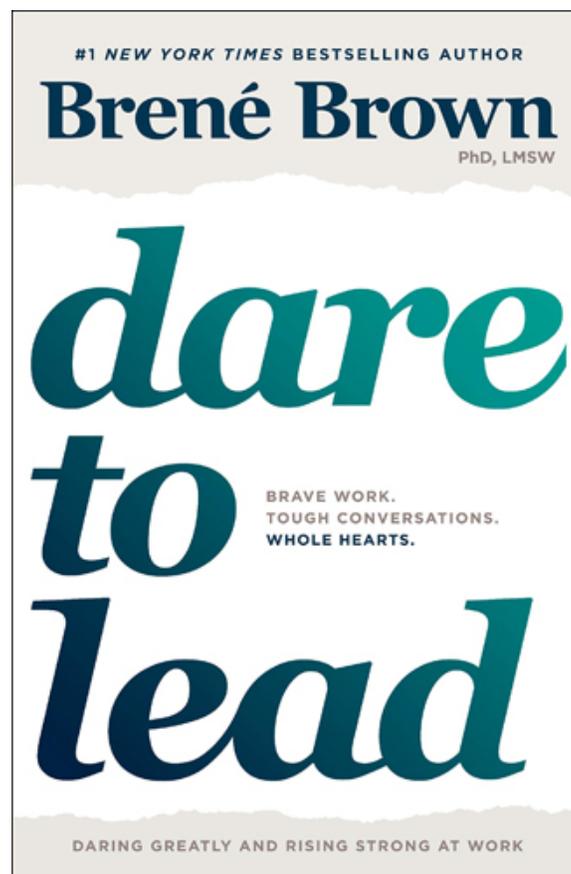# THE BUSINESS SOURCE

Dare to Lead

Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.

By Brené Brown

When the company, group or organization you belong to has a shortage – or possibly even a total absence – of courageous leaders, the damaging consequences are not hard to see.

When courageous leadership is absent, far too much of everyone's time and energy will be spent on assigning shame and blame, and not nearly enough will be invested in fostering accountability and learning. There will also be a noticeable shortage of employees who are willing to take smart risks, or share bold new ideas for meeting evolving customer needs.

None of this should come as a surprise. Because the simple fact is, when employees and managers are afraid of being put-down or ridiculed for trying something new, the best your company can expect from an innovation perspective is a steady dose of the status quo.

From corporations, to non-profits, to public sector

organizations, author and speaker Dr. Brené Brown believes we desperately need more leaders who are committed to courageous, wholehearted leadership, and who are self-aware enough to lead from a place of vulnerability, rather than from hurt, fear and disengagement.   Within far too many organizations, bold, daring leadership is desperately lacking, she says, and it's time we do something about it.

And who better than Brené Brown to tackle this larger-than-life human organizational challenge. The four-time #1 New York Times bestselling author has spent the past two decades studying the emotions and experiences that give meaning to our lives, and nearly ten years working with transformative leaders around the globe. No matter where she went, Brown found that leaders across all types of organizations ranging from tiny start-ups to Fortune 50 companies were asking themselves the same two fundamental questions:

- How can we cultivate braver, more daring leaders within our organization; and,

- How can we embed the value of courage in our culture?

Whether you find yourself at Pixar, the Gates Foundation, or the U.S. Air Force (and Brown has worked with all of these groups and more as part of the research for her latest book) these two fundamental questions surrounding leadership are practically screaming out for honest, practical and actionable answers. In *Dare to Lead*, Brown draws upon survey data and leading-edge research, grounded in everyday examples, to answer these two questions.

According to Brown, daring leadership emerges from three foundational skill-sets. The first stems from our willingness to "rumble with our vulnerability." Our potential to be daring leaders will never be greater than our capacity for

vulnerability, argues Brown. Once we expand our capacity for vulnerability, then and only then can we work on building the other two core skill sets – skill sets that Brown terms "Living our Values," and "Learning to Rise."   We will now take a look at each of the three skill sets in turn, beginning, as Brown does, with vulnerability.

