

INSIGHTS

Leaders' Psychological Bravery

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Much has been written about the importance of psychological safety (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Creating an environment in which everyone feels secure to express themselves and take risks without fear of negative consequences is a critical responsibility of any leader. But what does it take for a leader to cultivate this kind of safety on their team, within their unit, or across their organization?

The answer lies in what we call *psychological bravery*. To build a culture of true psychological safety, leaders must possess psychological bravery, the mental strength and courage to take risks, to embrace ambiguity, to make difficult decisions, and to stand firm in the face of adversity. Leaders' psychological bravery involves their willingness to confront fear, uncertainty, and potential criticism while maintaining a commitment to excellence, integrity, and ethical standards.

At a high level, psychological bravery is a form of moral courage, which the literature describes as taking a risky or unpopular action in response to an ethical, moral, or values-based challenge (Sekerka & Bagozzi, 2007). This is not a new idea: Half a century ago, Eleanor Roosevelt wrote that "courage is more exhilarating than fear and in the long run it is easier. We do not have to become heroes overnight. Just a step at a time, meeting each thing that comes up, seeing it is not as dreadful as it appeared, discovering we have the strength to stare it down." More recently, research has demonstrated that individuals who act in a morally courageous manner – that is, who engage in consistent, sometimes subtle acts of psychological bravery – reap a wide range of benefits such as experiencing a greater sense of meaning in their work and overall life satisfaction (Deeg & May, 2022).

In a leadership context, psychological bravery is what enables leaders to consciously step into discomfort and risk in both words and action, especially where issues of moral, ethical, or functional importance are concerned. After all, leaders often face tough choices, and their decisions may be met with resistance, uncertainty, scrutiny, and criticism. Psychologically brave leaders are willing to take on potentially unpleasant or confrontational situations, uphold integrity,

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and navigate difficult conversations or decisions with grace and compassion. They take calculated risks, confront unethical behavior no matter the costs, speak up against wrongdoing even when it is unpopular, and innovate despite the possibility of failure.

It is only when leaders demonstrate the courage to take real risks that those around them will feel psychologically safe enough to exhibit psychological bravery themselves. This bravery should, in turn, spark a virtuous cycle, further boosting the culture of psychological safety that is necessary for people to feel comfortable taking risks.

Of course, imbuing your leadership with psychological bravery is no small feat. In particular, there are five key, interrelated characteristics that psychologically brave leaders exhibit:

Moral and Ethical Courage

The literature on cultural agility describes a phenomenon known as *cultural minimization*, in which leaders opt to maintain a certain standard even when it runs counter to the prevailing cultural norm (Caligiuri, 2021). More broadly, psychologically brave leaders must stand firm in their values and ethical beliefs, even when it is uncomfortable or unpopular, making decisions and taking actions that are morally and ethically aligned with their values even in the face of dissent or opposition.

For example, a whistleblower acts with moral and ethical courage by putting their own career or safety at risk in order to expose wrongdoing or corruption. Taking action in this way demonstrates a willingness to stand up for what is right and just despite potential personal consequences. Summarized on the book cover and detailed in his book, *Here, Right Matters*, Retired U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Vindman recounts how he found himself at the center of a firestorm after deciding

to report the infamous phone call that led to former president Trump's impeachment (Vindman, 2021). Despite straining his relationships with colleagues, superiors, and even his own father, as well as eventually ending his decorated career in the U.S. Army, Vindman remained confident that he had done the right thing. Refusing to back down even in the face of intense pressure to stay silent and the potential for enormous personal and professional cost, Vindman demonstrated the moral and ethical courage that's emblematic of psychological bravery.

Diplomatic Communication

Psychological bravery is not just about doing the right thing. It's also about having the thoughtfulness to communicate those brave decisions respectfully and effectively – in other words, it is about diplomacy. The best leaders share their thoughts, beliefs, and feelings openly (even when their input might be received with skepticism or disagreement), engaging in difficult conversations and addressing uncomfortable or taboo topics transparently and authentically.

Longtime diplomat and former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman speaks powerfully to the importance of diplomatic communication in her book, *Not for the Faint of Heart* (Sherman, 2018). In her book and related articles, Ambassador Sherman describes how, as a mediator in the Iran Nuclear negotiations, she worked tirelessly to ensure her language was precise and respectful, ultimately helping her negotiate a mutually acceptable solution to avoid escalating tensions. Throughout her career, Ambassador Sherman demonstrated the courage and consistency it takes to remain diplomatic, even in the face of huge potential risk.

