THE NEUROSCIENCE OF COURAGE
HOW TO BE BRAVER AND BUILD A MORE COURAGEOUS CULTURE

Thought Leadership

Business today is defined by disruption. Leaders and employees are relentlessly challenged to go boldly forward—to disrupt their own habits, step out of their comfort zones, and move into uncharted territory. Yet while courage is frequently lauded as the quality that distinguishes those who rise above the rest, it's just as often misunderstood.

In this paper, we will explore the neuroscience of courage and how it relates to other concepts, such as growth mindset and psychological safety. In examining what courage means, how it works and why it matters, we will begin to unpack why it's so rare and what you can do to create a culture of courage in your workplace.

What is courage?

Courage is both complicated and uncommon—defined in different ways, each shifting with context, but repeatedly cited as a distinguishing quality of the most admirable people and exceptional leaders. Philosophers have debated the nature of courage for centuries. Some argue that courage is not the absence of fear but simply acting in spite of it—a willingness to face fear and overcome it. However, this broad definition could describe an array of reckless or even malicious behaviors. Given that courage is not reckless or impulsive, but rather thoughtful and intentional, it might be best defined as the decision to act in the presence of fear in pursuit of greater purpose.

Although our brains naturally protect us from discomfort, they can adapt to help us handle uncomfortable feelings, which psychologists call "affect tolerance." Courage is not an inborn trait endowed on the lucky few, but a learnable skill that we can build with repeated practice and experiences, similar to building a muscle. But first, let's understand the neuroscience of cultivating courage.

The building blocks of courage

If courage came easy, it wouldn't be a rarity. Our biases, coupled with past experiences, can push us towards playing it safe. But while our brain is instinctively wired for safety, we also have an innate capacity for courage. And understanding the interplay between our instincts and our capacity to overcome them may be the key to unlocking the courage that may otherwise lay dormant.

The brain regions involved in courage can be broken down into four main components:

1. *Amygdala:* This region detects and responds to threats, triggering the fight-flight-freeze response. It generates fear and anxiety, which can motivate us to avoid danger. Left unchecked, these emotions can keep us from taking risks that could ultimately benefit ourselves and others.

2. *Prefrontal Cortex (PFC):* This region is responsible for higher-order "executive" functions like planning, reasoning, decision-making, and self-regulation. It helps us overcome fear by evaluating situations and choosing the best actions. It also regulates emotions and impulses and helps us focus on goals and values.

3. *Subgenual Anterior Cingulate Cortex (sgACC):* This region acts as a bridge between the amygdala and PFC, modulating communications to regulate the fear response while reinforcing the influence of higher order structures like the prefrontal cortex. It also promotes positive emotions like compassion and empathy, which can support courageous action.

4. *Ventral Midline Thalamus (vMT):* This region receives information from various sensory modalities and sends it to different brain regions. It helps to integrate internal and external cues that are relevant for courage, such as our physical sensations, emotional states, social norms, and the environment.

In an experiment on people with snake phobias, scientists found that courage is linked to the disconnect between what we think (subjective fear, regulated by the PFC) and what we feel (somatic arousal, stemming from the amygdala). When these factors are not congruent, courage emerges. Low subjective fear and low somatic arousal represent indifference, while high levels of both lead to overwhelming fear.

The interplay of these processes is essential for activating courage, showing that it's a distinct element, neither denying our thoughts nor feelings, but something unique that makes simultaneously meaningful.

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Connecting the head and the heart

Understanding the complex interaction of our neural networks reveals how courage intersects our cognitive and emotional experiences, and why people often fail to take constructive action despite rational analysis. The fear of losing something often outweighs the desire to gain.

Our emotions often take the lead over logic because of cognitive biases like "loss aversion," making us more fearful of potential losses than excited about potential gains. Daniel Kahneman, Nobel Laureate and author of *Thinking Fast and Slow*, famously observed that "losses loom larger than gains," illustrating that, as humans, we hate to lose more than we love to win. The more uncertainty we perceive, the more prone we are to turn our forecasts into "fearcasts," magnifying our fear of losing something we value and crowding out courage.

