

SUMMARY

DARE TO LEAD

BRENÉ BROWN



Summary of “Dare to Lead” by Brené Brown

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Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.

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Introduction

When interviewing leaders for her book, author Brené Brown asked what it is that leaders need to be successful in a complex, rapidly changing environment. While the responses varied, there was one answer that came up time and time again: “We need braver leaders and more courageous cultures.” However, when Brown asked these leaders what courage and brave leadership looked like, they seemed to agree that courage is something you have or you don’t. Additionally, they easily identified problematic behaviors and cultural norms that corrode trust and courage. The first problematic behavior is that we avoid tough conversations, including giving honest, productive feedback. Some leaders attribute this behavior to a lack of courage, others to a lack of skills, and more than half discussed a cultural norm of “nice and polite” that is used as an excuse to avoid tough conversations. As a result, there is a lack of clarity which diminishes trust and engagement and fosters passive-aggressive behavior, like talking behind people’s back. While this may be a cultural concern in many workplaces and organizations, deep down the cause of this lack of courage stems from deeply-rooted human issues.

Thanks to the research completed by Brown and her team, they stumbled upon a very clear, very hopeful finding of courage: Courage is a collection of four skill sets that can be taught, observed, and measured. They are: Rumbling with vulnerability, living into our values, braving trust, and learning to rise. Throughout *Dare to Lead*, you’ll learn about the foundational skills of courage-building that you need to become a daring leader. You’ll then be provided with the tools, practices, and behaviors that are critical for building muscle memory for living these concepts. In the end, you’ll have everything you need to become the bravest leader you can be.

Lean Into Vulnerability

What is vulnerability? Author Brené Brown has spent the past two decades learning about vulnerability, she believes that vulnerability is not about winning or losing, but simply having the courage to show up when you can't control the outcome. So what does vulnerability look like? It's the first date after a divorce, it's talking about race to your team, it's trying to get pregnant after a miscarriage, starting a business, watching a child leave for college, apologizing to a colleague, getting feedback, getting fired, firing someone. As you may have guessed, vulnerable experiences are far from easy. They make us feel anxious, scared, and uncertain.

We have all felt vulnerability at some point, yet there are still many damaging myths surrounding vulnerability, the first is that it is a weakness. We indeed feel vulnerable when we experience times of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. But when standing in front of brave soldiers in 2014, Brené Brown asked them to provide a single example of courage that they have witnessed or experienced that didn't require vulnerability. As it turns out, not one soldier could think of a single act of courage that didn't require managing massive vulnerability. In other words, vulnerability requires courage, not weakness.

Vulnerability isn't only associated with hard emotions like courage, but all emotions. In fact, "To feel is to be vulnerable. Believing that vulnerability is weakness is believing that feeling is weakness." The truth is, we are emotional beings and vulnerability is the birthplace of some of the greatest emotions humans can experience, like love, belonging, and joy. Furthermore, without vulnerability, there is no creativity or innovation. But why? Well, there is nothing more uncertain than the creative process, and there is absolutely no innovation without failure.

As comedian Amy Poehler states, "It's very hard to have ideas. It's very hard to put yourself out there, it's very hard to be vulnerable, but those people who do that are the dreamers, the thinkers, and the creators. They are the

magic people of the world.” Lastly, it is our ability to change, to have hard conversations, to give tough feedback, and resilience that are foundational skills that make-up daring leadership, all of which are born of vulnerability.

Daring Leaders Provide Tough, Honest Feedback

It was in the earliest days of building her company that author Brené Brown experienced one of her first hard truths. She found herself sitting at a table with her team after they asked to meet for an hour, she had a sinking feeling that she was about to hear criticisms and everything she was doing wrong. Her CFO began with, “We need to rumble with you on a growing concern about how we’re working together.” Stunned, Brown listened as Charles explained how Brown was not good at estimating time. She consistently set unrealistic timelines for deadlines that her employees struggled to meet, leading to burnt-out employees.

While it was hard to hear the criticism, Brown was thankful for the clarity and the feedback. Why? Well, it is kind to be clear and unkind to be unclear. When we feed people half-truths or bullshit to make them feel better, we are more often than not making ourselves feel more comfortable, both of which are unkind. Furthermore, not getting clear with a colleague about your expectations because it feels too hard, yet holding them accountable or blaming them for not delivering is unkind. For instance, Brown’s colleagues expressed how frustrating and demoralizing it was for Brown to continue pitching ideas and timelines that were completely unrealistic, and then have Brown look at them as if they were crushing her dreams when they were honest about the timeline and cost. It is much kinder to be clear and honest.

