

# Dare to Lead Summary

By Brené Brown

Close your eyes and think about the quintessence of daring and bravery; who, or what do you picture?

*Dare to Lead* is a counternarrative about modern workplace culture, that offers vulnerability, trust, values, and resilience as the most crucial leadership qualities. Daring to lead is about being brave enough to embrace leadership that exposes fear and uncertainty.

Author Brené Brown has become the doyenne of imperfection, shame, and vulnerability, and her insightful wisdom has inspired millions of people. She's a professor, public speaker, researcher, and bestselling author who challenges us to see the world, and ourselves in new ways.

We'll briefly look at Brown's critique of contemporary leadership styles, and why bravery needs to be reframed. Furthermore, we'll examine how to be better leaders, how to foster healthier work cultures, and how to be brave and vulnerable. By providing "courage-building skills," we're shown alternative and more gentle ways to show true bravery. And, mastering bravery is the cornerstone of promoting creativity and innovation.

## Toxic Work Culture

How do you feel when you make a mistake at work?

For many of us, failure is something that we avoid at all costs, because

we think it paints us as incompetent. So, when we do something wrong at work, we tend to make a move towards self-protection.

Dan Coyle talks about group dynamics and chemistry in *The Culture Code*, and invites us to reflect on our own workplace culture. He shows how groups can either thrive or fail, by analyzing safety and security, sharing, and story. A positive work environment is one where people feel safe, can be vulnerable and make mistakes, and have a shared vision.

Unfortunately, the dominant culture that we've come to accept is based around the shame of failure, and this leads to very poor decision-making and performance. When it comes to leadership, this can manifest itself as the need to appear dominant and not admit to failure, or to avoid hurting people's feelings by holding back criticism.

The knee-jerk reaction to failure is often passing the buck or shifting blame. We feel that if we draw attention to someone else's negligence, we can deflect and decoy. We might also avoid owning up to it or having difficult conversations, which means that there's no motivation to find workable solutions. Or, for those of us who want everything to be perfect, we may avoid taking risks because we're terrified of failure. None of these behaviors are proactive, and they create a toxic work culture where people walk on eggshells and feel like imposters at their jobs. To change unhealthy or problematic leadership, you need to adopt the core values of bravery, and illustrate that being brave means being honest and completely vulnerable. True courage isn't combative or aggressive; it's empathetic.

## **Vulnerability Is a Superpower**

Being courageous and brave is all about showing vulnerability.

We're so misguided about leadership, and Brown's advice is to take the opposite view of the narrative we've been given about traditional leadership. She asserts that a true leader is the first person who owns up to vulnerability.

Brown's research has shown that being brave and courageous can't happen without feeling vulnerable. Through interviewing thousands of research participants about leadership, all of them admitted to feeling vulnerable while performing an act of courage.

Being vulnerable means that we open ourselves up to other people's scrutiny, or we feel as if we're putting ourselves at risk. So acting out of bravery means that we're always going to feel vulnerable because we're risking something, be it our safety or reputation. So you can't have courage without vulnerability.

So how do we go about dealing with anxieties and fears around vulnerability?

The first thing we need to do is stop thinking that vulnerability is a weakness. It's quite the opposite; weakness is, in fact, ignoring your feelings and vulnerabilities. Secondly, vulnerability and trust are a series of negotiations rather than an existing agreement. You don't have to trust someone entirely to be vulnerable, and being vulnerable doesn't immediately gain trust. Trust and vulnerability are exchanges that we make, and building trust and exposing vulnerability are processes that happen over time. Finally, vulnerability doesn't mean you have to disclose all of the skeletons in your closet. On the contrary, vulnerability means

creating boundaries and operating within an appropriate context.

## **Trade Polite Conversations For Honest**

### **Conversations**

Having tough conversations is part of being a good leader. It's never easy having these types of conversations, but owning up to vulnerability is a way of making this process easier. Brown explains that kindness comes from clarity, and unkindness comes from withholding, avoiding, or tempering information. You have to say what you mean, and you have to avoid the temptation to be polite or sugarcoat things.

Being honest doesn't mean being cruel or unkind, but it does mean being critical and offering clear areas where improvement is needed. It's unfair to hold people accountable when they don't know what areas they're struggling with.

Another problem is that we often identify "easy" emotions as the ones we're struggling with. We could claim to be "tired" or "stressed," which are often used as catch-all feelings that encompass a range of emotions. Understanding how the people around you are feeling is imperative to being able to respond appropriately, and implement policies and changes that will help with overall wellbeing.

## **Dealing With the Ego**

Stifling emotions and vulnerability doesn't foster a healthy work environment because it encourages the ego to step in. When we're operating in defensive environments, there's a huge temptation to strive

to protect our egos.

How often have you avoided trying something because you're afraid that you'll make a fool of yourself, not be good enough, or not live up to your expectations?

Brown argues that our egos often influence us and make us nervous and anxious about our performance. Our search for perfection often prevents us from trying, because we're too scared of failing or making mistakes.

Leaders should foster a work culture where employees aren't afraid to try and fail. There are three ways to do this. The first is to avoid rewarding any kind of defensive behavior. From a young age, we're often praised for not making mistakes, and we're taught to avoid failure at all costs. We often see people getting rewarded for so-called perfection, but this isn't healthy, because no one learns from doing well all the time.

