

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Brené Brown

PhD, LMSW

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lead

BRAVE WORK.
TOUGH CONVERSATIONS.
WHOLE HEARTS.

DARING GREATLY AND RISING STRONG AT WORK

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R A N D O M H O U S E | N E W Y O R K

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a note from Brené

People often ask me if I still get nervous when I speak in public. The answer is yes. I'm always nervous. Experience keeps me from being scared, but I'm still nervous. First, people are offering me their most precious gift—their time. Time is, hands down, our most coveted, most unrenewable resource. If being on the receiving end of one of life's most valuable gifts fails to leave you with a lump in your throat or butterflies in your stomach, then you're not paying attention.

Second, speaking is vulnerable. I don't memorize my lines or have a set shtick that I do verbatim. Effective speaking is about the unpredictable and uncontrollable art of connection. Even though it's just me onstage and possibly ten thousand people sitting in folding chairs in a convention center, I try to look into as many pairs of eyes as I can. So, yes. I'm always nervous.

I have a couple of tricks that I've developed over the past several years that help me stay centered. Even though it makes event production teams crazy, I always ask for the stage lights to be at 50 percent. When they're at 100 percent, you can't see the audience at all, and I don't like talking into the void. I need to see enough faces to know if we're in sync. *Are the words and images pulling us together or pushing us apart? Are they recognizing their experiences in my stories?* People make very specific faces when they're hearing something that rings true for them. They nod and smile and sometimes cover their faces with their hands. When it's not landing, I get the side tilt. And less laughter.

I have another trick I use when anxious event organizers try encouraging me to up my game by describing the status of the audience members. An organizer might say, "Hey, Brené, just so you

know, the audience tonight includes top military brass.” They’ll mention the high-level corporate leaders, elite members of this or that super special group, the top glass-ceiling breakers in the world, or, my favorite, “These actually are rocket scientists who will probably hate what you’re saying, so stick to the data.” This strategy is often employed when the audience seems somewhat resistant because they don’t know why I’m there, or, worst-case scenario, they don’t know why they’ve been forced to be there with me.

In these cases, my strategy is a take on the classic “picture the audience naked” trick. Rather than picturing naked people sitting in auditorium chairs, which just doesn’t work for me, I picture people without the armor of their titles, positions, power, or influence. When I spot the woman in the audience who has her lips pursed and her arms tightly folded across her chest, I picture what she looked like in third grade. If I’m hooked by the guy who keeps shaking his head and making comments like “Winners aren’t weak at work,” I try to picture him holding a child or sitting with his therapist. *Or, honestly, sitting with the therapist I think he should see.*

Before I go onstage, I whisper the word *people*, three or four times to myself. “People. People, people, people.” This strategy was born out of desperation a decade ago, back in 2008, when I gave what I consider my first talk to a corporate leadership audience. I had lectured at grand rounds in hospitals and done many behavioral health talks, but the difference between those experiences and even just standing in that green room was palpable.

I was trying to find a place to set up camp in a room with twenty other speakers, each of us waiting to be called to do our TED-style twenty-minute talk at this day-long event, when that lonely feeling of not belonging and being out of place started washing over me. I first checked if it was a gender thing, because, to date, I’m often still the only female speaker backstage. That wasn’t it. It wasn’t homesickness, because I was thirty minutes from my house in Houston.

When I heard the event organizers talking to the audience, I pulled back a small section of the heavy velvet curtains that separated the

green room from the auditorium and peeked out. It was like a Brooks Brothers convention—rows of mostly men in white shirts and very dark suits.

I shut the curtain and started to panic. The guy standing closest to me was a young, super energetic speaker who, you could tell, had never met a stranger. I'm not even sure what he was saying to me when I cut him off in midsentence: "Oh, my God. These are all businesspeople—executives. Or FBI agents."

He chuckled. "Yeah, mate. It's a conference for C-levels. Didn't they tell you that?"

The blood drained out of my face as I slowly sat down on the empty chair next to me.

He explained, "You know, CEOs, COOs, CFOs, CMOs, CHROs..."

