



## Dare to Lead

Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.

Brené Brown | Random House, 2018

In this inspiring and useful text, vulnerability researcher and TED superstar Brené Brown supplements her *New York Times* bestsellers, *Daring Greatly* and *Rising Strong*, with new research, personal experiences, case studies and data from interviews with top leaders. Though in some ways this repackages some of her earlier ideas aimed at the business market, Brown issues a fresh call to lead bravely and foster courageous workplace cultures. She explains that, in contrast to “armored” leaders who act from a stance of self-protection and self-interest, daring leadership comes from a place of courage and confidence.

Brown remains a champion of compassion. She offers practical guidelines and a process for applying the lessons of her previous books to your leadership practice. Her process can be arduous: You must commit to looking deeply within yourself and initiating tough conversations with your colleagues. The good news is that you can learn the specific skills and behaviors of daring leadership at any point in your career. If you have read Brown’s earlier works closely, you might find some of what you she teaches here is redundant. On the other hand, new times demand new models of leadership and Brown’s advice on personal growth is always welcome.

### Review

#### “What Stands in the Way?”

A common misconception is that courage and fear are mutually exclusive. With her typical compassion and insight, Brown reminds you that most people feel scared even while they act courageously. Acting when the outcome is uncertain or the odds are against you takes bravery. Brown excels at reminding you that the internal contradictions you may wish you could disavow are in fact fundamental to human nature and no source of shame.

When researchers asked senior leaders what stands in the way of great leadership, they identified the lack of brave leaders and courageous cultures. Brown calls out leadership and organizational behaviors that thwart productivity, innovation and advancement. They include avoiding tough conversations, spending too much time managing problems instead of working proactively, avoiding risk, and failing to build relationships or show empathy. Problems include shaming and blaming, setting corporate values that are aspirational rather than practical, and being reluctant to address diversity and inclusion.

## **Vulnerability**

The way leaders deal with fear, Brown asserts, is the barrier or gateway to courageous behavior. This is familiar territory for Brown. Shedding armor by eliminating self-protective thoughts and behaviors and practicing self-compassion help you respond constructively to fear. Organizational leaders should create a culture that makes people feel safe, appreciated and respected, thus enabling them to act bravely. Brown reminds leaders that deciding to be courageous and take risks includes assuming that failure and pain are part of the process. Stepping into the arena and taking on a challenge when the outcome is uncertain exemplifies vulnerability – not a weakness, but a show of strength.

Brown is adamant that no one should listen to the opinions of people who've never stepped into the arena. Choose a few individuals whose feedback you value and respect. Seek those who will celebrate your successes, call you out when you behave poorly and support you through setbacks.

Some people deny their own vulnerability. They retreat into protective behaviors, such as acting out or erecting emotional barriers. Brown reminds readers that the belief that you can “go it alone” is a myth. Connecting with others is a basic human need. People derive strength from communicating and collaborating. Trust and vulnerability grow together and strengthen over time. Vulnerability does not require full disclosure or oversharing. Brave leaders' candor about their struggles with work situations gives others permission to be honest about their feelings. Leaders are vulnerable within the context of leadership, but they can set boundaries about what is and isn't appropriate to share.

Brown lists the four courage-building skills employees and their organizations need to “lead through discomfort.” They are:

### **1. “Rumbling with Vulnerability”**

A rumble is a structured dialogue that brings vulnerability out into the open in order to identify and solve problems. Brown illustrates the use of a rumble by offering up her own mistakes as examples to be avoided. In the early days of her company, her team asked for a “rumble.” Charles, the CFO, pointed out that Brown continually set unrealistic timelines which created stress for her employees. The message wasn't easy for Brown to hear, but she appreciated Charles's honesty. She

asked her team members to tell her how the tight deadlines affected them. She thanked them for their input and promised to “circle back” the next day. Circling back gives people time to process a tough conversation.

Brown describes how the rumble forced her to face her propensity to set unreasonable timelines out of her fear that her company would miss an opportunity or fall behind the competition. She recognized that she instituted some deadlines to fit in with outside responsibilities, information she failed to share with the team. The team circled back by filling out permission slips giving Brown written permission to feel and act a certain way in the meeting. The team shared the slips and discussed Brown’s feelings surrounding timelines.