Rumbling With Vulnerability

In *Daring Greatly*, Brené Brown wrote extensively about the myths surrounding vulnerability, with a clear and present goal to torpedo each and every one of them. We won't rehash all of those ideas here, but we should remind ourselves that the main idea Brown set out to establish was that a vulnerability is a strength, not a weakness. One would remember that at the time this was a rather groundbreaking claim.   Back then, Brown's thesis that "appropriate displays of vulnerability in the workplace can lead to greater strength and team

cohesion" met with its share of detractors. But now, six-plus years after the publication of *Daring Greatly*, it's fair to say that the jury is no longer out on this subject.

The evidence is clearly on Dr. Brown's side, and there's more coming every day. Google for example, recently completed a five-year study on how to establish and foster highly productive teams. Dubbed "Project Aristotle," this landmark study found that "psychological safety" (i.e. team members feeling safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of one another) was "far and away the most important of all the factors that set successful, high-performing teams apart from poor-performing ones."

Adaptability to change, willingness to engage in hard conversations and provide honest feedback, ethical decision-making, recognition and resilience – all clearly underpin high-performing cultures -

and they're all born of vulnerability.

Unfortunately, vulnerability doesn't always come easily, or naturally, and sometimes we have to work at it. Or, to borrow Brown's phraseology, we've got to be willing to "rumble" with it.

For Brown, the word *rumble* is more than just a charming *West Side Story* way to say, "Let's have a real conversation, even if it is tough." Rather, she embraces the word "rumble" as a serious statement of intention, and as a behavioral cue or reminder. For Brown, a rumble is a discussion, conversation, or meeting defined by a clear commitment to lean into vulnerability. It involves staying curious and generous and being willing to stick with the "messy middle" of problem identification, and emotional problem-solving. It means being fearless in owning-up to our shortcomings, and, as psychologist Harriet Lerner teaches, "To listen with the same passion with

which we want to be heard."

More than anything else, when Brown or someone else says, "Let's rumble," it should cue us to get ready for a tough conversation, and to come with an open heart and mind so that we can serve not only the work but also each other, as opposed to just supporting our egos.

Steer Clear of Shadow Comforts

Like many of us, Brown reports that she wasn't raised with all of the skills and emotional best practices needed to rumble with vulnerability. So, in her early adulthood, she resorted to what she refers to as "numbing." Common numbing practices include binge-watching stupid TV, consuming too much alcohol and eating too many sweets and fattening foods. Brown relates to all of these so-called "shadow comforts" (described as such because they might feel like real comforts in the moment, but in reality they cast a long shadow

over our lives). She confides that, for a period in her life, shadow comforts had a strong hold over her, and she basically became an "anything to take the edge off-aholic."

The problem, as Brown found out first-hand, is that we cannot selectively numb our emotions. "If we numb the dark, we also numb the light," she writes. In other words, if we constantly seek to take the edge off pain and discomfort, we are by default taking the edge off joy, love, belonging and a plethora of other emotions that give meaning to our lives.

Moreover, daring leaders need to model appropriate work-life boundaries for their teams by shutting off email at a reasonable time of the evening and focusing on themselves and their family. Don't celebrate people who work through the weekend, or who brag that they were tethered to their computers over the Christmas break.

Ultimately, that is unsustainable behavior, and has dangerous side-effects including burnout, depression, and anxiety. It also creates a culture of workaholic competitiveness that is detrimental for everyone and antithetic to people being authentic and vulnerable. As Brown eloquently reminds us, "The opposite of play is not work. The opposite of play is depression."

Fortunately, Brown's personal struggle with numbing has a happy ending. With the help and support of her family and a good therapist, plus a return to more spiritual practices in her life, she's been able to curb much of that behavior. Brown says that totally curbing comfort eating remains a difficult project for her, but she works hard on it every day. One of her most important self-care habits is her daily walking routine. One tangible thing she does to avoid numbing with food is to keep a Polaroid picture of her walking shoes taped to the fridge. The picture reminds

her to ask herself: "Am I actually hungry, or would a walk bring me more lasting comfort?" At work, Brown writes that leaders need to do a better job of helping their team members forego shadow comforts by implementing programs that encourage healthy eating and physical activity, as well as addiction support and counseling when it's needed.