All I could think was, *There is no way I'm going to tell this guy the truth.*

He knelt next to me and put his arm on my shoulder. "You okay, mate?"

Maybe it was the Australian accent, or the big smile, or the name Pete that made this guy instantly trustworthy, but I turned to him and said, "They did tell me it was a C-level audience. But I thought that meant down-to-earth. Like these are real sea-level people. Salt of the earth. S-E-A-level."

Through a huge, booming laugh he said, "That's brilliant! You should use that!"

I looked him in the eye and said, "It's not funny. I'm talking about shame and the danger of not believing we're enough."

There was a long pause before I added, "Ironically."

By that time a woman from Washington, D.C., who was doing her twenty-minute talk on the oil trade, was standing beside us. She looked at me and said, "Shame—as in the emotion? Like I'm *ashamed*?"

Before I could even admit that was true, she said, "Interesting. Better you than me," and walked off.

I'll never forget Pete's response. "Look out into that audience again. These are people. Just people. And no one talks to them about shame, and every single one of them is in it up to their eyeballs. Just like the rest of us. Look at them. They are people."

I think either the truth of his advice or the thought of my topic got to him, because he stood up, squeezed my shoulder, and walked away. I quickly pulled out my laptop and searched "popular MBA and business terms." *Maybe I can put some hard corners on my topic by weaving in a little business lingo.*

Damn. It was like reading *Old Hat, New Hat*, the Berenstain Bears book that my kids loved when they were little. It's the story of Papa Bear going to the hat store and trying on fifty different hats to replace his old, ragged hat. But of course all of the new hats have issues: "Too loose. Too tight. Too heavy. Too light." It goes on for pages until it reaches the logical conclusion of keeping the old, ugly hat that fits perfectly.

I started whispering some of the terms to myself to see if I could pull it off.

Long pole item? Too tall.

Critical pathway? Too trafficky.

Skip-level? Too hopscotchy.

Incentive? Maybe?

Incentivize? Wait. What? I call bullshit. You can't just add "ize" to stuff.

Mercifully, my husband, Steve, called and interrupted my Berenstain Bears business search.

"How are you? Are you ready?" he asked.

"No! It's a total cluster," I said. After I explained the situation, he was very quiet.

Using his serious voice—the one reserved for panicked parents calling for medical advice (he's a pediatrician), or for me when I'm losing my mind—he said, "Brené, promise me that you will not use any of those dumb-ass words. I mean it."

I was near tears at this point. I whispered, “I promise. But you should see these people. It’s like a funeral. And not a funeral in my family, not a fancy-Wranglers-and-an-appropriately-somber-cowboy-hat funeral. It’s like a British funeral. Or a graveside service on *The Sopranos*.”

He said, “Take that guy’s advice and look out at the audience again. They’re really just people. Like you and me. Like our friends. There are people there you know, right? These are real people with real lives and real problems. Do *your* thing.”

He told me he loved me, and we hung up. I stood up and pulled the curtain back one more time. The room was darker, and a speaker was talking from the stage. I wanted to see the audience members’ faces but my side view made it tough. Then, like a slow motion scene from a movie, a large bald guy turned to whisper something to the guy sitting next to him, and I saw his face.

I gasped and pulled the curtains closed. *I know that guy*. We got sober around the same time, and we used to go to the same AA meetings in the mid-’90s. I couldn’t believe it. As I sat there wondering if I was in the middle of a miracle, my new friend Pete walked up.

“You doing okay?” he asked.

I smiled. “Yeah. I think so. Just people, right?”

He patted me on the shoulder and told me that a woman was standing outside the green room door asking to talk to me. I thanked him again and went to check on my visitor. It was my neighbor! At the time she was a managing partner at a law firm, and she was attending the event with several other partners and a few clients. She told me that she just wanted to say hello and wish me luck. I gave her a quick hug, and she went back toward the auditorium doors. I walked across the lobby and stepped outside for some fresh air.

She may never know what it meant for me to see her that day. I appreciated the kindness and connection, but it was the simple act of seeing her that made all the difference for me. Yes, she’s a partner in a prestigious law firm, but she’s also a daughter who I know recently

moved her mother from assisted living to hospice. She's also a mother and a wife going through a difficult divorce.

