

BRAVER LEADERS IN ACTION

Personal and Professional Development
for Principled Leadership



MIKE MCLAUGHLIN
ELAINE COX

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Personal and Professional
Development for Principled
Leadership

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

from Mike

For: Lucy, Luisa, Annabelle

Special thanks to: Carolyn, Gaynor, Peter, Thea, Edward, Poppy and Paul

from Elaine

Again, and always, for Chris

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FOREWORD

Making changes in any business is scary – getting the culture ‘right’, especially when it needs to change significantly from the current state, is not straightforward. Getting individuals to focus on a wide range of factors, not only profit but also, for example, people development, mental health, climate change and wider environmental, social and governance matters, is not easy. This book provides a go-to reference for management of how to make changes in personal style, thinking and actions to achieve significant change in business and to do so without fear.

The exercises, questions and real-world practical examples aid understanding in an uncomplicated manner and help to demonstrate how relatively small individual changes in approach can make a massive change to an organisation for the better. The structure used in the book provides an easy-to-follow roadmap to develop each of 32 areas of focus. Although each are interlinked, the reader can also select those areas that they believe require more development. Either way, it provides the confidence to make changes with less negative emotion.

Being a braver leader requires well-developed emotional intelligence and the ability to deal with the pressures of everyday management. I have no doubt that using these insights, approaches and recommendations will lead to more organisations developing the right culture not only to improve performance but also to maximise the development of people at all levels. Mike and Elaine have expertly captured in this book what braver, high-performing business leaders and managers do in practice. What we need now is many more of them.

In summary, this book is an excellent tool which can be used in many different industries and situations by all levels of management to ensure we all become ever braver leaders achieving our full potential.

Chris Surch

Chris was a PLC Director (CEO and CFO) in a number of organisations in different industries. His focus has been on maximising performance through developing appropriate cultures and structures and helping management to achieve their full potential. This focus continues as a Non-Executive Director.

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INTRODUCTION

The motivation for this book came from concern for our many global challenges and how we consider the human race needs to ‘step up’. Jointly, people have the intelligence and predictive capacities, as well as the technological know how to solve our problems. But each one of us just needs to be braver, to be a leader – a braver leader.

We chose to use the word braver rather than brave because although many people are already doing brave things, we are facing a whole new raft of unprecedented challenges and these will require many of us to be braver more often and more consistently. We envisage that cultural and societal changes will be required to address, not only technological challenges but also the effects of climate change and environmental disasters brought about by pollution, CO₂ emissions and the plundering of natural resources.

Moreover, we need more people to come forward as leaders, and to be braver, doing the right thing, situation after situation. In this book therefore, we explore the challenge of being an everyday leader doing everyday things that require courage, fearlessness, tenacity, resilience and forethought – all attributes that will, at various times be required, of the braver leader.

Often when we watch a film or a television programme, or read a book, we strongly identify with the main protagonist, someone who is very often involved in some kind of heroic feat or brave endeavour. But, why is it that those braver heroes or heroines, the ones that we truly resonate with, are so often those overcoming great obstacles to ultimately do good in a world where apathy would be the easier option? Carl Jung (2014) might have suggested that it was something to do with archetypes, and Joseph Campbell (2003) would probably have made a connection to mythology. Notwithstanding how we may try and explain the phenomenon, there does appear to be something deep and compelling about these heroes.

However, our predilection for investing emotionally in an often-fictional heroic journey, whether this be a movie or a book, can cause us to live those

brave actions vicariously, and in doing so mistake the associated flood of hormones, such as noradrenaline and dopamine, as being the result of an actual lived experience. In other words, our own braver calling can be partially met and satisfied by observing the actions of others and imagining it to be us. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it may not be good if it convinces us that we have played our part or done our duty – just by watching the movie or reading the book. It is also not good if we begin to imagine that we can only really make a difference in the world if we are doing the ‘big stuff’: wrestling with the controls of an out of control aircraft, jumping into a flaming building or travelling back in time to reset the future!