We tend to prioritize short-term safety over long-term growth and rationalize choices that maintain the status quo, often neglecting long-term consequences and to the detriment of future opportunities. This leads people to choose what feels like the "safer" option, even if it puts them in a more vulnerable position in the long run.

Emotions like shame can also undermine courage by making us fear losing love, connection, or confidence in our ability to change and grow. Shame often shows up in the stories we tell ourselves that we are innately lacking, deficient or unworthy in some way. These "shame stories" chip away at our courage and add fuel to self-doubt. Only by examining and "rescripting" the false interpretations and stories we create that feed shame can we make space for courage.

Courage: an inside out-outside in perspective

While neural dynamics influence our decision to act with courage (or not) we are not at the mercy of our biology. Various other factors such as our internal mindset and our external environment play a pivotal role in facilitating courage.

There are multiple ways to frame mindset, but among the most well-known is the "growth mindset," introduced by Carol Dweck. A "growth mindset" is defined by the belief that abilities can be improved through effort, feedback, and learning. People with a growth mindset embrace challenges, learn from mistakes, and persist when faced with obstacles.

In contrast, those with a "fixed mindset" believe their abilities are fixed and innate, leading them to avoid challenges and give up easily.

But courageous action isn't just determined by what is going on inside of us but by what is going on around us. Research shows that people act safe unless they feel safe to do otherwise. In other words, the more secure we feel in our external environment, the less afraid we are of taking courageous action.

For this reason, psychological safety—that is, how safe people feel to take interpersonal risks—has a moderating impact on courageous action. When people feel psychologically safe, they can express their opinions, ask questions, and share ideas without fear of punishment or humiliation. Found to be the strongest predictor of high-performing teams, and vital to organizational performance over time, psychological safety fosters trust, respect, and openness among colleagues. Indeed, psychological safety and courage form a virtuous reinforcing cycle.

Both a growth mindset and psychological safety facilitate courage in different ways. Working from the inside out, a growth mindset helps us reframe failure and negative feedback as opportunities for growth rather than threats to our safety. In doing so, we can rise above our innate fear of failure and risk aversion.

Working from the outside in, psychological safety helps change our perspective on ourselves, our situations, and those around us. This transformation fosters collaboration and empathy, encouraging everyone to show courage in pursuing shared goals instead of avoiding vulnerability.

Why is courage so rare in the workplace?

While a "courage mindset" in leaders, teams and organizations can unlock substantial value, courageous actions at work are more often the exception rather than the rule. Fear of what could go wrong or be lost eclipses the motivation to make things right or gain ground. Both individual psychology and company culture influence this.

In many workplaces, culture is characterized by hierarchical structures that discourage speaking out and encourage conformity, fueling fear of being candid or going against the majority. Competitive environments often reward individual achievement and penalize mistakes, reducing collaboration and increasing fear, blame, and shame. As a result, they prioritize quick wins and immediate results at the expense of longer-term value and impact, reinforcing existing norms of caution and compliance.

From the perspective of psychology, cognitive biases that distort perceptions of risk/reward can drive us to make overly cautious, incremental decisions. A desire to "fit in" and preserve or enhance our status also shapes our behavior and expectations. Layer this over our innate resistance to change and tendency to seek information that confirms our existing beliefs, and there are a multitude of "courage crushers" in the workplace.

Courage in the workplace: a balancing act

Today's enterprise leaders face the challenge of balancing the intersection of internal and external ecosystems. Indeed, having a "courage mindset" is essential for enterprise leaders to simultaneously deliver short-term results and transform their organization for the future. When combined with a clear purpose, this mindset allows leaders to consider different perspectives and make decisions that serve not only the entire organization but the entire ecosystem, making progress in all areas.

Korn Ferry research found that only 14% of executives show the qualities and skills of an enterprise leader—and those who do see their impact multiplied across all aspects of their business. Courage may be the key—the mindset that enables leaders to unleash the full resources of their organization in service of its highest purpose.

