological safety in teams and groups include judgment, unsolicited advice giving, interrupting, and sharing outside the team meeting.

The behaviors that people need from their team or group almost always include listening, staying curious, being honest, and keeping confidences.

“What does support from me look like?”

Not only is fake vulnerability ineffective, but it breeds distrust.

Rumbling with vulnerability is about leaning into rather than walking away from the situations that make us feel uncertain, at risk, or emotionally exposed.

Boundaries is making clear what's okay and what's not okay, and why. Vulnerability minus boundaries is not vulnerability. It's confession, manipulation, desperation, or shock and awe, but it's not vulnerability.

The conversation started with multiple flags. Not enough for a parade, but close.

“Say more.” Another favorite rumble tool. Asking someone to “say more” often leads to profoundly deeper and more productive rumbling.

If you come across an explanation of vulnerability that doesn't include setting boundaries or being clear on intentions, proceed with caution. To feel is to be vulnerable. Believing that vulnerability is weakness is believing that feeling is weakness.

There is absolutely no innovation without failure.

Show me a culture in which vulnerability is framed as weakness and I'll show you a culture struggling to come up with fresh ideas and new perspectives. To foreclose on vulnerability and our emotional life out of fear that the costs will be too high is to walk away from the very thing that gives purpose and meaning to living.

Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind.

Feeding people half-truths or bullshit to make them feel better (which is almost always about making ourselves feel more comfortable) is unkind.

I took a deep breath and leaned into the mother of all rumble tools—curiosity.

The most critical thing that the shame gremlins kept whispering was you don't belong in this job. You study leadership, but you can't lead. You're a joke!

Courage and faith are my core values, and when I'm in fear I show up in ways that leave me feeling out of alignment with these values and outside my integrity.

“The cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek.”

Permission slips. We each wrote down one thing that we gave ourselves permission to do or feel for this meeting.

I would offload the emotions on them with anger and the really shitty behavior of looking at them like they were dream crushers.

First, as a leadership team, we need a shared understanding of all the moving pieces so no single person is the connective tissue.

We now stop meetings five minutes early to review and agree on the minutes before we leave.

It's not about being right or wrong, it's about creating space to understand different perspectives.

We should all be held accountable for being both **optimistic and realistic**.

You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”

We all work to take responsibility for both dreaming and reality-checking those dreams with facts.

Frame the willingness to apologize and make amends as brave leadership.

I've opened the door to a conversation I don't always feel equipped to address.

“I am a traveler, not a mapmaker. I am going down this path same as and with you.”

Words like loneliness, empathy, compassion, are not words often discussed in our leadership training, nor are they included in our leadership literature. 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. 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.

“In the past, jobs were about muscles, now they're about brains, but in the future they'll be about the heart.” —Minouche Shafik, director, London School of Economics

I've always talked about living with an unarmored heart as wholeheartedness.

I love that the Latin root of the word integrate is integrare, “to make whole.”

The slogans are easy. The behaviors to support the slogans are not. These beliefs lead us to consciously or unconsciously build cultures that require and reward armor. They value all-knowing over always learning and staying curious.

Without our understanding or consent, emotions start driving our decision making and behavior while thinking is tied up in the trunk.

I think of my ego as my inner hustler. It's that voice in my head that drives pretending, performing, pleasing, and perfecting.

Protecting our ego and fitting in is why we reach for armor in situations where we think being liked or respected is at risk because we may be wrong, or not have all of the answers, or might get in over our heads and not look smart enough.

Driving Perfectionism and Fostering Fear of Failure. Wherever perfectionism is driving us, shame is riding shotgun. Perfectionism is not the same thing as striving for excellence. Perfectionism is, at its core, about trying to earn approval. They adopted this dangerous and debilitating belief system: I am what I accomplish and how well I accomplish it. Please. Perform. Perfect. Prove. Perfectionism is a self-destructive and addictive belief system that fuels this primary thought: If I look perfect and do everything perfectly, I can avoid or minimize the painful feelings of blame, judgment, and shame. There is no way to control perception, no matter how much time and energy we spend trying. We must learn how to distinguish perfectionism from healthy striving for excellence.

Why do we insist on dress-rehearsing tragedy in moments of deep joy?

I had read several articles that show recognition is a factor in increasing employee engagement, satisfaction, and retention in an increasingly competitive global talent market.

When we're talking about the pain surrounding addiction, it's never a self-contained storm, it's a tornado.

Resentment is almost always related to a lack of boundaries.

I've earned a black belt in boundaries.

The word sarcasm is from the Greek word sarkazein, meaning "to tear flesh." Tear. Flesh.