Being a leader is not easy – we cannot simply vanquish all our foes and woes with the flick of a magic wand. Rather we must remember that most of the challenges leaders face in the real world are smaller. The actual changes that need to be made in life and in business are mainly about the ‘small stuff’, the mundane and the quotidian. Yes, there will be some big stuff; there will be some crunch moments. However, any real, significant change has also got to be connected to those smaller things that we can do just a little bit differently day after day. Almost every team, committee, organisation, business or society owes much of its success and cohesion to the persistent, quiet bravery of individuals within its ranks. They form a key component of the supporting infrastructure. We can be dazzled by the pyrotechnics of famous leaders but, ultimately, we would be nothing were it not for those often unseen braver people who promote and maintain that which is good in society.

Badaracco (2002, p. 5) similarly highlighted the fact that ‘most effective leaders are rarely public heroes’. He argues that many are not high-profile because they don’t want to be. They rarely champion ethical crusades because they prefer to do the right thing discreetly. Badaracco calls such people the ‘quiet leaders’ because often their achievements can be attributed to their inherent modesty and restraint. We prefer to call them ‘braver leaders’ since it can take a lot of courage to solve problems by making small, inconspicuous but consistent efforts that subsequently build up to make the world a better place. Albert Schweitzer (1998) claimed that the sum of these smaller acts is ‘a thousand times stronger than the acts of those who receive wide public recognition. The latter, compared to the former, are like the foam on the waves of a deep ocean’ (p. 90). Badaracco sums this up well:

The vast majority of difficult, important human problems – both inside and outside organizations – are not solved by a swift, decisive stroke from someone at the top. What usually matters are careful, thoughtful, small, practical efforts by people working far from the limelight.

(2002, p. 9)

This book, then, recognizes that the world badly needs the help of its ‘ordinary’ leaders. All aspects of life and work provide opportunities to overcome obstacles or difficulties and our mission as leaders is to tackle those obstacles, not shy away from them, but to rise to any challenge and to make a positive difference in our world.

WHY DO WE NEED BRAVER LEADERS?

The need for bravery in leadership roles has always been important, but is becoming increasingly critical and urgent due to the range of unprecedented environmental, biological, psychological, economic and technological challenges that we face. Indeed, the challenges and dangers that leaders will meet in the years to come may be incomprehensible to us now – and they may not be of their choosing. This element of choice is important when distinguishing what is meant by bravery. We like to draw on a description by Ellen MacArthur, the solo long-distance yachtswoman, who suggested that facing danger when *you* choose it is what we call courage, but when danger is *thrust upon you*, when there is an existential imperative, that is bravery (Britain and the Sea, Episode 1, BBC2). In our earlier book, we similarly suggested that bravery is manifestly linked to action: whilst courage is the state of managing the emotion of fear it is only ‘a precursor’ to the more potent braver action (McLaughlin & Cox, 2015, p. 4).

The exceptional environmental and other challenges mentioned above, are impacting all industries. For example, solutions will need to be found in the wake of the climate emergency for keeping global warming below two degrees (Masson-Delmotte et al., 2019). This has become urgent. There are also solutions needed for the overuse of resources such as oceans, soils and fossil fuels for transport and heating. Additionally, mental health, physical health and wellbeing are also being negatively impacted. As countries,

cultures, families and businesses search to find employable and practical answers to the challenges being faced, leaders across workplaces will need to be braver in order to face these challenges head on. This may include adopting a very different style of leadership, prioritising wellbeing, undertaking true long term thinking and crucially searching for solutions that reverse the destruction of natural habitats that is so devastating for our planet. All of this may mean promoting reskilling and making modifications to practice but also promoting changes in perception.

Collectively we are up against the foes of shortsightedness, avarice, gluttony and hubris, amplified by a lack of empathy and wisdom. This is not to suggest that capitalism is inherently at fault. Not at all. It can provide many benefits, although we would suggest that any true value can only come from capitalism with a conscience – and the model must evolve. It may even involve a change in our definition of growth and a shift towards a global steady state economy (Washington & Twomey, 2016).

