



The Courage to Lead: The Person

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Executive Summary

Leading with courage begins with the self. This article is a continuation of our *Courage to Lead* series and explores the "Person" dimension of the Person–Role–System framework, examining how leaders build courage through understanding and managing themselves, managing information overload, strengthening their mindset, and practicing presence. By knowing your values, leveraging your strengths, understanding how you learn, and cutting through the noise, you create the foundation for courageous action in uncertain times.

What is personal courage? Aside from “bravery” and the like, personal courage requires understanding your actions in relation to: who you are, your role, where you work, and those with whom you work. Finding the courage to lead begins with both knowing and managing yourself.

As leaders, we must know how our behavior impacts those we lead. Easier said than done!

Personhood

A “person” is a complicated organism where thoughts, feelings, and physical, psychological, existential and environmental factors coalesce. And, the attributes that define who we are take shape over a lifetime. Our colleague Steve Axelrod (2024, 2025) has written extensively about the stages of development from post-adolescence through adulthood, defining four:

- Emerging Adulthood (ages 20–30)
- Established Adulthood (ages 30–45)
- Midlife (ages 45–65)
- Late Adulthood (ages 65+)

Each of these stages builds on the prior and offers unique developmental challenges and opportunities. How we understand and incorporate our development over our lifetime is the essence of self-learning and self-management. Unless we understand our motivations at the core of our behavior, it will be difficult to harness the energy of others.

This journey is further complicated by the fact that we bring conscious and visible (known and available) aspects of ourselves, and unconscious and hidden (unknown and not readily available) aspects to our interactions. How we engage is influenced by my unconscious reaction to you and your unconscious reaction to me. For simplicity's sake, we refer to the part of us that is visible as “above the surface” and that which is not as “below the surface.” This iceberg metaphor is a good visualization for understanding the parts we reveal as appearing above the waterline and the parts we keep hidden or do not know about ourselves as remaining below the waterline. As with an iceberg, only the tip emerges above the surface with much more occurring below.

The more work we do to know ourselves and the more transparent we are about who we are, the more of us appears above the waterline¹ and available to others.² Add to this your understanding of your role, others’ expectations of your role and multiply that by the number of roleholders in an organization, and a complicated world emerges with obstacles that could easily sink any boat. Navigating these waters alone is difficult.

Leading others through these iceberg filled waters of knowns and unknowns directly impacts individual and organizational outcomes.

Know Yourself: Four Core Questions

Knowing yourself is a lifelong journey. As we noted in the beginning of this post, we change as we go through life, accumulating different experiences that impact who we are. Understanding what motivates and guides our behavior as we adapt, grow and learn is critical. While we are not here to suggest lying on the couch for an extended analysis, we do think there are some practical things that help us become a courageous leader. To paraphrase Peter Drucker³, we need to be able to answer four questions:

- What are our values?
- What are our strengths?
- How do I learn and perform?
- What will I contribute?

Leaders should continually revisit these key questions as a way of monitoring and adjusting to the demands around them.

What are your values? Self-management breaks down when personal values are not known, not considered, disregarded or, worse, sacrificed. The “mirror test” is a stark reminder: what kind of person do I want to see when I face myself each morning? Working within an organization whose core values clash with your own inevitably breeds frustration and underperformance. No system operates without values (stated or not) and no individual, especially leaders, can remain indifferent to what truly matters. The key is for values to resonate, even if they do not perfectly match, achieving some form of tonality. Discovering your values is a process of understanding what matters most to you.

Start by considering your meaningful personal and professional experiences both good and bad. Dig deep to uncover as best you can how you felt. What brought you the greatest sense of fulfillment, satisfaction, anger, or disappointment? What aspects were most important to you? These responses signal underlying values.

Once you have compiled a list of values, compare them, consider the trade-offs between them and prioritize them. Pay close attention to the words that resonate with you currently, that produce a reaction in you. A value that induces a visceral negative or positive response should be prioritized. Take the prioritized short list (say five to seven) of responses and compare these to how you currently behave. This will provide you a sense of how you are currently living your values and/or what might be missing or off about your list.