Despair is the belief that tomorrow will be just like today.

Open, honest discussion, in which everyone feels free to offer suggestions and contribute, stimulates creativity.

People use history to criticize different thinking.

"We don't want to change course," or "We don't like the direction you're taking the project." I hate the invisible army, and if you use it with me I will drill you down on exactly who makes up your we. Pretending that we represent a lot of folks when we don't is cheap-seat behavior. If you're going to tear something down, you have to offer a specific plan for how you would rebuild it to make it stronger and more substantial.

Martin Luther King, Jr., defined power as the ability to achieve purpose and effect change.

What makes power dangerous is how it's used. When we operate from a place of power within, we feel comfortable challenging assumptions and long-held beliefs, pushing against the status quo, and asking if there aren't other ways to achieve the highest common good.

When we do not understand our value, we often exaggerate our importance in ways that are not helpful, and we consciously or unconsciously seek attention and validation of importance.

Tuck your team members in around the areas where they quickly achieve flow—those are typically where they are particularly primed to contribute value. We start to develop a coordinated relay in which team members baton-toss to each other’s strengths instead of vying to run the whole stretch alone. Once everyone understands their value, we stop hustling for worthiness and lean into our gifts. The armor of compliance and control is normally about fear and power. The less people understand how their hard work adds value to bigger goals, the less engaged they are. When we operate from compliance and control, we also have a tendency to hold on to power and authority, and push only responsibility down.

- Who owns the task?
- Do they have the authority to be held accountable?
- Do we agree that they are set up for success (time, resources, clarity)?
- Do we have a checklist of what needs to happen to accomplish the task?
- “What does ‘done’ look like?”

We want people to share our commitment to purpose and mission, not to comply because they’re afraid not to. We want people to police themselves and to deliver above and beyond expectations. If you can keep people afraid, and give them an enemy who is responsible for their fear, you can get people to do just about anything. This is the playbook for authoritarian leaders here and around the globe.

Watch out for rewarding exhaustion as a status symbol and attaching productivity to self-worth.

Pegging our self-worth to our net worth.

When worthiness is a function of productivity, we lose the ability to pump the brakes.

If we want to live a life of meaning and contribution, we have to become intentional about cultivating sleep and play. We have to let go of exhaustion, busyness, and productivity as status symbols and measures of self-worth. We are impressing no one.

“The opposite of play is not work—the opposite of play is depression.”

True belonging doesn’t require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are.

Staying open to learning about our biases and blind spots.

Daring leaders work to make sure people can be themselves and feel a sense of belonging.

Rewarding others rather than seeking to be rewarded is the only way to continue to grow within an organization,

“At Costco, we clap for the truth.”

One of the patterns that I've observed in working with leaders is that many people lead from a place of hurt and smallness, and they use their position of power to try to fill that self-worth gap. To put it in simple terms, we work our shit out on other people, and we can never get enough of what it is we're after, because we're not addressing the real problem.

The first-family stuff can look like seeking the approval and acceptance from colleagues that we never received from our parents. An insatiable appetite for recognition and success, of unproductive competition,

The difference between leading from hurt and leading from heart is not what you've experienced or are currently experiencing, it's what you do with that pain and hurt.

When we deny our stories of struggle, they own us. They own us, and they drive our behavior, emotions, thinking, and leading. Daring leadership is leading from heart, not hurt. If shame and blame is our management style, or if it's a pervasive cultural norm, we can't ask people to be vulnerable or brave. Shame, which is often referred to as "the master emotion" by researchers, is the never good enough emotion. "unwanted identity" is one of the primary elicitors of shame.

Shame is the fear of disconnection—it's the fear that something we've done or failed to do, an ideal that we've not lived up to, or a goal that we've not accomplished makes us unworthy of connection. Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love, belonging, and connection.

The fear of being irrelevant is a huge shame trigger that we are not addressing at work.

The majority of shame researchers and clinicians agree that the difference between shame and guilt is best understood as the difference between "I am bad" and "I did something bad." Guilt = I did something bad. Shame = I am bad.

We're now seeing that shame often fuels narcissistic behavior. In fact, I define narcissism as the shame-based fear of being ordinary. Grandiosity and bluster are easy to assign to an overinflated ego. It's tough to get a glimpse of the fear and lack of self-worth that are actually behind the posturing and selfishness. Where shame exists, empathy is almost always absent.

If Sonja's self-talk is I am a failure—that's shame. If her self-talk is "Man, my boss is so out of control, I don't deserve this"—that's humiliation.