In our earlier book (McLaughlin & Cox, 2015, p. 5) we coined the phrase, ‘profit by all means, but not profit by any means’. What we were suggesting was that efficiency and well organised enterprises can do much good, but we also must recognise the fallacy implicit in our blind servitude to endless growth, to sometimes covetous shareholder expectations, to generating profit at the expense of decency, compassion and above all the environment.

Just as the overconsumption of resources is challenging, so is the management of waste. Plastic waste, for instance, has created considerable alarm worldwide and the amount of discarded food that our agricultural and hospitality industries generate is also of enormous concern. Leaders in these areas face massive challenges. Leaders will also need to act to reverse declines in animal and insect species due partly to climate volatility, but also our unchecked use of ‘pest’ killers, both at a domestic level and also in agriculture. In addition, there are health issues as well as human rights tensions, equality and ethical concerns that impact on leadership as well as the regulation and compliance changes in the workplace that absorb a lot of leadership time and energy.

Those are the ‘headlines’ and of course not everyone is directly involved in addressing those issues (although we would argue that we should all be involved, at least indirectly). We would also argue that what these issues actually highlight is a manifestation of the age old human dichotomy, that we can do good or bad. Each of us has the capacity to do both, and when we

observe things that are quite patently unwise, and will ultimately do harm, and yet we do nothing to intervene, it can seem as if the collective weight of human thinking and behaviour has tipped the scales in the wrong direction. Every interaction we have, every decision we make, every behaviour we exhibit, does make a difference. It may be small, it may seem insignificant, but cumulatively and over time, those small acts, those braver responses to the events and priorities thrust upon us, will ultimately tip the scales of collective consciousness towards wisdom, decency, prudence and good stewardship.

In addition to emphasising some of the key areas where bravery is needed, we also want to highlight that although the task may often be tough and can be quite stressful; one of the things that can make it more bearable is the knowledge that as leaders we are creating real meaning and purpose by generating value for others. This is not monetary value, although that can be an outcome, it is the value gained from helping others and the planet. Despite what we may be encouraged to believe, fame and wealth, if that is all there is, does very little to actually benefit us or others. The vision of endless days of drinking cocktails on a beach is little more than that, a vision – sterile, empty and, in this age, facile and self-serving. Preserving our planet, using our learned skills and inherent common sense, and helping others to do so as well by using their skills, strengths and talents can lead to a different, more meaningful form of happiness and a safer, more stable world.

And so we begin this book with one question:

If you knew without a shadow of a doubt that your mission was to make a real difference in the world, what would you begin by doing now, today?

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book is the result of many hours of observations, interactions and conversations with leaders. We have listened to their candid thoughts, how they feel about their successes, and to the regrets that they feel when things go wrong.

We have not interviewed the ‘big names’. This was a conscious decision, because often much (but not all) of what we frequently hear from the

successful and famous is sanitised, burnished and on some occasions warped by the well-oiled machinery of marketing and public relations. Instead we talked to ‘everyday leaders’ that are not particularly well known but are very well respected in their own professions and organisations. They are part of a network that can impact the very fabric of our society – the warp and weave that can make the difference between economic stability or not, between mental health or not, and between sustainable, habitable eco-systems or not.

Many leaders are already overcoming personal and business challenges in their working lives in order to help improve the environment and lives of those around them. The illustrations from real leaders that we include in this book will provide examples of actions taken day to day that can lead to a better world. It is hoped that these examples will strengthen our call to all leaders to join a ‘braver leader’ movement aimed at a new class of fearless frontrunners: intrepid, braver leaders working each day to make the world a better place. These leaders are the real heroes, often unsung, always striving to do the right thing – not perfect, but always aware that they are a work in progress and that knowledge and a burning desire to be the best version of themselves, for them and for others, will help them to consistently aim for better.