Living Our Values

Daring leadership also flows from living our values, because when we're properly attuned to our values, it becomes much easier to make decisions, both large and small.

The first step of living your values is figuring out what is most important to you. What is your North Star? Do you aspire to be a good parent, above all else?   Are you passionate about improving and preserving the environment for future generations? Do you want to earn enough money so that you

can afford to retire comfortably at 50 years old and sail the world?

We can't live a life that is in alignment with our values when we haven't even bothered to think about, and name, what it is we care about most. That's why Brown includes a list of commonly-held core values in her book – roughly 100 values in all. The list isn't meant to be exhaustive; it's there to help us get our wheels turning. Brown's list includes meaning-rich words like: authenticity, health, independence, resourcefulness and risk-taking.

Brown invites us to select *one or two* values that resonate most (being hyper-selective matters here – the exercise falls flat if you choose too many core values). We're instructed to choose the ones that are most important and dear to us, that "help us find our way in the dark," as Brown puts it. Also, you should "resist latching onto words that

resemble something you've been coached to be," or something you think you should be, but you're really not. Those are someone else's core values, not yours.

The author's two core values – the two core tenets that speak most loudly to her both personally and professionally – are faith and courage. "My value of courage calls on me to stand up for my beliefs," explains Brown. "If you say something in front of me that I find racist, or sexist, or homophobic, even if other people are laughing I am not going to laugh. I am going to ask you to not say that kind of stuff around me. I don't do this out of self-righteousness; trust me, there are times when I'd rather just walk away to avoid confrontation. But I always stay and say something because courage is one of my core values, and for me to feel physically and spiritually okay, courage insists that I choose my voice over my comfort."

Having a strong sense of your core values makes you a more capable decision-maker, and a better leader. "As decision-makers, when our values aren't clear to us, we can easily become paralyzed. Or even worse, we can become too impulsive," writes Brown. "But when we learn to live our values, we're able to hit the 'sweet spot' of decision-making. We begin to reliably make decisions that are thoughtful and well-reasoned, as well as decisive and bold."

Melinda Gates, who shared some of her own daring leadership experiences with Brown says: "It is much easier to deal with conflicts when you are able to engage a team in a values-based conversation. People, and I include Bill and myself, can easily get attached to specific plans and tactics. But when you are forced to tie those tactics to values and explain them to others, you're better able to question your own assumptions and help others question theirs. We find that a

values-focus just leads to much more productive conversations – and a feeling of satisfaction of being heard, no matter what those conversations ultimately lead to."

Above all, living our values means that we do more than simply profess our values. We must practice them every day. We must walk the talk. We must be crystal clear about what we believe, and then take care that our intentions, words, and behaviors align with those beliefs.

Learning To Rise

"We have to do a better job of teaching people how to land before they jump," writes Brown. "When you go skydiving, you spend a lot of upfront time jumping off a ladder and learning how to hit the ground without hurting yourself. The same is true in leadership. We can't expect people to be brave and risk failure if they're not prepared for an occasional hard landing."

One of the most unexpected findings that emerged from her leadership research is the importance of timing when it comes to teaching skills for rising, or resilience. Too often, instructors and executive coaches gather people together and try to teach resilience skills *after* there's been a setback or failure. That's like teaching first time skydivers how to land *after* they've already hit the ground.

Brown's research shows that leaders who had resiliency training before a major failure occurred in their lives were more likely to stick with their courageous behaviors because they knew how to dust themselves off and get back up.   For Brown, this goes beyond mere sloganeering. "While the merits of failure as an inevitable part of the process of innovation have received a fair bit of attention in the last couple of years, I seldom see the clever slogans like 'fail-fast' put into practice along-side actual resiliency skills." She goes on to say that "Giving people slogans, without teaching

them concrete skills, is a half-assed attempt at normalizing failure that simply leaves people thinking: 'God this is painful, but I am not sure that I'm supposed to feel this way about failure, so I'd better keep my feelings a secret.'"

Moreover, Brown observes that resiliency skills are becoming more important than ever with so many Millennials entering the workforce. Today, with Millennials making up 35% of the American labor force, teaching people how to embrace failure as a learning opportunity is even more important. Brown has been in the university classroom for 20 years, and she has observed that the general resiliency of students has decreased markedly in recent years. Perhaps this is because we, as parents, are constantly intervening in our kids' lives, and helping them at every turn. Helicopter parenting is definitely not courage-building, she says.