People. People. People.

The experience that day was electric. The audience and I were totally in sync and deeply connected. We belly-laughed. We cried. The audience leaned in so hard to what I was sharing about shame, unattainable expectations, and perfectionism that I thought they would fall out of their seats. We experienced the surge.

Before I went back to school to study social work in the early '90s, I was climbing the corporate ladder at a Fortune 10 company. I left that job to study social work, and I didn't think then that I would return to that world, which, in my mind, was the opposite of what I cared about—courage, connection, and meaning.

For the first several years of my doctoral work, I focused on systems change management and organizational environmental scanning. I eventually shifted direction and wrote my dissertation on connection and vulnerability. I never thought I'd return to the field of organizational development, because I didn't really love it at that time.

The talk I gave that day marked a significant turning point in my career. The heartfelt experience I had with that audience made me question whether I had made a mistake by framing two of my interests as mutually exclusive. *What would it look like to combine courage, connection, and meaning with the world of work?*

The other weird thing that happened that day resulted in a major shift in my speaking career. There were several speaking agents at the event, and after the audience evaluations were shared with the speakers and their agents, I got calls from all of them asking about my career goals. After a couple of months of soul searching, I decided to find my way back to the world of leadership and organizational development. But this time, with a new focus: people, people, people.

It's Not the Critic Who Counts

In 2010, two years after that event, I wrote *The Gifts of Imperfection*, a book that introduced my research on the ten guideposts for wholeheartedness. It had a very wide audience including corporate, community, faith, and nonprofit leaders.

Two years after that, in 2012, I sharpened my focus on vulnerability and courage and wrote *Daring Greatly*. This was my first book that included findings on what I was learning about leadership and what I was observing in my work with organizations.

The epigraph of *Daring Greatly* is this quote from Theodore Roosevelt:

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again...who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.

I found this quote during a particularly challenging time in my career. My TEDxHouston talk on vulnerability was going viral, and while there was a groundswell of support for the talk, many of the criticisms were cruel and personal, confirming my biggest fears about putting myself out there. This was the perfect quote to capture how I felt and my growing resolve to go full-on Tom Petty and not back down.

The courage to be vulnerable is not about winning or losing, it's about the courage to show up when you can't predict or control the outcome. Just as the quote resonated so deeply with my desire to live a brave life despite the growing cynicism and fearmongering in the world, it resonated with leaders everywhere. For many, *Daring Greatly* was their introduction to the quote, while others had it hanging in their offices or homes for years and felt a kindred

connection. I recently saw a picture of LeBron James's game shoes, and "Man in the Arena" was written on the side.

I followed up *Daring Greatly* very quickly with *Rising Strong*—a book that explores the process that the most resilient of my research participants use to get up after a fall. It felt like a mandate to write it, because the only thing I know for sure after all of this research is that if you're going to dare greatly, you're going to get your ass kicked at some point. If you choose courage, you will absolutely know failure, disappointment, setback, even heartbreak. That's why we call it courage. That's why it's so rare.

In 2016, I combined the research from *Daring Greatly* and *Rising Strong* to develop a courage-building program, and we launched Brave Leaders Inc. to offer online learning and in-person facilitation of the work. Within one year, we were working with fifty companies and close to ten thousand leaders. The next year brought *Braving the Wilderness*, a book about the courage to belong to ourselves as a prerequisite for true belonging, and the dangers of spending our lives trying to fit in and hustle for acceptance. It was a topic I felt called to research and write in the midst of increased polarization, rampant dehumanization of people who are different from us, and our growing inability to ditch the echo chambers for real critical thinking.

Over the past two years, our team has researched, evaluated, failed, iterated, listened, observed, watched, grown, and learned more than we could ever have imagined. And if that wasn't enough, I've had the opportunity to sit with and learn from some of the greatest leaders in the world. I can't wait to share what I've learned, how it can completely change how we show up with each other, why it works, why it's really hard in places, and where I keep screwing up (*just to keep it real*).