Is there evidence of people in leadership roles bullying others, criticizing subordinates in front of colleagues, delivering public reprimands, or setting up reward systems that intentionally embarrass, shame, or humiliate people?

Great leaders make tough "people decisions" and are tender in implementing them.

When we're able to be gentle with ourselves in the midst of shame, we're more likely to reach out, connect, and experience empathy.

Empathy is not connecting to an experience, it's connecting to the emotions that underpin an experience. Empathy isn't about fixing, it's the brave choice to be with someone in their darkness. Empathy is the rocket fuel for building trust and increasing connection.

Empathy Skill #1: To see the world as others see it, or perspective taking

Perspective taking requires becoming the learner, not the knower.

We cannot practice empathy if we need to be knowers; if we can't be learners, we cannot be empathic.

Empathy Skill #2: To be nonjudgmental

Empathy Skill #3: To understand another person's feelings

Empathy Skill #4: To communicate your understanding of that person's feelings

To review, empathy is first: I take the perspective of another person, meaning I become the listener and the student, not the knower. Second: I stay out of judgment. And third and fourth: I try to understand what emotion they're articulating and communicate my understanding of that emotion.

Empathy Skill #5: Mindfulness

The clinical term for that is empathic failure, though I prefer empathic miss, because it's not quite as shaming. Let's look at the six big ways we tend to miss empathy

Miss #1: Sympathy vs. Empathy

Empathy is feeling with people. Sympathy is feeling for them. The two most powerful words when someone's in struggle are "Me too." Again, the difference between empathy and sympathy: feeling with and feeling for.

Empathy Miss #2: The Gasp and Awe

Empathy Miss #3: The Mighty Fall

Empathy Miss #4: The Block and Tackle

Empathy Miss #5: The Boots and Shovel

Empathy Miss #6: If You Think That's Bad...

With some skill-building, we can all learn how to practice empathy. That's a huge gift.

Resisting the urge to punish or shame ourselves when we make mistakes is true mastery.

Do not take responsibility and ownership for the words of other people—just own your part.

Talk to yourself the way you'd talk to someone you love.

Remember, empathy is the most powerful connecting and trust-building tool that we have, and it's the antidote to shame. Shame needs you to believe you're alone and it's just you.

1. Recognizing Shame and Understanding Its Triggers

Strategies of disconnection:

Moving away: Withdrawing, hiding, silencing ourselves, and keeping secrets.

Moving toward: Seeking to appease and please. Moving against: Trying to gain power over others by being aggressive, and by using shame to fight shame.

2. Practicing Critical Awareness

3. Reaching Out

4. Speaking Shame

I'm also not a fan of anything that's brutal, including honesty. Honesty is the best policy, but honesty that's motivated by shame, anger, fear, or hurt is not "honesty." It's shame, anger, fear, or hurt disguised as honesty.

Developing a disciplined practice of rumbling with vulnerability gives leaders the strength and emotional stamina to dare greatly. We need to be willing to have tough conversations, hard meetings, and emotionally charged decision making,

Leaders need the grounded confidence to stay tethered to their values, respond rather than react emotionally, and operate from self-awareness, not self-protection.

Ultimately, leadership is the ability to thrive in the ambiguity of paradoxes and opposites."

The reality is that to be effective, learning needs to be effortful. The brain needs to feel some discomfort when it's learning.

"It's not that I'm so smart, it's just that I stay with problems longer." Einstein

What problem are we trying to solve? Sometimes we'll be an hour into a difficult rumble when someone will bravely say, "Wait. I'm confused.

We would no longer judge outcomes as good or bad, we would just read the outcomes as outcomes, learn from them, and quickly improve.

“What did we set out to do, what happened, what did we learn, and how fast can we improve on it?” This allowed us to overcome setbacks and put the focus on learning instead of blaming.

Once we removed the fear of failure and the fear of being judged, we started to outlearn and outperform our best competitors.

This personal and professional journey has changed my practice as a leader in three specific ways:

1. Teaching me how to practice vulnerability
2. Increasing my self-awareness
3. Giving me the tools to have tough conversations

As a leader, I no longer check my personal life at the door.

If not me, then who? If not now, then when?

I’m committed to tackling problems that threaten our mission, vision, and values, and I challenge others to call out the culture killers in our organization.

We celebrate what works, and we change things that don’t add value to the organization.

When the critics are being extra loud and rowdy, it’s easy to start hustling—to try to prove, perfect, perform, and please.

If we do not have clarity of values, if we don’t have anywhere else to look or focus, if we don’t have that light up above to remind you why we’re there, the cynics and the critics can bring us to our knees.