Risk Tolerance

Taking risks needlessly or excessively is not good leadership. But at the same time, avoiding risks at all costs does not work either. Effective leaders must be willing to make decisions and take actions that, while informed

and considered, carry inherent risks. Indeed, to avoid risks that might compromise values or long-term goals, sometimes it is necessary to take some risks in the shorter term. This means accepting failures and setbacks (and encouraging team members to do the same), recognizing that apparent failures can also serve as opportunities to learn and develop that can ultimately result in even better outcomes than the safe course or status quo would have achieved.

After all, progress is impossible without some level of risk. In his book *HOW: Why How We Do Anything Means Everything*, Dov Seidman, Founder and Chair of The HOW Institute for Society, proposes that real progress requires innovation, and people can only innovate if they're willing to tolerate some risk.

One of American history's most famous examples of psychologically brave leadership is the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., who led the U.S. Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s. At the risk of losing everything he valued, from his family to his freedom to his very life, he never wavered from his passionate and undying fight for racial equality. King's commitment to peacefully confronting systemic racism and injustice came at a substantial personal cost, but it also inspired millions to join the struggle for civil rights. Through both his words and his actions, King demonstrated an incredible tolerance for risk, helping to advance the civil rights movement and bring about significant social change in the United States and around the world.

Openness

Another important facet of psychologically brave leadership is the ability to be open to new ideas and conflicting perspectives when developing strategy and making decisions. This means potentially revising decisions and strategies when new information is presented and honestly admitting misjudgments or mistakes.

When we imagine a quintessential leader, we might picture someone who is tough, decisive, unshakeable – but psychological bravery means having the courage to admit that you do not have all the answers. For instance, during a group discussion about a controversial topic, an individual who actively listens to others considers opposing viewpoints rather than dismissing them out of hand and is open to changing their own perspective based on the information presented demonstrates a high level of openness. This willingness to consider new ideas and engage in constructive dialogue can sometimes be uncomfortable, but it is the only way to achieve mutual understanding, which in turn is critical to ensure effective decision-making.

To be sure, remaining open minded is often easier said than done. Leaders' psychological bravery will likely be met with inertia, resistance to change, and even outright opposition. Leaders might find themselves at odds with established norms, practices, or beliefs within a team or organization, necessitating skills related to conflict resolution, change management, persuasion, and motivation. But while these tactics can lessen the blow, some amount of resistance is inevitable – and when it occurs, it is crucial for leaders to exercise psychological bravery by maintaining courage, diplomacy, risk tolerance, and openness.

Culture Creation

Finally, psychological bravery means not just honing your own leadership muscles but also fostering a culture that invites those around you to cultivate and demonstrate bravery as well. Leaders must build a climate in which others feel empowered to share dissenting, innovative, or unconventional viewpoints, without fear of retribution.

In a corporate context, this might be framed within a conversation about company culture. For instance, a tech company might work to establish a culture in which

employees are encouraged to take risks, think outside the box, and share their ideas freely. Fostering such an innovative environment requires leadership, policies, and practices that prioritize creativity and open communication. The media giant Pixar serves as a particularly illustrative example: Its mantra of “fail early, fail often” has contributed substantially to its culture of creativity and thoughtful risk-taking, with its co-founders even explicitly arguing that “It is not the manager’s job to prevent risks. It is the manager’s job to make it safe to take them.”

Conclusion

Leading with psychological bravery is not easy. Consistently demonstrating bravery, especially in resistant environments, can be deeply mentally taxing and is only possible with a strong support network of peers, mentors, and advisors who can provide guidance, perspective, and emotional support. Leaders should also prioritize self-care practices such as mindfulness, regular exercise, and adequate rest to maintain their mental and emotional well-being, as well as engaging in continuous learning and development programs that equip them with the skills and resilience necessary to navigate challenging environments.

In the words of Theodore Roosevelt, “Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat.” By daring mightily, psychologically brave leaders endeavor to elevate themselves and the teams and organizations they lead, shaping a future defined by courage, compassion, and collective triumph.

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