

# Demystifying Courageous Leadership

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“The best way to predict the future is to create it.”

— Abraham Lincoln

Welcome to the era of distortion. Not disruption, not transformation—this is the era of distortion.

Many of today's leaders have their business philosophy grounded in Michael Porter's Five Forces. And what a clear construct it is, focusing on competition, customers, and suppliers. But today, everything is not so clear, and market forces are increasingly impossible to predict. Today, you don't know who your new customer is; your supplier is actually your “frenemy” (because you're in an ecosystem); and your competition, well, is best seen through a periscope. Nothing looks or acts as it used to. And because of this, yesterday's playbook no longer applies.

These changes, of course, have huge implications for CEO leadership. How do CEOs lead effectively, with no reliable blueprint, through an unrecognizable landscape? Where do they begin? How do they project growth? Moreover, how can today's CEOs take the transformative leaps required of them, when everything feels so uprooted and ephemeral? There are many answers, but one stands out: This is courage.

We can appoint leaders who can prepare and deliver impressive P&Ls, or have led through massive M&As, survived activist investors, and even advanced across

several prominent sectors. But today's chief executives (and other top leaders) need to move beyond past experience and seasoned skill sets into the high levels of adaptability and openness necessary to advance the transformative agendas their organizations will require. It is by cultivating courageous leadership that they can reach those levels. Courageous leaders are ultimately the ones who can motivate their employees around a shared purpose, inspire their customers, and bring their companies to international recognition (on top of reaching shareholder goals). Conversely, businesses led without courage visibly suffer. The results can be seen in several key areas: R&D programs, product pipelines, emerging market development, and, ultimately, employee retention.

Courage is “the defining characteristic” of great leaders today, according to Bill George, the former CEO of Medtronic and renowned thought leader and Harvard professor. In his work with more than 200 CEOs of major companies, the “best ones,” George writes, have found “the courage to make bold moves that transform their businesses.” His list includes Paul Polman, Mary Barra, Indra Nooyi, Howard Schultz, Dan Vasella, Jeff Bezos, Jack Ma, and many more. All made courageous decisions to advance great companies. They all learned to lead with

their principles—what George calls their “True North”—and to not veer from this, especially in the face of complicated circumstances.

To be clear: By “courage,” we are not suggesting raw bravado or macho prowess. The courage that is needed today to drive performance and lead through transformation is not forcefully or materially derived. Instead, it comes from a place of consciousness and self-awareness that leaders need to rely on, especially when daring into the unknown—into the distortion. Courage is, in fact, defined as “mental and moral strength” called up to face and confront “danger, fear or difficulty.” The word actually derives from the Latin: *cor* and the French: *coeur*, which mean heart. Indeed, courage conveys something deeply and innately human. It is in us. It just needs to be brought out, awakened, and strengthened (especially in the presence of fear and adversity).

Coming to courageous leadership depends upon practice—it is the building up of small moments of courage, toning the cognitive and emotional muscles of boldness and decisiveness. Although courage lies within us all, it is commonly hidden under all the other practices and habits we have accrued along the way. It is strengthened over time with the affirmation of *yeses* and the mounting resolve of necessary *nos*. Above all, courage in leadership involves learning to transcend fear and to fight complacency and move forward. Courage is not the absence of fear. Courageous leaders forge ahead, well aware that their fear is in tow—usually toward several possible outcomes, some highly undesirable. It is really this last point—making those decisions that are “edgy enough to be potentially wrong”—that Jennifer Garvey Berger, CEO of Cultivating Leadership and a prolific authority on leading in complexity, has singled out as the “most difficult sort of courage.” This is what is called for today: leaders willing to take these critical, defining risks to create and generate the opportunities that their companies depend upon.

So how do they get there? How can CEOs lead their organizations more courageously into action?

- **By modelling adaptive leadership:** The most courageously successful leaders today have accessed a level of consciousness and self-awareness that becomes the directional lighthouse of their leadership and the base of courageous action. As Berger has written, “courage needs to arise from the conviction that learning is one of the most vital things a complex adaptive leader should enable.” Leaders who move intentionally beyond the limits of fixed mindsets and encourage the same openness across their organizations arrive at the wise and creative solutions needed to enact effective action and change. Satya Nadella, for example, has notably instilled a growth mindset culture at Microsoft that has supported tremendous change and performance. “We can all have bold goals,” Nadella has explained. “But it is only going to happen, if we live our culture, if we teach our culture....It is about a dynamic learning culture.”
- **Refusing to wait for things to happen:** Leaders must step out of what Brené Brown calls “the defensive crouch” and decisively dare into the unknown. Brown has become a widely respected, sought-after expert on vulnerability and leadership. Her latest work draws attention to the key differences between what she calls “Armored” leadership, which is characterized by “becoming a knower” and “being right” versus “Daring” leadership, which she distinguishes as “being a learner” and “getting it right.” Armored leaders typically stick with the tried and true. When faced with challenges, they often zig-zag and avoid. Daring leaders, in Brown’s language, “brave the wilderness;” they talk straight and take action.
- **Instilling authenticity:** You can’t fake courageous leadership. Becoming an effectively courageous leader depends on a solid and tested foundation of truth and trust that binds stakeholders to the cause. Getting to that truth is hard work. Leaders prove themselves over and over again; they learn to admit when they don’t have all the answers, to ask for help, and to listen for solutions. They step out of confining

egos and learn how to humbly leverage their positions for the greater good and the larger self—for the service of others.

Courageous leaders see the risks and go in. They continue to do the necessary inner work; they practice to maintain and build the emotional stamina and consciousness to stay in and lead through the fires. Tellingly, this is where

the big wins and the real satisfaction come from. Because ultimately, daring to lead courageously, through today's distorted playing field, creates sustainable value across several planes—for the organization as a whole, for the employees, the customers, the leader, and sometimes for the world at large. These are the big outcomes. Cultivating courage is about engaging the whole leader to serve the whole business.

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