What's more, we often jump towards criticism without offering solutions or ideas. It's crucial to view criticism and solutions as acts that happen simultaneously. Secondly, when people are acting defensively, it's essential to call them out on this behavior. Having open communication is one of the most imperative things for being a good leader, and we must be brave enough to stand up to defensive actions. Making suggestions for improvements, and providing honest feedback is part and parcel of being a good leader. Finally, when dealing with ego, remember to recognize team members and employees who are making improvements. When other employees exhibit brave and vulnerable behavior, it should be pointed out as an excellent example to follow.

# **There's No Shame in Shame**

Shame is a genuine and compelling human emotion. Shame often comes with feelings of anxiety, guilt, and worthlessness. When we feel like we haven't achieved our goals or lived up to expectations, we often look at our self-worth and feel that we're not good enough.

Brown takes a different approach to shame, and argues that there are more healthy ways of dealing with it.

Ways to deal with shame in healthy and progressive ways is to be open about it. Again, the keyword is empathy. When we show support and empathize with those experiencing shame, we can move past these feelings and use them as a growth experience. For Brown, being a courageous and effective leader is about harnessing the power of empathy.

We all have bad days at work. There are some days that we wish we could forget. Maybe it's a botched presentation, an awkward meeting, or a big mistake. A good leader won't ignore these experiences; they will make a connection and display empathy. Employees need to know leadership has their backs, and empathy is a way to encourage and give feedback and support.

## **What Are Your Values?**

Dealing with vulnerability takes practice and persistence. Another skill of daring to lead, is identifying and honing in on core values, so that you can

be more resilient.

What are the things you'd put on your list of values?

No doubt you're thinking of quite an extensive list of things that you value. It's easy to rattle off values; the tricky thing is narrowing them down to a few core values. Having a solid sense of values is essential, because when things get tough, they force us to focus on what really matters. We often pick the easy route when faced with adversity, so having a clear sense of values allows us to focus on those.

While it's a good idea to start with a list of values, the next step is to critically evaluate each of these and pick which two are the driving force. This takes some patience and discipline, but it's worth it, because a clear sense of values also allows us to communicate with others a lot more effectively. If company values are "honesty" and "wellbeing," these could translate into open communication, critical feedback, and allowing employees to leave work at the workplace and avoid working overtime.

Understanding core values allows everyone to self-evaluate and consider whether our actions align with what's important to an organization.

## **Trust and Connection**

How trustworthy are you?

Most of us consider ourselves to be trustworthy. However, in trust, there's always a weak link. In *Game of Thrones*, when Varys asks Tyrion how many others knew about John Snow's lineage, Tyrion tells him 'eight.' Varys famously responds, 'So it's not a secret, it's information.'

Knowledge is power, and trust is challenging to forge. Most of us avoid talking about trust issues and skirt around the subject. As with all things, Brown encourages us to acknowledge the proverbial elephants in the room, and communicate feelings of trust and insecurity.

A leader who dares to lead, communicates about trust, and doesn't gloss over weaknesses and potential problems. For example, a leader may not trust someone to take the lead on a project. However, instead of saying 'I don't trust you with this,' she'll say something like, 'Your time management is a problem, so we need to work on that for you to take the lead on this.'

Remember, for a team to trust each other takes time and is reflected through small and consistent acts. Being connected and having trust happen simultaneously, and this happens through open communication and being fearless.

## **BRAVING**

Often we want to appear strong, or we find it difficult to honestly critique other people because we're afraid of hurting their feelings. Creating trust and connection can be done through the acronym BRAVING.

Boundary-setting is vital for everyone. It allows us to say "no," and know



when we're pushing other people's boundaries. Having this sense of clarity is one of the first things we need to determine when building trust. You can't collaborate if you don't know what a person's limits are.

Reliability means that everyone is governed by sticking to deadlines and fulfilling their roles and duties. If someone can prove that they're reliable, this garners trust. Next comes accountability. When we aren't reliable, we have to be held accountable for our actions, apologize when needed, and aim to rectify mistakes. Throwing others under the bus for our errors is one of the most untrustworthy things we can do.

Vault-closing means we can be trusted with secrets and information. If someone tells you something in confidence, we need to keep that information secret and not disclose anything that isn't ours to announce. This brings us to integrity. Integrity means sticking to our values even when it's complicated.

Finally, there's non-judgment and generosity. Rather than being judgemental, be curious. Ask questions, find out why someone acted in the way they did. Don't jump to conclusions. And this leads us to generosity which means working in a positive and empathetic manner.

If you operate within the framework of BRAVING, people will turn to you and respect you. And remember, leap into failure as quickly as possible. By showing that you can fail, you'll inspire others to take risks and seek out creativity and innovation.

## **In Conclusion**

*Dare to Lead* is an incredibly human-centered approach to effective

leadership. It looks at what makes us human, and offers a gentler approach to getting what we need from others. It's not forceful or aggressive, and yet it's the most effective way to nurture the best elements of human nature and collaboration.

Brown shows us that being vulnerable is the bravest thing we can do. We all need to strive to expose our weaknesses, and genuinely self-evaluate ourselves. It's not about that typical scenario where we disguise strengths as weaknesses; it's about acknowledging our actual faults and leading by example.

So focus on communication and empathy, interrogate your values, and take charge by cultivating trust and resilience. Power needs to be summoned, and we do this through accepting and embracing our vulnerabilities. By pragmatically scrutinizing our feelings, we're better equipped to deal with them rather than numbing them.

The new definition of a great leader is one who dares greatly and leads gently.