Take your final list and write short descriptive sentences about each. Revisit this list often to see how your values hold up to your daily personal and professional choices. Identify any misalignments by asking yourself “Where is the tension?”

When values are not aligned they conflict, creating an internal dilemma of which we may or may not be aware. The greater the conflict the less we are able to show up as a full person, disabling our ability to find the courage to lead.

What are your strengths? Self-knowledge is non-negotiable for leaders. Drucker advised understanding and amplifying one’s strengths. While strength-awareness should be developed over years, leaders today need to know how they are perceived. 360° feedback, group dynamic surveys, personality and leadership assessments, after-action, monthly and quarterly reviews, and

other sources of ongoing feedback will identify strengths and areas for development.

Leaders who create a culture of continuous feedback are most able to leverage strengths, harness talent, and utilize all forms of feedback as a powerful resiliency tool.

How do you learn and perform? How one learns and performs is essential for successfully taking-up one's role. Do you learn by reading, talking, listening, writing, doing, or by solitary rumination? Are you most comfortable and at your best in crowds, groups or alone? Do you like to take the stage, present ideas or be the person behind the curtain? Are you inclined to sort through an abyss of data or rely on others to bring you the headlines for consideration? These distinctions matter, as a role ill-matched to temperament leads to mediocrity, however strong your intellect. Knowing what makes you the best is as important as what you can do.

What will you contribute? Another critical question for managing oneself is "What should my contribution be?" The effective leader articulates goals and measures results, holding themselves (and others) accountable. Being clear about your strengths, how you operate, what your guiding values are, and what you are trying to achieve is critical. Such clarity replaces uncertainty and aimless drifting with resolve and deliberate action. Again, Drucker's counsel offers a straightforward path by asking "What can I contribute that will significantly affect the performance and the results of the institution I serve?"

Knowing yourself requires:

- Identifying and naming the emotions you experience in the moment.
- Understanding how these emotions influence your thoughts and actions.

- Understanding the history, triggers and/or patterns that typically drive your emotional responses.
- Recognizing the impact your emotions have on others interpersonally, in teams and in social environments.

The courageous leader knows themselves deeply, understands what motivates them, works on continuously improving, and puts the needs of the organization and its people first.

Managing Yourself to Lead From Who You Are Today

Managing yourself is increasingly difficult with today's ever-increasing volume of inputs, some of which is relevant, some noise. Stopping the action to reflect on the self is critical to ensure we are operating at our best and in concert with our values. There are many ways to create space: some meditate, some give themselves alone time, some seek a coach or therapist, some take a walk, some have mentors and trusted people to speak with, and so on. The following emotional intelligence questions offer a practical guide for deeper self-management:

Self-Regulation

- When I experience strong emotions, am I able to pause and choose a constructive response instead of reacting impulsively and effectively calm myself when under stress?
- Can I adapt to changing circumstances and challenges without losing composure?
- Do I reflect on feedback or criticism objectively before responding, recognizing my defenses and admitting my faults, managing them in real time?
- Am I aware of what I consume and the impact it has on my mood?

Motivation

- Do I maintain enthusiasm and optimism in difficult situations or do I get easily discouraged?
- How do my values shape my actions, especially under pressure?
- Am I able to delay gratification and persist toward longer-term outcomes?
- In which areas of life do I actively seek improvement or growth, despite discomfort and are there others where I should avoid?

Empathy

- Can I see situations from another's perspective, check in with them to understand their perspective, and do I check my own biases regularly?
- Do I offer support to others who are stressed or upset?
- How do I handle differences in opinion or emotional reactions, and do I notice verbal and non-verbal cues?
- Do I understand the difference between sympathy and empathy and when do I use each?

Social Skills

- Can I communicate clearly and resolve conflicts when there are disagreements or misunderstandings?
- Do I build trust and maintain productive relationships?
- Do I provide constructive feedback, mentor and support others' development?
- How comfortable am I with silence interpersonally and in groups?
- Am I comfortable leading or facilitating others, and influencing group dynamics in positive directions?