They identified four “key learnings.” The rumble yielded a process for time estimation and project management called “Turn & Learn.” Rumbling with vulnerability requires “grounded confidence.” It takes time and practice to gain the emotional strength, self-awareness and confidence to rumble effectively. Curiosity fuels that kind of grounded confidence. Curiosity helps you remain open to new ideas and experiences. Brown lives out her own advice. She admits her mistakes, describes how they affected others and shows how she stood up to the consequences. Her own consistent courage makes her advice all the more valuable.

### **“Armored Leadership” Versus “Daring Leadership”**

Brown asserts that leaders who don’t shed the armor of self-protection spend their energies managing unproductive behavior. Wholeheartedness means integrating the different aspects of yourself and the roles you take on, so you recognize and accept your entire persona. Without institutional wholeheartedness, it’s impossible to show vulnerability or lead with courage. Those deficits will stifle trust, creativity and personal responsibility.

Brown identifies the enemy of wholeheartedness as ego, which craves validation and attention. When something threatens your ego and sense of self-worth, you feel that horrible emotion, shame. You put on armor and lock down your emotions to protect your ego. Shedding the armor and leading with your heart is essential to daring leadership. Recognizing and coping with shame – and replacing it with fortitude – is, of course, Brown’s best-selling calling card and *metiér*.

She cites the characteristics of armored leadership as: perfectionism and fear of failure, withholding recognition, and numbing emotions with escapist activities such as immersion in social media, shopping, video games or alcohol. Other traits are a win/lose mind-set, the need to be right, cynicism, criticism and the exploitation of power. Armored leaders exercise top-down control, manipulate uncertainty, demand a 24/7 work ethic, tolerate discrimination and exclusion, and avoid tough conversations and situations.

In contrast, she says, daring leadership includes striving for excellence rather than demanding perfection, recognizing and celebrating accomplishments, and developing strategies to manage

anxiety and renew the spirit. Daring leaders admit what they don't know, and practice kindness and empathy. Team members understand how their contributions add value and move the company's mission forward. Daring leaders recognize the importance of personal time and renewal.

## **Shame and Empathy**

As Brown pointed out in the TED talk that made her brand, shame is a universal human emotion, but it's often a taboo subject. Shame is the feeling that "you are bad." People often believe they deserve to feel shame, that they earned it for some reason. When shame proliferates in organizations, the results include "favoritism, discrimination, blaming, gossiping and cover-ups."

Brown cites, as she has in earlier books, the antidotes to shame: empathy and self-care. As Brown's career demonstrates, talking about shame reduces its power, and fosters connection and trust. Understanding what triggers your shame, sharing your experience and switching to a "big-picture" context builds resilience against shame. Empathy is relating to the emotions that underlie an experience. It requires vulnerability. When you connect with those feelings on behalf of other people, you must recognize them in yourself. To gain empathy, embrace "perspective taking." You view every situation through your own unique experience, biases and upbringing. Strive "to be nonjudgmental." Often, you judge others when their feelings trigger your sense of shame or vulnerability. Judgment has no place in empathy. Understand another person's feelings, and communicate that you identify with him or her.

## **2. "Living into Our Values"**

Living your values means aligning every aspect of your behavior with your beliefs. Many leadership books offer this advice. But Brown strives to live her values and monitor her behavior to ensure she always does. Again, that makes it easier to accept and apply Brown's guidance. She suggests that you identify the two values that most define your belief system. When you name only two core values, they become a behavioral North Star rather than aspirational but empty words. With your core values as a positive guide, you can choose what's right over what's expedient.

Translate your values into three or four primary behaviors. Think about times you acted contrary to your beliefs, and how it felt. Did you keep silent when you should have spoken, or act counter to your values so someone would like you? Living into your values is not easy, and life will test you. During these "arena moments," when you try hard but still make mistakes, embrace empathy and "self-compassion." Brave leadership is challenging, and you need valued supporters when the going gets tough. Brave leaders don't have all the answers, but they're courageous and curious enough to stride into the arena.

Receiving feedback is essential for your growth and development. Feedback can be hard to take, particularly if the giver lacks skill in offering it. Find something of value in it, even if you

don't agree with every aspect. Focus on the purpose of feedback, which is to help you master a skill.