***You can't
get to
courage
without
rumbling
with
vulnerability.***

EMBRACE THE SUCK.

introduction

BRAVE LEADERS AND COURAGE CULTURES

i have one deceptively simple and somewhat selfish goal for this book: I desperately want to share everything I've learned with you. I want to take my two decades of research and my experiences inside hundreds of organizations to give you a practical, *no-BS*, actionable book about what it takes to be a daring leader.

I say “deceptively simple” because the data informing what's presented in this book are the culmination of:

- Interview data collected over the past twenty years
- New research including interviews with 150 global C-level (and sea-level) leaders on the future of leadership
- Program evaluation research from our Brave Leaders Inc. courage-building work
- Data collected during a three-year instrument development study on daring leadership

Coding and making sense of 400,000 pieces of data is already complex, and the more committed I am to translating the data into actionable, research-based practices, the more painstakingly precise I need to be with the data and the more testing I need to do.

The selfish part of my goal stems from wanting to be a better leader myself. Over the past five years, I've transitioned from

research professor to research professor *and* founder and CEO. The first hard and humbling lesson? Regardless of the complexity of the concepts, studying leadership is way easier than leading.

When I think about my personal experiences with leading over the past few years, the only endeavors that have required the same level of self-awareness and equally high-level “comms plans” are being married for twenty-four years and parenting. And that’s saying something. I completely underestimated the pull on my emotional bandwidth, the sheer determination it takes to stay calm under pressure, and the weight of continuous problem solving and decision making. Oh, yeah—and the sleepless nights.

My other quasi-selfish goal is this: I want to live in a world with braver, bolder leaders, and I want to be able to pass that kind of world on to my children. **I define a leader as anyone who takes responsibility for finding the potential in people and processes, and who has the courage to develop that potential.** From corporations, nonprofits, and public sector organizations to governments, activist groups, schools, and faith communities, we desperately need more leaders who are committed to courageous, wholehearted leadership and who are self-aware enough to lead from their hearts, rather than unevolved leaders who lead from hurt and fear.

We’ve got a lot of ground to cover, and I told Steve that I wanted to write a book that would change how the reader thinks about leading, would result in at least one meaningful behavior change, and could be read cover to cover on one flight. He laughed and asked, “Houston to Singapore?”

He knows that’s the longest flight I’ve ever endured (Moscow was just halfway). I smiled and said, “No. New York to L.A. With a short delay.”

Brave Leaders and Courage Cultures

I've always been told, "Write what you need to read." What I need as a leader, and what every leader I've worked with over the past several years has asked for, is a practical playbook for putting the lessons from *Daring Greatly* and *Rising Strong* into action. There are even a few learnings from *Braving the Wilderness* that can help us create a culture of belonging at work. If you've read these books, expect some familiar lessons with new context, stories, tools, and examples related to our work lives. If you haven't read these books—no problem. I'll cover everything you need to know.

The language, tools, and skills described in these chapters require courage and serious practice. Yet they are straightforward and, I believe, accessible and actionable to everyone holding this book. The barriers and obstacles to daring leadership are real and sometimes fierce. But what I've learned from both the research and my own life is that as long as we name them, stay curious, and keep showing up, they don't have the power to stop us from being brave.

We've built a *Dare to Lead* hub on brenebrown.com where you can find resources including a free downloadable workbook for anyone who wants to put this book further into action as you read. I highly recommend it. As we learned from the research we did for *Rising Strong*: **We know that the way to move information from your head to your heart is through your hands.**

There are also leadership book recommendations and role-play videos that you can watch as part of building your own courage skills. The videos won't take the place of putting this work into practice, but they will give you some idea of what it can look like, of where it gets hard, and of how to circle back when you inevitably make a mistake.

Additionally, you'll find a downloadable glossary of the language, tools, and skills that I'm discussing in the book. (Terms included in the glossary are bolded throughout the book.)

WHAT STANDS IN THE WAY BECOMES THE WAY

We started our interviews with senior leaders with one 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?