Developing Yourself, a Summary

Developing ourselves is a lifelong pursuit that demands intentional choices about how, from whom, and in what ways we learn. Whether in structured programs and formal study, experimentation, iteration, and lived experience, or some combination, development requires us to acknowledge the gap between who we are today, what we know (and don't), and who we need to become. Closing that gap is a disciplined endeavor, especially vital in today's climate of constant disruption.

Growth is seldom a solitary journey. Mentors bring invaluable perspectives born of experience. Advisors contribute targeted expertise. Coaches offer sound guidance through complex challenges. Therapists help explore the conscious and unconscious drivers shaping decisions. Together, these relationships expand a leader's capacity, continuously refining both skill and character. By accessing support from others, leaders build the resilience and effectiveness needed to navigate uncertainty, noise, and information overload.

Consumption Is Not Action

We live in an age where we consume far more than we digest, intoxicated by too much information resulting in paralysis and stress. We are constantly stimulated, buried in dashboards, Slack® messages, social media, market news, articles, blogs, and comment threads. To make things worse, we multitask to the extreme, absorbing work updates while scrolling through grim headlines, checking texts, emails and other notifications in the middle of Zoom calls. We are left overstimulated, irritable, indecisive, overwhelmed, and anxious.

This constant state of overconsumption hijacks our ability to cope with stress. Prolonged overload of the limbic system raises cortisol and reduces the brain's capacity for higher-level thought. Courage gives way to reactivity and impulsivity. Leadership is already hard, infoxication⁴ makes it harder. We may listen to too many "opinions" about a hiring decision or chase short-term metrics ignoring how decisions will shape culture and impact the longer term. Overload erodes trust, stalls innovation, and replaces vision with reaction.

Building courage starts with practices that interrupt infoxication: pausing before reacting, trusting our own experience before deferring to others, clarifying what aligns with our values, and cutting out the noise that fuels anxiety. By tolerating uncertainty and making space for reflection, leaders expand their capacity for intentional action. Courage allows us to reclaim agency in an overwhelming world.

A checklist for managing information overload:

- Pause before reacting to new data.
- Ask if it aligns with my values and goals?
- Limit "expert opinions" to trusted sources.
- Create intentional offline spaces (walks, retreats, no-notification zones).
- Replace compulsive scrolling with reflection or dialogue.

Cultivating a Courageous Mindset

Social scientists are unanimous that courage begins with the full acceptance of reality. When leaders face situations as they are, not as they wish, they reclaim control and open the door to meaningful action. Courage bridges fear and action and is strengthened when values take precedence over feelings. Leaders who act from their values are clear on their *moral purpose*,⁵ fueling persistence and creating coherence and integrity.

Alongside purpose, leadership self-efficacy requires cultivating emotional stability and confidence under pressure. As noted earlier, self-regulation plays a key role. When unpleasant distractions or emotions interfere, leaders must direct their attention back to their most important priorities.

Over time, the discipline of maintaining a positive, purposeful, and self-controlled mindset helps courage become a repeatable skill. Every courageous decision affirms alignment between core identity and outward behavior.

Decreasing Fear

Fear narrows perspective and hijacks the limbic system, producing overarousal and anxiety. When leaders engage in problem solving and creative processes activating their default mode network⁶ and the prefrontal cortex, fear diminishes. Leaders can deliberately engage these parts of themselves through intentional consumption practices: limiting external voices and the internet, deploying AI appropriately as a tool, and identifying trusted colleagues, confidants and role models. Any creative endeavor helps suppress rumination, freeing the brain from constant vigilance, and can spark adaptive problem-solving.

Finally, decreasing fear requires eliminating the destructive habits that fuel it. Avoidance, over-control, procrastination, and reliance on numbing behaviors (like drugs and alcohol) prevent us from facing reality. While avoidance feels safe in the moment, it robs leaders of the opportunity to practice courage. To paraphrase Jeanette Winterson (2011, 2018), by removing risk, we remove the need to be courageous and the chance to see courageous acts. Courage grows from choosing to directly engage risk, not by avoiding it. Leaders who embrace risk wisely create space for courage to emerge for themselves and for those they lead.