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Only when leaders operate from a courage mindset—that is, willing to go above and beyond—can they instill the value of courage in their teams and across the cultural DNA of their organization. Learning how to be courageous may open the door for people at all levels to operate from an enterprise mindset that elevates outcomes for all stakeholders.

Here are three steps to creating a culture of courage in the workplace.

1. Start on the inside

- *Act with purpose.* Courage is not about pride or perfection, but rather a higher "other-focused" purpose that pushes us forward. Connecting to a compelling purpose reframes the risk of short-term loss into a larger context, spurring the courage to go above and beyond. Acting with purpose also fuels resilience after setbacks and not to over-personalize failure. One Korn Ferry survey found that an overwhelming 96% of leaders agree that having a strong sense of purpose leads to long-term financial gains for the company.

- *Train for brave.* Courage is both personal and contextual. What courage looks like for you is different from what it looks like for others. What's more, courage is a skill that grows stronger with practice. Even small courageous steps expand your capacity to take on bolder endeavors and bigger challenges. Not only does courage differ from person to person, but it can be different from one day to the next.

- *Practice mental time travel.* Putting yourself in the shoes of your "future self" can help to reframe perception of immediate risks through a larger lens and improve the tendency to be short-term focused.

2. Work from the outside in

- *Reward courageous action, not just winning outcomes.* Recognize and appreciate others who show courage by acknowledging their efforts. Celebrate the learning that comes when brave actions don't produce ideal outcomes.

- *Respond well to bad news.* How you respond to different opinions or bad news can build or break psychological safety. Never respond in ways that fuel hesitation to share feedback or perspectives. Make others feel safe to take risks by showing respect, empathy, and curiosity.

- *Share your "failure" stories.* Inspire others with your courage by telling them how you faced your fears, overcame your challenges, and learned from your experiences, including failures. Courage doesn't guarantee success. By sharing the value you've got from the times it didn't work out, you help make it safer for others to adopt a growth mindset, destigmatize "mistakes," cultivate innovation, and accelerate learning.

3. Influence the system

- *Create feedback mechanisms that challenge the status quo.* Cultures with strong cross-collaboration across silos enable teams to solve problems faster. Be transparent and open the door for others to participate in designing policies, practices, and norms that foster courage.

- *Communicate a bold vision with a Big Why.* Organizations which are deeply aligned with people's strongest motives—to belong, to grow and to use their strengths to make a meaningful difference—galvanize collective purpose that fuels courageous action. Tap into that desire by communicating the bigger picture that aligns with a deeper purpose for the team or organization. Be strategic and intentional about balancing short-term results with long-term consequences.

- *Model the way.* Just as fear is contagious, so too is courage. Decide to role model the courage you want to inspire in others. Show you are trying to be real, not right. Share stories of moments you've felt afraid but had overcome your fear. Most of all, don't discount the hidden costs of being too cautious. They are rarely immediately obvious, but failing to take smart risks exacts a steep hidden "timidity tax" over time.

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Head and heart: unlocking the paradox

Research shows that progress is predicated on the courage that is built by navigating the tensions between seemingly opposing systems. Those of the head *and* the heart, those around us *and* within us, those of short-term risks *and* long-term possibilities. Embracing the paradox unlocks the door to the future.

The potential impact of generative AI on the workforce sets the stage for a critical moment for leaders and organizations to lean into a courage mindset. To make the most of disruption, organizations must tap into human creativity— which is often suppressed by fear—regardless of the complex, ever changing and often ambiguous risk landscape.

Leaders who can pair both head and heart will embolden a braver workforce, unlocking untapped potential of employees to bring their boldest thinking to the challenges at hand.

If ever there was a time that leaders needed to role model the courage they wish to instill in their teams and organizations, it is now. Which begs the question, what would you do today if you were courageous?

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Contact us today to talk about how you can instill a "courage mindset" in your leaders, employees, and across the culture of your organization.

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