

The Brave Habit: Talk Summary

If I had to choose one gift to impart upon every person I meet - one master key that unlocks their potential - it would be bravery. We need radical bravery in our workplaces, our schools, our neighborhoods, and - God help us - in our politics. If more people committed to making brave choices daily, we would see stronger, more effective teams, less corruption, less unhealthy conflict, and more progress on the societal issues that truly matter.

Organizations need leaders committed to cultivating a culture of bravery, and who themselves are making brave choices in the face of uncertainty. The marketplace needs more business owners who are willing to step up and do the right thing for their employees and their communities, even at the risk of personal cost. And, society needs more people to cultivate brave, empathetic relationships with people who think differently from them.

My ambition with this manifesto is to inspire an epidemic of everyday bravery both in and out of the workplace.

Bravery Is Not What You Think

To begin, we need a good definition of what bravery actually *is*. Most of our cultural reference points for bravery involve heroic actions like storming a beach, risking everything on an unlikely business deal, or casting caution to the wind on a massive career change.

Yes, those actions *can* be brave, but the call to bravery is not just about mustering courage in the face of overwhelming odds.



Bravery exists whenever someone a person engages in right action at the potential expense of their own comfort.

Cowardice, on the other hand, exists when someone chooses self-protection at the expense of right action. It is possible to appear brave to others while actually behaving in a cowardly way, or to appear a coward to others while doing the brave thing. Others may not always know your internal considerations, and may filter your actions through their own biases.

Bravery exists in an environment of high agency, and high optimism. When there is a lack of either agency (belief that individual actions can make a difference) or optimism (there's a possible better future), the environment is ripe for potential cowardice.

Leaders can help cultivate a culture of brave action by focusing on increasing both the level of perceived individual agency (by giving permission to speak and act), and the sense that a better future is possible for employees and for the organization as a whole (by tying decisions and actions back to core operating principles.)

What bravery is:

Bravery is doing the right thing, as best you know it, even when it's the uncomfortable thing. It's needed now more than ever in the marketplace, in the political realm, and in our schools and neighborhoods. Most bravery in the world is exhibited in small, everyday actions, not big efforts.

Bravery is a choice, not a trait. People who choose to do the right thing in the face of personal cost are choosing to sacrifice their life and comfort for a better future. They are not superhuman. They are perhaps the most *fully* human.

Bravery is always empathetic. It's about the other, not about yourself. The other might be a person or a core principle, but the brave person is always looking outward when deciding. The coward looks inward and to his own interests.

Bravery is action in spite of fear. People who act bravely feel fear and insecurity as much as everyone else. It's just that they choose cause over comfort.

Bravery is willingness to fail in the pursuit of what matters. Those who choose bravery recognize the risks, and proceed because they are driven by deeper principles.

What bravery is not:

Bravery is not stupid risk. A brave person counts the cost, and decides to act because the cost of inaction is simply too vast to bear.

Bravery is not bravado. Many people (especially some politicians) love to put bluster ahead of action. However, brave people do not feel the need to posture. Instead, they allow their actions to speak for themselves. They are fine being misunderstood, and even unliked if that's the cost of right action.

Bravery is not for a select few. There are opportunities to be brave everywhere and every day. The need for bravery is in the workplace, in the home, in relationships, in neighborhoods, and everywhere humans interface.

Bravery is not impulsive. While brave actions often happen in a flash, the source of those actions are deeply-held beliefs about right and wrong, and a vision for a better future. Brave people are realistic optimists.

Bravery is not anonymous or remote action. Lobbing insults or politically correct attacks on someone from afar is not bravery. Stepping into their world, looking them in the eye, and learning to love what you don't understand is.

You Will Be Known By Your Actions

In order for something to be considered an act of bravery, it must be sourced in the desire to do what's right even at the risk of personal cost. Which begs the question: how do you decide what's *right*?

Brave people are protective, cowards exploit. If your actions are to protect someone or something vulnerable, whether a person or ideal, then there's a good chance it's right action.

Brave people reveal truth at the right time, cowards conceal it. Brave people know that the truth is never really a threat, but even if it costs them their livelihood or relationship, the cost of inaction is simply too vast to take the easy way out.