Brown urges compassion and curiosity when giving feedback. For example, identify an issue an employee is facing, and ask questions such as, "Here's what I'm seeing. Can you help me understand?" Acknowledge what people do well, and discuss how to apply their strengths to the current situation. Shame, blame and criticism have no place in constructive feedback. Believe that people do the best they can.

### 3. "Braving Trust"

Most people believe in their own trustworthiness, and distrust everybody else. Implying someone is unreliable is an affront to that person's self-perception; he or she will immediately become defensive. That undermines the trust that holds organizations together. Mastering the skills to talk openly about trust is essential. Brown is skilled at creating acronyms. While the contents of this acronym are useful, the construction seems forced, but it may function better in corporate presentations. The acronym "BRAVING" represents seven behaviors that combine to build trust:

- **"Boundaries"** – Set clear boundaries and respect other people's limits.
- **"Reliability"** – Follow through on promises and commitments.
- **"Accountability"** – Acknowledge your mistakes, apologize and, if possible, remedy the situation.
- **"Vault"** – Keep confidences, as if you're placing them inside a vault.
- **"Integrity"** – Choose what's right over the easy way out. Converting values into behaviors is integrity in action.
- **Being "nonjudgmental"** – When people compare themselves to others and find the other person lacking, they're quick to judge. Parenting is filled with judgment because insecure moms and dads use it to boost their confidence. People fear the judgment of others when they need help. Asking for what you need is a strength, not a weakness.
- **"Generosity"** – Give others the benefit of the doubt. Before you trust other people without reservation, practice trusting yourself. Instead of beating yourself up over your mistakes and failures, hold yourself accountable where you fell short, and practice self-generosity in areas that need improvement.

### 4. "Learning to Rise"

Teaching resilience after a failure is like showing novice skydivers how to land once they're on the ground. Brown says that gaining skills in rising up enables people to take risks and jump into the vast unknown. Learning to rise is a three-part process: "the reckoning, the rumble and the revolution." People are emotional beings. When you react emotionally to something, move forward by becoming curious about what you feel and why. Tune in to your mind and body's reactions, such as an increased heartbeat, a dry mouth or ruminating thoughts.

Brown understands emotional processes well. She describes how people “offload” emotions onto others instead of reckoning with their feelings. They tamp down their emotional reactions until one small comment or action sparks an out-of-proportion outburst. Or, they get angry, place blame and make excuses. Calming breathing helps you gain perspective and quiet your emotional reactions. Breathe in deeply through your nose, hold the breath for four seconds, exhale and hold the exhale for four seconds. During the breathing exercise, question if the information you have supports your response. People fill in informational blanks with stories to make sense of what’s happening and to protect the ego.

### A Ham Sandwich

Your fears and insecurities form a weak first draft of what’s going on, and although it may be emotionally satisfying, it’s inaccurate. For example, your husband opens the refrigerator and sighs, “No ham.” You immediately think, “He doesn’t think I’m a good wife or mother because there’s never any food in the house.” By rumbling with your first reaction, you bring it into the open and take away its power. You might say to your partner, “The story I’m telling myself is that you think I’ve failed as a wife and mother because I didn’t get to the grocery store.” He might reply, “Nope! I was just in the mood for a ham sandwich.” Brown finds interpersonal hot spots and shows how to recognize wrong-headed instant responses, how to suppress them and how to believe in the person you are speaking with.

### A Familiar, Worthy Voice

Brown excels at reminding you that the internal contradictions you may wish you could disavow are in fact fundamental to human nature and are not a source of shame. She creates new terminology and, as always, it seems familiar and apt on first reading. Brown’s followers will get more of what they love from this business manual, even though much will be familiar from previous readings. Brown aims these pages at leaders of organizations, small businesses and teams who want to get to the heart of brave leadership.

Her previous books did not set out to reach these particular targets, though they offered many applicable lessons. Here Brown’s advice seems hard-won and entirely personal, but applicable to almost any work situation. This is her singular gift. Therefore, this book seems to be an excellent starting place for any leader or would-be leader who is unfamiliar with Brown’s work. She covers all her usual touchstones and adds guidance that is specific to business.

### About the Author

Vulnerability researcher and professor at the University of Houston **Brené Brown** is the author of four *New York Times* bestsellers, including *Braving the Wilderness*, *Rising Strong* and *Daring Greatly*.

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