Brown's patented Learning to Rise process is about getting up from falls, overcoming mistakes, and facing hurt in a way that brings more wisdom and wholeheartedness into our lives. It has three parts: the reckoning, the rumble, and the revolution.

Reckoning involves being more aware of, and curious about, our feelings and emotions. Many of us were raised to bury our emotions. When negative emotions bubble to the surface, we try to force them back down to the depths (which, over time can lead to anxiety and burn out), or even worse, we take them out on other people (which can permanently damage relationships and undermine credibility and trust). By contrast, daring leaders get curious about their emotions. When they sense they are feeling hurt, or angry or neglected, they take a deep breath or two and ask themselves: "Why am I feeling this way right now?"

Daring leaders allow their emotions to rise to the surface, but they don't become overwhelmed by them. Instead, they treat their negative emotions as something that legitimately needs to be reckoned with. That's when the rumble kicks in. The rumble starts with this universal truth: *in the absence of hard data we will make up stories*. It's how we are wired as humans.

Making meaning out of things is part of our biology, and generally we're pretty good at it. But when we're in emotional difficulty, our meaning-making circuitry can get a bit scrambled. When we're hurt or afraid or ashamed, the stories we tell ourselves are often wrong, or at the very least, incomplete. We tend to "confabulate," which means we replace missing information with something false that we believe to be true. (For example, if we lose a major customer account and aren't sure quite why it happened, we might tell ourselves that it happened because the customer

didn't like us as a person. But this could turn out to be a confabulation, because the real reason the customer left might be that she got a much better deal from a competitor.)

Another way of looking at these incomplete stories that we tell ourselves in times of emotional difficulty is to think of them as "shitty first drafts." The bones of the story may be there, but most of the meat is missing. To move to a more accurate story that you can extract real meaning and learning from, rumble with these questions:

1. What more do I need to learn and understand about the situation? What do I know objectively vs. what assumptions am I making?

2. What more do I need to learn and understand about the other people in the story? What questions or clarifications might help?

To see how these questions could be applied in

real life, picture yourself having a difficult one-on-one conversation with a colleague from another department following an emotionally charged team meeting. You can imagine the rumble playing out something like this:

"Hey, tough meeting today. You were uncharacteristically quiet, and I am sort of making it up in my mind that you were unhappy with the concepts I was pitching for the next marketing campaign. I'm worried that I may have totally missed the mark. Can we talk about that?"

And your colleague's response might be: "No, I'm not mad. I'm exhausted. My partner is away, and my son is sick and he was throwing up all night. But I appreciate you checking in. Why don't we grab a cup of coffee and I'll give you my thoughts about the marketing plan."

This example shows how it's possible to write a new, happier ending to a story when you've taken

the time to fill in the missing pieces. "The gaps between what we make up about our experiences and the truths we ultimately discover through the process of rumbling is often pretty stark," writes Brown. "We must act with courage to close those gaps."

The final piece of the learning to rise process is the "revolution" that comes when you become sufficiently comfortable with these ideas and behaviors that you integrate them seamlessly into your professional and personal life. You'll become a different type of leader. A far braver leader who is known for being able to have tough, honest conversations that lead to real learning and progress, as opposed to defensiveness and shame.

Conclusion

The skill sets that make up courageous leadership are not new. Skills like vulnerability, resiliency

and values-based decision making have been aspirational leadership skills for as long as there have been leaders. Yet, according to the author of *Daring to Lead*, we haven't made much progress in developing these skills because we are "unwilling to dig into the humanity of this work." Often, it's just too messy, and it seems easier to complain than it is to talk about the real hopes, fears, and feelings that hold us back from achieving our goals.

Or, as the author ironically puts it: "We don't have the courage for straight talk about courage."

Perhaps it's finally time that we managers, owners and leaders start to embrace our vulnerability, act in accordance with our values, and find more effective ways of dealing with failure. Let's make this the year we truly commit to strengthening our soft skills. In fact, it seems Brené Brown is daring us to do exactly that.