We have not approached this research from a statistical perspective, instead, we have been primarily concerned with the lived experience of those who lead, and indeed those who have been impacted by leaders, both good and bad. Common themes began to evolve from our discussions with leaders – particularly from the more open conversations that we had – and then, when we introduced others to those themes, they nodded in agreement stating that this was how they had always thought and that we had consolidated their ideas.

Our backgrounds, which helped define the input to and boundaries of this book, range from a considerable amount of academic research, management and leadership experience, years of development work with leaders to the pragmatic application of psychological strategies for positive change.

We have examined the research, explored the gap with real leaders and aligned that with what we believe are common sense approaches to developing leaders, environments and cultures, that can truly transcend the quagmire of nonchalance, selfishness and greed that the world currently appears to find itself coping with. We want this to be a manual, a go-to guide, an inspiration, a reminder to us all that we are not on our own. You are not

alone. Many, many people are in alignment, doing their bit, balancing the tightrope between making a living and acting ethically towards others and the environment. Many others are waiting to join us when we put our heads above the parapet of mediocrity and complacency. The more who do that, the more others will.

In order to be braver, it is valuable for leaders to have some form of support or scaffold from which they can advance their cause and also support others. This, we believe, is why this book can be particularly useful. Since the publication of our first book, *Leadership Coaching: Developing Braver Leaders*, we have been asked to expand on some of the themes and to provide a more 'hands-on' guide to be used by leaders, teams, organisations and coaches to help transform individuals and cultures. So we have worked to make this an important progression from our original ideas. Our research has continued and the results are shared in this book. We hope readers find the book motivating, and that can use it to help develop themselves and others and subsequently transform the world around them.

BRAVER LEADERS IN ACTION

This book is written as both a self-help book focusing on personal and professional development and as a book to facilitate development of others, either as a leader or as a coach or mentor. It is laid out to make progress and understanding as straightforward as possible. In each chapter, we introduce themes considered important to becoming a braver leader – one who can contribute effectively to the needs of the world and respond efficiently to its demands.

The overarching theme of each chapter is buttressed by four cornerstones. To illustrate potential outcomes, we include short case examples from braver leaders who have applied these ideas in their leadership roles.

In our original framework, we had six aspects of leader development that individuals could work on in isolation or with their coach, and six further aspects that involved engagement with teams, employees and other stakeholders. With the help of many business leaders and coaches, we have now greatly expanded our guidance to encompass more than the coaching dyad and to provide practical ideas to enable the transition to greater awareness and enhance braver leadership potential. The book therefore involves the leader in

personal reflection and reflexivity in eight action areas which encompass the work that leaders must do at a personal level before they can influence effectively. In total, the eight chapters describe 32 key aspects of development together with exercises and examples for leaders to contemplate to help revise, hone or consolidate their leadership ability.

Chapter 1: Becoming Aware

Awareness helps leaders to become more conscious of their development needs, their limitations, habits and blind spots. In this first chapter, we introduce four cornerstones aimed at supporting leaders hone their awareness and share ways in which they can also support and encourage others. These cornerstones are identified as: (1) role reflexivity, (2) stealing time, (3) seeking feedback and (4) using critical friends.

We also share the ways in which leaders support and encourage others, having absorbed, and practiced if necessary, the developmental ideas of the process of becoming aware.

Chapter 2: Generating Desire, Motivation and Commitment

Chapter 2 is about generating desire which in turn leads to motivation and commitment. Understanding this trio of key drivers is vital to our goal of braver leadership. We also highlight how some leaders have begun to make necessary braver changes in relation to motivation and commitment and have begun to guide others through a similar journey.

The four cornerstones of generating desire are identified as: (1) becoming inspired; (2) the future you; (3) committing to commitment and (4) mind the gap!

Chapter 3: Challenging Mindsets

This chapter is about the leader developing a flexible mindset, one that is not stymied by defensiveness or other personality traps. In this chapter, we draw