

Conquering Institutional Fear: Standing Up For Ourselves And Others

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Human feelings and thoughts – though they originate in the brain – have a strong connection to our bodies. Philosophers have argued this for years and more recently neuroscience has shown that emotions and thoughts infuse both the mind and the body. While thinking negative thoughts or feeling negative emotions can often raise our blood pressure, thinking positive thoughts and feeling positive emotions can often strengthen our immune systems. In other words, whether we remain conscious of this fact or not, our minds and emotions are “embodied” and have an impact on how we show up.

This is one of the primary reasons why today's leaders are really struggling to bring forward their best in the workplace.

In the past several hundred years, extraordinary developments have taken place with our global economies calling on new demands for modern and advanced organizational interventions. Though some decision makers understand this and try to invest in advancing organizational capabilities (through inside-out interventions), majority look over the fact that today's leaders are really challenged for their inner sources due to the dense impact of globalization, digitalization and democratization in their lives.

In my previous article "[Everyday Abundance: Why We Must Invest In Finding Purpose](#)", I started introducing eight core human attributes that are key for future leaders' to embrace. These attributes are drawn from a two-year study with [Stanford University's CCARE](#), trying to reconnect leadership to its original terms, helping leaders become more of a guide, educator, reflector inside their communities. In this study, we specifically looked to understand what knowledge, mindset and behaviors are at play for driving sustainable transformative change and the kind of inside-out interventions may be necessary for 21st-century leaders to develop better resilience and jump back from adversity.

The second attribute future leaders must consider investing in then is courage.

The word courage comes from Old French, original terms "corage" and from the Latin word "cor" meaning the heart. Many of us think of courage as an absence of fear or discomfort. In reality, demonstrating courage is about taking action despite the feeling of fear or discomfort.

In scientific terms, courage is best related to our willingness to be vulnerable against uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure. There is an emotion and an action there because recognize, without action, a value (any value) becomes just an aspiration rather than a way of "being."

From a practical perspective, courage embodies a sense of vulnerability. It helps us overcome intimidation. By trusting our life task (purpose) and values and by making choices that are aligned to those, we become available to override of the narrative of terror. Not to mention, when we remain connected to our heart, every act we take feeds into our self-trust and respect, helping us move more freely and therefore, allowing self the possibility of growth.

At an individual level, being a good leader is all about leaning in. Leaning into the discomfort of ambiguity and uncertainty, leaning into fear of not knowing and holding an empathetic space so people can find their own way and flourish. From the view of science, courage is defined as an intentional choice that engages us in something that may involve risk in search/pursuit of a noble or a worthy end. Again, it requests a willingness from our side.

[Brene Brown](#) is one of the scientists who study fear extensively. Her original research paper is based on shame resilience theory, which demonstrates that at the heart of many forms of inaction is a shame of feeling unworthy or not belonging to a group that

matters to us – whether that is family or work or other kinds of social groups. She shows there is an intense feeling of pain that can get in our way of acting with courage – particularly when we respond to that feeling of shame and unworthiness with a sense of being trapped, alone and silenced.

This is also why it is at times too easy to overstate the fear and nobility in courage. When we study courage in organizational life, we find people often feel a risk associated with standing out or even going “against the tide.” When they make it clear that they are leaning in because they believe in something larger that is for the good of the whole, their action holds a moral standing.

It is important to note there are huge myths in the workplace getting in our way of acting a particular way. For example, being vulnerable is often equated to being “weak” by leaders. Some people say they don’t do vulnerability even though the impacts (of disconnecting from self) are still valid.

It is hard for any one of us to propose a new idea or challenge the status quo, yet we can train ourselves to believe any experience is there to provide us with an opportunity to learn.

In our research, we have been able to validate the impact of exercising and not exercising courage in an organizational setting. Specifically, we found out in environments, where leaders are reportedly acting more courageously – meaning they are behaving in concurrence with their purpose and values a majority of the time and employees know where to stand and which principles to obey by, we found organizations were more likely to experience a climate of psychological safety as a whole.

On the flip side, we have been able to validate the existence of certain mindsets and behaviors go actively against the exercise of courage bringing adverse impact onto the overall organization.

For example, cultures that hold a mindset of scarcity is one. The word "scarce" once again comes from the Old French word "scars" meaning “restricted in quantity.” We found in environments, where there is a predominant mindset of scarcity in leading, meaning people operate with the mindset of "zero-sum" and act as if there is not enough safety, love, acceptance, money or other resources available, we found organizations had a harder time experiencing safety. Instead, we found employees rather feel restricted, insecure and ultimately disengaged in their experience.

Similarly, we found in environments, where there is a culture of perfectionism, employees struggle to show up with their true sense of self. In these environments, there was by in large appraisal by comparison. This specific state of "being," where the bar kept being moved up higher seemed to trigger something related to shame in people’s minds, where employees start to believe no matter what or how they contribute, they will likely receive criticism. They seem to grow a feeling of not being good enough, not

capable enough, not accepted enough. Needless to say, this sort of 'not good enough' mindset, when prolonged exhausts people's inner sources and crushes one's ability to demonstrate appropriate levels of vulnerability, again, impacting their well-being.

If *purpose* is related to knowing our make-up, we need to remember *courage* is about staying true to the heart. To be courageous, we need to lead from within and a place of trust. Otherwise, when we are leading from a place of self-protection, it becomes unfair to turn to others for courage because we are modeling comfort in the first place.

It is important to note also that implementing policies after the damage is done doesn't cure people's feelings, nor it shifts their state of mind for the future. We may actually serve each other better by asking what kind of cultures we want to create, agree on operating values and principles to then make everyday decisions based on what's agreed upon instead.

Finally, it would do us well to understand having healthier relationships – holding space for self and another to show up with negative feelings such as shame and unworthiness is not to get rid of the emotion, but rather to respond to them differently. Reaching out, connecting to others, finding ways to discuss what is happening and building a shared context of support are all healthier ways of responding to negative emotions.

Let us no longer turn an eye on the fact that living and working in trust-based environments have a profound impact on our longevity and wellbeing. According to [Paul Zak's research on the neuroscience of trust](#), compared with low-trust companies, people at high-trust companies report 74% less stress, 106% more energy and 76% more engagement at work and 29% more satisfaction in their lives, too.

If we are honest about the institutionalization of courage, then, we each need to start by modeling it - trying, failing and rebounding together.