There was one answer across the interviews: **We need braver leaders and more courageous cultures.**

When we followed up to understand the specific “why” behind the call for braver leadership, the research took a critical turn. There wasn't just one answer. There were close to fifty answers, and many of them weren't intuitively connected to courage. Leaders talked about everything from critical thinking and the ability to synthesize and analyze information to building trust, rethinking educational systems, inspiring innovation, finding common political ground amid growing polarization, making tough decisions, and the importance of empathy and relationship-building in the context of machine learning and artificial intelligence.

We kept peeling the metaphorical onion by asking: *Can you break down the specific skills that you believe underpin brave leadership?*

I was surprised by how much the research participants struggled to answer this question. Just under half of the leaders we interviewed initially talked about courage as a personality trait, not a skill. They typically approached the question about specific skills with a “Well, you either have it or you don't” answer. We stayed curious and kept pushing for observable behaviors: *What does it look like if you have it?*

Just over 80 percent of the leaders, including those who believed that courage is behavioral, couldn't identify the specific skills; however, they could immediately and passionately talk about problematic behaviors and cultural norms that corrode trust and courage. Luckily, the idea of “starting where people are” is a tenet of both grounded theory research and social work, and it's exactly what I do. As much time as I spend trying to understand *the way*, I spend ten times as much researching *what gets in the way*.

For example, I didn't set out to study shame; I wanted to understand connection and empathy. But if you don't understand how shame can unravel connection in a split second, you don't really

get connection. I didn't set out to study vulnerability; it just happens to be the big barrier to almost everything we want from our lives, especially courage. As Marcus Aurelius taught us, "What stands in the way becomes the way."

Here are the ten behaviors and cultural issues that leaders identified as getting in our way in organizations across the world:

1. We avoid tough conversations, including giving honest, productive feedback. Some leaders attributed this to a lack of courage, others to a lack of skills, and, shockingly, more than half talked about a cultural norm of "nice and polite" that's leveraged as an excuse to avoid tough conversations. Whatever the reason, there was saturation across the data that the consequence is a lack of clarity, diminishing trust and engagement, and an increase in problematic behavior, including passive-aggressive behavior, talking behind people's backs, pervasive back-channel communication (or "the meeting after the meeting"), gossip, and the "dirty yes" (when I say yes to your face and then no behind your back).
2. Rather than spending a reasonable amount of time proactively acknowledging and addressing the fears and feelings that show up during change and upheaval, we spend an unreasonable amount of time managing problematic behaviors.
3. Diminishing trust caused by a lack of connection and empathy.
4. Not enough people are taking smart risks or creating and sharing bold ideas to meet changing demands and the insatiable need for innovation. When people are afraid of being put down or ridiculed for trying something and failing, or even for putting forward a radical new idea, the best you can expect is status quo and groupthink.
5. We get stuck and defined by setbacks, disappointments, and failures, so instead of spending resources on clean-up to ensure that consumers, stakeholders, or internal processes are made whole, we are spending too much time and energy

reassuring team members who are questioning their contribution and value.

6. Too much shame and blame, not enough accountability and learning.
7. People are opting out of vital conversations about diversity and inclusivity because they fear looking wrong, saying something wrong, or being wrong. Choosing our own comfort over hard conversations is the epitome of privilege, and it corrodes trust and moves us away from meaningful and lasting change.
8. When something goes wrong, individuals and teams are rushing into ineffective or unsustainable solutions rather than staying with problem identification and solving. When we fix the wrong thing for the wrong reason, the same problems continue to surface. It's costly and demoralizing.
9. Organizational values are gauzy and assessed in terms of aspirations rather than actual behaviors that can be taught, measured, and evaluated.
10. Perfectionism and fear are keeping people from learning and growing.

I think most of us can look at this list and quickly recognize not only the challenges in our organizations, but our own internal struggles to show up and lead through discomfort. These may be work behaviors and organizational culture concerns, but what underlies all of them are deeply human issues.

After finding the roadblocks, our job was to identify the specific courage-building skill sets that people need to address these problems. We conducted more interviews, developed instruments, and tested them with MBA and EMBA students enrolled at the Jones Graduate School of Business at Rice University, the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, and the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. We worked until we found the answers. Then we tested it, improved it, and tested it again. Let's unpack what we learned.