Brave people consider context and scale, cowards think right now. The brave choice is the one that takes into account nuance and context, is empathetic, and scales in a positive way. Cowardly action is only concerned with immediate consequences.

Brave people are principle-driven, cowards go with their gut. Brave people have a framework for making decisions that is so ingrained that their actions in the face of adversity are almost automatic.

Brave people face consequences, cowards blame others. Brave people are willing to be known by their choices, and are willing to face the consequences of their actions, whether good or bad.

Brave people initiate, cowards just allow life to happen to them. Those who choose bravery know that it often means being the first-mover, when others are scared to do so. It means initiating reconciliation in a relationship. Being the first to start a venture. Being the first into the water.

Brave people listen, cowards want to be heard. Brave people are not threatened by differing opinions. Brave leaders know that brilliance is forged in the cauldron of creative conflict.

Brave people follow-through, cowards hedge. Those who choose the brave path know that it means seeing things through to the end, even when it gets uncomfortable. Cowards might be eager to jump in, but abandon their effort when it costs them something.

Brave Work

If there is one place where bravery is most needed (and often most lacking) it's in the workplace. Here are a few principles for doing brave work each and every day:

Own your words and actions. Be an individual with a backbone. If you say or do something, accept the consequences, whether good or bad, for your choices. Never throw a teammate under the bus.

Encourage. This literally means to “put courage into” others. Brave people embolden the people around them, speak words of affirmation to them, and cheer them on to be their best. They are not threatened by the successes of others.

Embrace personal growth, even when you look foolish. Some people fear trying new things, learning new skills, or tackling new kinds of projects because they fear that if they fail they will be “found out”. Brave people know that occasional failure is simply a part of doing hard things.

Share your ideas, even when they aren't received. You cannot control whether someone else likes your ideas, but you can control whether or not you share them. The regret over inaction is too high a price to pay.

Refuse to compromise your values, even when it costs you something. Had there been more brave people, fiascos like Theranos, Enron, and the Great Recession could have been averted or greatly mitigated. Brave people do what's right, even when it might cost them everything they've worked for.

Compete for purposes of cause, not for comfort. Cowards climb the ladder because of what it brings them in terms of comfort and accolades. Brave people are driven by principles and cause.

Brave Leaders

Brave workplaces need brave leaders. They need people who are committed to standing in the gap, protecting their people, and fighting for the mission of the organization even at personal expense. Here are a few principles for brave leaders:

Have the uncomfortable conversation. It's far easier to avoid difficult chats with direct reports, but brave leaders recognize that it's more important to be effective than to be liked.

Speak truth to power. As a leader, you must be willing to fight for principles if you perceive they are being ground in the organizational gears.

Put your resources where your mouth is. Cowards say bold things, but are always hedging their bets. Brave leaders are willing to put themselves on the line by resourcing the initiatives they believe to be best for the organization and the people it serves.

Give your job away. Insecure leaders fear that someone will take their place. Brave leaders recognize that their job is to reproduce themselves in others and train others up to shoulder organizational responsibility. Encourage, teach, and empower others. Listen more than you speak.

Brave Teams

Most of our work is accomplished in the context of teams. Therefore, every day we face situations in which we must choose to be brave in our team interactions, or to be cowardly. Here are a few principles for brave teams:

Engage in (healthy) conflict. Brave teams fight well. Cowardly teams run from conflict. Healthy conflict builds better work and better teams.

Protect your teammates. Brave teammates stand up for and protect their teammates' reputations. When someone else is talking poorly about their teammate, they don't join in. They recognize that trust is earned every single day. Cowards throw people under the bus to save their own skin.

Recognize that it's not about you. Brave teammates know that the cause supersedes any individual credit they receive. It's not about *their* idea, it's about the *right* idea. They are willing to support the best work, even if it's at the expense of personal recognition.

Bravely give and receive feedback. Brave teammates are willing to hear feedback they disagree with, and are not afraid to offer helpful feedback when they believe a fellow teammate is not living up to their potential.