Additionally, one of the most important learnings that Brown has learned is that “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.” For instance, you may find yourself addressing an employee about the same issue over and over again. Typically, you might make up a story about the person’s behavior as being difficult or perhaps tell yourself that he is just testing you. The problem, however, is that you haven’t dug deep enough. You haven’t had a hard

enough conversation. Here is where Brown suggests that you simply stop talking.

That's right. Stop talking and listen. Really listen. Don't formulate a response while they're talking and don't try to make them get to their point faster. Simply listen and keep a lot of space in the conversation. Another important thing is to stop taking responsibility for their emotions. Others are allowed to feel pissed, sad, surprised, or elated, but boundaries must be set. For example, being angry is okay but yelling is not. Being frustrated is okay but interrupting people and rolling your eyes is not. Emotions and different opinions are okay but passive-aggressive comments are not. Lastly, it's okay to take a time-out. When a meeting becomes unproductive, call a time-out and give everyone ten minutes to walk around or catch their breath

Core Values Act as a North Star and Guide You Through Life's Decisions

The workplace can often feel like an arena, a place where we're trying to be really brave can also become confusing and overwhelming with noises, distractions, and cynics in the stands. The battle can bring out the worst in us, and when the cynics become too loud, we might be tempted to just exit the arena. In these moments, we put other voices in front of our own, and we forget what made us go into the arena in the first place. Most importantly, we forget our values.

If you think about it, it is often our values that lead us into the arena - we are willing to do something uncomfortable and daring because of our beliefs. So when we get into the arena and things don't go as planned, we need our values to remind us why we went in, especially when we are facedown in the dirt covered in sweat and blood. For daring leaders, their values become a North Star that guides them in times of darkness. They live into their values and are clear about what they believe and hold important. As a result, they take care that their intentions, words, thoughts, and behaviors align with those beliefs.

So what is your North Star? What values do you hold most sacred? You can't stay aligned with values if you don't take the time to identify and name them. Oftentimes when people are faced with this question, they ask, "Should I identify my personal or professional values?" Well, here's the thing: we have only one set of values. Values shouldn't shift based on context. You should then begin by making a list of values that you hold important. This may be difficult, as many people want to pick somewhere between ten and fifteen. You can certainly identify fifteen, but you must then narrow your core values down to two. But why just two? Well, if you have a long list of values that you find important, then none are truly guiding your behavior. As a result, those values become a list of words that hold no true meaning.

For Brené Brown, her two central values are faith and courage. Of course, her family is important to her as well, so why doesn't she choose family as a core value? She realized that while her family is the most important thing in her life, her commitment to them is fueled by her faith and courage. For example, when she turns down an exciting work opportunity for time with her family, she is leaning into her courage and faith. So choose one or two values, hold them close and use them to help you find your way in the dark.

Use the BRAVING Inventory to Establish Trust

Oftentimes, we feel the most vulnerable when our trustworthiness is being questioned. It's almost if we transform immediately, we engage our shields, put our armor up, and close our hearts. Once we're in lockdown mode, we struggle to process anything that is being said because our limbic system has been hijacked, forcing us into an emotional survival mode. And while most of us believe that we are trustworthy, we only trust a handful of our colleagues. Something doesn't quite add up.

Well, according to Charles Feltman, trust is defined as "choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person's actions." Therefore, distrust is deciding that "what is important to me is not safe with this person in this situation (or any situation)." With these definitions, it's quite easy to see why we go into survival mode when the topic of trust comes up. Trust is hard to talk about, but it's one of the most important values that any organization can uphold; it is the glue that holds teams and organizations together. So before we can begin to build trust within an organization, we must first determine what the concept of trust means.

To help define trust, Brené Brown has created an acronym - BRAVING - for the seven behaviors that encourage trust, and it can become a useful way to take inventory of various strengths and weaknesses within a working relationship. The B stands for boundaries. This means respecting one another's boundaries, and asking questions when you are unclear about what's okay and not okay. Boundaries also mean you are willing to say no. The R stands for reliability or doing what you say you'll do. This means staying aware of your competencies and limitations so that you don't overpromise and can deliver on commitments.

The A stands for accountability, which means owning your mistakes, apologizing, and making amends. Next, the V stands for vault. Think of your mind as vault of information that other people have shared with you,

you shouldn't share that information or experiences that are not yours to share. Confidences need to be kept, and that means avoiding sharing information about other people that should be confidential. The I stands for integrity, in which you choose courage over comfort. You choose what is right over what is fun, fast, or easy. And you choose to practice your values rather than simply talking about them.