A value is a way of being or believing that we hold most important.

Jim Collins’s mandate “If you have more than three priorities, you have no priorities.”

Sometimes my prayer is simply If I miss the boat, it wasn’t my boat.

Everyone talks a big values game but very few people actually practice one. Only about 10 percent of organizations have operationalized their values into teachable and observable behaviors that are used to train their employees and hold them accountable.

Don’t choose silence over what is right. It’s not my job to make others more comfortable or to be liked by everyone. We all know what it feels like to stay silent and comfortable instead of voicing what we believe. Choose courage over comfort. Daring leaders who live into their values are never silent about hard things. Silence is not brave leadership, and silence is not a component of brave cultures.

A brave leader is someone who says I see you. I hear you. I don't have all the answers, but I'm going to keep listening and asking questions.

Support looks like love, encouragement, straight talk, boundary setting, and the occasional "No—I don't support this, and here's why."

I wish doing the right thing was the easy thing, but it rarely is.

Giving productive and respectful feedback is a skill set that most of us have never learned.

I've never seen a situation that required feedback where the person delivering the feedback didn't own some part. Mastery requires feedback. I'm brave enough to listen. Think in terms that there's something valuable in the feedback you get. Take what works and leave the rest. The ultimate goal in receiving feedback: a skillful blend of listening, integrating feedback, and reflecting it back with accountability.

The idea of having a chief culture officer.

You don't really know people until you take the time to understand their values. We don't fully see people until we know their values. You can see how this process takes lofty and subjective values and makes them real and actionable. Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind. It's easy to have the value on the company poster, but way more difficult to practice it. When you have a value printed on posters hanging in the halls but you don't dig into the behaviors that support it and teach people those behaviors, you're in BS territory.

Feltman defines trust as "choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person's actions." Trust is the glue that holds teams and organizations together.

Fortune's research showed that "trust between managers and employees is the primary defining characteristic of the very best workplaces," Trust is the one thing that changes everything. It's not a nice-to-have; it's a must-have.

Each person fills out the BRAVING Inventory

Let's look at the seven elements.

1. Boundaries
2. Reliability
3. Accountability
4. Vault
5. Integrity:
6. Nonjudgment
7. Generosity

Integrity is choosing courage over comfort; it's choosing what's right over what's fun, fast, or easy; and it's practicing your values, not just professing them.

It is easy to justify shortcuts based on expediency or cost.

What do your team members do that earns your trust? The most common answer: asking for help.

Choosing what's right over what's easy has become my mantra.

When I provide clear expectations and set boundaries, people perform admirably.

Trust is earned in small moments. Gaining trust is the stacking of small moments over time, something that cannot be summoned with a command—there are either marbles in the jar or there are not. We don't earn trust by demanding it with "Trust me!" Trust is a living process that requires ongoing attention. If you haven't made the investment and there's nothing substantial there, there's no way to duct-tape it together.

I don't need to attach my personal worth to what I produce.

Maya Angelou said, "I don't trust people who don't love themselves and tell me, 'I love you.'"

"We expect you to be brave. That means that you should expect to fall.

Here's the bottom line: If we don't have the skills to get back up, we may not risk falling.

The challenge is that very few of us were raised to get emotionally curious about what we are feeling.

Instead of feeling our emotions and getting curious, we offload them onto others.

Living, growing up, working, or worshipping on eggshells creates huge cracks in our sense of safety and self-worth.

The ego likes blaming, finding fault, making excuses, inflicting payback, and lashing out, all of which are ultimately forms of self-protection. The ego can be a conniving and dangerous liar when it feels threatened.

We don't trust people who don't struggle, We also don't develop connection with people we don't find relatable.

I define calm as creating perspective and mindfulness while managing emotional reactivity.

We are all conspiracy theorists with our own stories, constantly filling in data gaps with our fears and insecurities.

Clear is kind, and clarity absolutely reduces story making and conspiracy theories.

You can spend a reasonable amount of time attending to feelings and fears (and conspiracy theories), or you can squander an unreasonable time managing unproductive behaviors.

Rather than rumbling with vulnerability and staying in uncertainty, we start to fill in the blanks with our fears and worst-case-scenario planning.

It's essential to create a culture in which circling back and checking out stories is safe and built into the evaluation process.

Stay curious, learn to resist needing to know.

The level of collective courage in an organization is the absolute best predictor of that organization's ability to be successful in terms of its culture, to develop leaders, and to meet its mission.

We fail the minute we let someone else define success for us.

Now, I can ask myself if taking something on moves me closer to what brings me joy and meaning. This alone is a revolutionary act.