



Thoughts from Linda:

*Dare to Lead*  
*Brave Work. Tough Conversations.*  
*Whole Hearts*

by Brené Brown  
2018

Brené Brown is a 'household name' in the world of leadership development these days, having written five *New York Times* bestsellers and an original Ted Talk—*The Power of Vulnerability*-- that has garnered 35 million views. Her work is well-known by business leaders, the military, and educators worldwide. She has created her own 'vulnerability industry' in many ways, with a training and development company, her speaking ventures, and a publishing firm. She is a Ph.D., LMSW research professor at the University of Houston, where she holds the Huffington Foundation –Brené Brown Endowed Chair at the Graduate College of Social Work.

Here are a few of the references quoted praising this specific book and her work in general:

*"Brené visited Pixar to talk with our filmmakers. Her message was important, as movies are best when they come from a place of vulnerability...It is easy to sit back and talk about the values of a safe and meaningful culture, but extraordinarily difficult to pull it off." "...the needed underlying skills are hard. Still, they are teachable; start with this book."* Ed Catmull, President of Pixar

*"We asked Brené to bring her work on courage and vulnerability to our Air Force base. Dare to Lead is about real leadership: tenacious, from the heart, and full of grit."* Brigadier General Brook J. Leonard, USAF

*"Brené is the Google Empathy Lab's Obi-Wan Kenobi."* Danielle Krettek, founder of Google Empathy Lab

Her credentials as a world-class researcher are well known, and her ability to share her learnings is one of her key gifts—actually, I would submit that is her own '*ikigai*' (having just reviewed the book by this name) or purpose in life.

This book is full of helpful frameworks and tools and a very useful guide for all who brave the world of leadership. As a leader for over 40 years, an owner today of a collaborative leadership firm, and a voracious reader myself, I would say this is one of the most useful books I have read in the arena of *what it really takes* to lead others well. I agree with Brené when she says, "*Regardless of the concepts, studying leadership is way easier than leading.*" Deciding to step "into the arena" requires courageous, wholehearted leadership and enough individual self-awareness to lead from the heart. And as we know, and she often reminds her readers, "*the path to move information from your head to your heart is through your hands.*" To do this, we need practical skills, and as she notes, "*...one of the most important findings of my career is that daring leadership is a collection of 4 skill sets that are 100% teachable, observable, and measurable.*"

Her four fundamental skill sets are 1. Rumbling with Vulnerability, 2. Living our Values, 3. Braving Trust, and 4. Learning to Rise. In the book, she takes us through each of these domains, explaining what they mean, describing and unpacking barriers to each, and providing tools that help the leader in the lifelong practice of the art and science of effective leadership. The book is organized around four parts which are the skill sets mentioned above. She focuses heavily on part one, Rumbling with Vulnerability, and includes five rich sections: The Moment and the Myths, The Call to Courage, The Armory, Shame and Empathy, and Curiosity and Grounded Confidence.

This book synthesizes much of the 400,000 pieces of data she and her team have collected and codified over the past twenty years. It also reflects interviews with 150 global C-suite leaders (or, as she jokes, 'sea-level leaders') on the future of leadership and program evaluations from her most recent courage-building programs, along with the data collected during a three-year instrument development study on "daring leadership." She includes parts of her other books in this one, especially the work on vulnerability.

There is much to this book. While it is easy to read, it is rich with content, so it deserves time and focused energy. I will call out a few sections of particular interest to me, beginning with the background on her recent interviews with senior C-suite executives. Her research team started every conversation with the key question: "*What, if anything, about the way people are leading today, needs to change in order for leaders to be*

*successful in a complex, rapidly changing environment where we're faced with seemingly intractable challenges and an insatiable demand for innovation?"*

One answer ran across all of the interviews. *"We need braver leaders and more courageous cultures."* Interestingly, when pressed further, as leaders began to respond to just 'why' there is a call for braver leadership, there were over 50 key answers that created a pattern, but not all of them actually connected to courage itself. As her teams continued to push the executives for further thinking, they asked, *"can you break down the specific skills that you believe underpin brave leadership?"* only to find a large amount of struggling to find answers.

Just over 80% of the leaders questioned, including those who believed that courage is behavioral, could not identify the underlying, specific set of skills required to address the issue. However, they were adept at identifying the barriers—the problematic behavior descriptions and cultural norms that could erode courage. Following the principle espoused by Marcus Aurelius that *"what stands in the way becomes the way,"* she spends much time on barriers to get to the appropriate sets of skills that can be learned...in the areas of courage and vulnerability specifically.

In a summarized fashion, here are the ten most significant barriers that these interviewed leaders identified as the key ones getting in our way in organizations across the world:

1. Avoiding tough conversations, not giving honest and productive feedback (over 50% of those interviewed referred to the barrier of a 'nice & polite culture')
2. Spending more time on addressing problem behaviors versus addressing fears and feelings that emerge during change and upheaval
3. Diminishing trust due to a lack of connection and empathy
4. Lack of innovation
5. Getting stuck and defined by setbacks & failures and failing to get 'unstuck'
6. Too much shame and blame, not enough accountability and learning
7. People opting out of vital conversations about diversity and inclusion
8. Ineffective problem identification, critical thinking, and solution-finding
9. Gauzy organizational values that lack meaning and measurable assessments
10. Perfectionism and fear keep people from learning and growing

From this experience, she and her team identified the specific courage-building skill sets that were called for to address these problems. They spent time conducting more interviews, developing theories and instruments which they tested with MBA and

EMBA students at Rice University, the Kellogg School at Northwestern, and Wharton's business school at the University of Pennsylvania. In unpacking their findings and insights, they found the following:

1. You cannot get to courage without dealing effectively (rumbling) with vulnerability. She describes 'rumbling' as "...a discussion, conversation, or meeting defined by a commitment to lean into vulnerability, to stay curious and generous, to stick with the messy middle of problem identification and solving, to take a break and circle back when necessary, to be fearless in owning our parts and, as psychologist Harriet Lerner teaches, to listen with the same passion with which we want to be heard."

The good news from this finding is that there are, indeed, skills that can be learned, observed, and measured.

2. Self-awareness and self-love do matter. Who we are is how we lead. The key insights here are that everyone experiences many types of fear on a regular basis, and feeling fear is not the real barrier. Instead, it is *how* we respond to our fear—as she would note, generally- through our 'amor'- that differentiates the courageous from others. Learning how to work through this very human condition requires courage just to discuss courage. It is reminiscent of the story of Grendel in *Beowulf*--the 1500-year-old English poem, as it addresses the issue of power and vulnerability as the path to living a life that is authentic and worthwhile.

3. Culture is contagious. Brown notes that building cultures of courage require leadership to cultivate an environment where brave work, tough conversations, and whole hearts are the expectation, and 'armor' is not necessary or rewarded.

The book offers you very specific strategies to deal with barriers. It is a practical guide that is grounded in reality and will resonate with today's reader. I have long thought that the 'soft stuff' is really the 'hard stuff' of leadership.

Her definition of a leader is: "*anyone who takes responsibility for finding the potential in people and processes and who dares to develop that potential.*" I suspect that if you read this book, you will help Brené Brown accomplish her own objective, which is—as she says--for you to learn at least one meaningful behavior to help you on your own personal courageous leadership journey. I hope you will not only learn that and much more, but you will also want to read her entire offering and explore even more deeply the key insights of how we all can become better human beings and more wholehearted leaders.