The N stands for non-judgment, which means you can ask for what you need and talk to one another about how you feel without judgment. Finally, the G stands for generosity, in which you are consistently generous in your interpretation of the intentions, words, and actions of others. By putting the BRAVING inventory into practice, you can become a daring leader who is both courageous and trustworthy.

Learn How to Fail

When you go skydiving, you spend a lot of time learning how to hit the ground. By jumping off a ladder, you learn how to prepare for the hard landing to avoid breaking limbs, serious injuries, etc. The same is true in leadership - you can't expect people to be brave and risk failure without being prepared for the hard landings! This means daring leaders must learn how to be resilient.

Brené Brown found some unexpected findings in her leadership research about the timing of teaching the skills needed for resilience. Oftentimes, leaders and executive coaches gather people together and try to teach resilience *after* there's been a setback or failure. This is similar to teaching first-time skydivers how to land after they hit the ground. Or worse, as they're free-falling. In other words, when it comes to teaching leaders resilience skills, timing is crucial. In fact, teaching these skills upfront is key to building daring, courageous leaders.

When you teach falling and failing up front, people learn better how to get up once they're already on the ground. As a result, they will be more prepared to get back up and become more willing to take courageous risks. It's essentially telling leaders, "We expect you to be brave. That means you should expect to fall. We've got a plan." So when companies fail to teach resilience skills in their organization, they are essentially deterring people from becoming brave leaders. And with millennials making up 35 percent of the American labor force (the largest represented generation), teaching people how to embrace failure as a learning opportunity is even more important.

Oftentimes, millennials haven't learned how to have hard conversations, they rely on technology to have those tough confrontations, which is why Brown's company makes it a priority to teach failing and resilience skills immediately. Almost every millennial who goes through the Daring Leadership program says something along the lines of "I never learned how

to have these kinds of conversations. I never learned about emotions or how to talk so openly about failure, and I've never seen it modeled. When you're used to using technology for everything, these hard face-to-face conversations are awkward and so intense." It is the job of the company to normalize failure, broaden perspectives, and foster bravery among its employees.

The Myth of Perfectionism Prevents us From Learning to Rise

From a young age, we often avoid feelings of hurt and disappointment, so we turn to certain behaviors that build a wall around us to protect us from the scary world. But if we want to be daring, courageous leaders, we must become vulnerable and tear down these walls. Breaking barriers means recognizing thoughts and behaviors within ourselves that we use as defense mechanisms and identifying behaviors that we may not realize are causing us harm in the first place. In the first chapter, we talked about the myths of vulnerability. Now, it's time to discuss the mythology surrounding perfectionism.

One of the biggest myths surrounding perfectionism is the myth that perfectionism is about striving for excellence. In reality, perfectionism is not about healthy achievement and growth; instead, it is a defensive move. Furthermore, it is not about self-improvement. Perfectionism is, at its core, about trying to earn approval. Most perfectionists grew up being praised for achievement and performance, like grades, manners, people-pleasing, sports, etc. But somewhere along the way, they adopted a dangerous belief system: *I am what I accomplish and how well I accomplish it.*

A healthy strive for excellence happens when we are focused on ourselves and ask questions, like *how can I improve?* Perfectionism, on the other hand, is focused on pleasing others and these people ask *what will people think?* Furthermore, research shows that perfectionism is correlated with depression, anxiety, addiction, and life paralysis, or missed opportunities. The fear of failing, making mistakes, not meeting people's expectations, or even being criticized keeps these people out of the arena - a place we need to be to grow and engage in healthy competition, a place where striving for greatness can truly occur.

Perfectionism is a self-destructive and addictive belief system. This is because perfection doesn't exist, it's an unattainable goal that many people

find themselves striving for. It's about perception rather than internal motivation, and there is no way to control perception, no matter how much we try. Perfectionism is addictive because when we do feel those vulnerable feelings like shame, judgment, and blame, we often make the excuse of, "I just wasn't perfect enough." We don't question the faulty logic of perfectionism; instead, we become more fixed in our quest to do everything perfectly. In the end, a daring leader takes off the armor of perfectionism and understands that failure will happen and mistakes will be made. And in understanding this, they develop the courage they need to become a successful, daring leader.

Final Summary

In today's world, leaders are becoming less courageous and less authentic. As a result, Brené Brown feels that the world needs a revolution. We need to take off our armor, rumble with vulnerability, live into our values, trust with open hearts, and learn to rise so we can reclaim authorship of our own stories and lives. Essentially, Brown believes that becoming courageous is a rebellion. This is because courage requires us to dismiss everything we think we know about leadership and understand that when we choose to become a daring leader, we are choosing to start a revolution - one in which we choose authenticity, vulnerability, and courage.



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