Adaptability

Adaptation operates across several dimensions. Cognitively, it demands a shift of perception to a growth mindset that reinterprets disruption as opportunity. Behaviorally, it requires the conscious replacement of old routines with new ones. Environmentally, adaptation empowers reconfiguring workspaces, networks, and alliances to support renewal. Studies of resilience⁷ support that organizations that have purpose, adaptable leadership and structures, and psychological containment, perform better and are more resilient in the face of volatility.

Psychological flexibility extends this adaptive capacity into the inner domain. Rather than treating pressure as something to harden against, it builds the ability to redirect attention, reallocate energy, and act in line with values even amid uncertainty. Modern psychology⁸ frames this as a disciplined skill of bending without breaking that enables faster recovery, sustainable performance, and the pursuit of goals despite volatility. How we interpret setbacks, failures and change shapes the outcome. The challenge is to reframe change from a loss to an opportunity for growth.

Pausing and Presence

Growth isn't always predicated on speeding up and getting to the next rung on the ladder more quickly. The "sacred pause," as mindfulness practitioners call it, is the discipline of slowing down and anchoring in the moment. When under pressure, pausing often makes the difference between reacting impulsively and responding intentionally. If one's mind is on constant overdrive and we are "influxicated", noise will sweep in, we will become anxious and our judgment will be clouded.

Being authentically present or mindful is a practice. Jon Kabat-Zinn⁹ defines mindfulness as "paying attention, on purpose, in the present, and without judgment."¹⁰ Adaptability serves as a bridge enabling us to respond to what is outside us, while psychological flexibility allows us to navigate what lies within. Presence connects the two and without it leaders run the risk of being swept away with a false sense of momentum.

In these moments, speed and activity can feel productive, but without mindful presence, seemingly productive endeavours take us away from rather than drive progress. True momentum arises from thoughtful engagement with the present, enabling us to discern when to advance, when to hold steady or when to pause. Developing this discernment is critical to moving beyond superficial busyness towards meaningful impact.

Conclusion: From Person to Role

The courage to lead begins with the person: **you**. It requires honest self-awareness, the discipline to manage your impulses, and the humility to keep learning. Courage is not the absence of fear but the choice to act in alignment with values despite fear, noise, or uncertainty. By knowing and managing yourself, cutting the noise, developing, strengthening your mindset, and practicing presence, you build the foundation on which all other dimensions of courage sit.

Leadership does not exist in isolation. Who we are as people is only one part of the story. Our **roles** shape how courage is expressed and experienced by others. In the next article, we will turn to Role in the PRS framework and explore how courage goes beyond the self to the positions we occupy and the expectations that come with them.

References & Notes

1) Also see the *Johari Window* for another illustration of what is known and not known for a person. Johari Window, adapted from Joseph Luft, (1969), *Of Human Interaction*, Palo Alto, CA, National Press Books.

2) A note on transference and countertransference: one of our long-time clients, in her early days of being a CEO, aspired to have relationships with all 400 of her employees. She could not understand why certain employees were intimidated by her and silent in her presence. After all, she was very social, nice, and caring. We spent hours discussing what gets “put” on (and into) her just for having the title of CEO (and being a founder, smart, the boss, etc.). In psychology, this is known as transference and countertransference. Transference being the unconscious redirection of feelings and desires onto another person, and countertransference being one’s unconscious emotional reactions and feelings based on one’s history and another’s transference.

3) Drucker, P, (2005), *Managing Oneself*. Harvard Business Review.

4) Infocination is a blend of the words “information” and “intoxication” coined by Alfons Cornellà (1990s). It describes the overwhelming sensation that results when exposed to more data, news, and opinions than one can effectively manage or filter, often leading to information anxiety or cognitive overload.

5) A core guiding value or principle that shapes decisions and actions, often grounded in an individual’s or group’s sense of right and wrong and their desire to make a positive impact beyond personal interests.

6) The default mode network in neuroscience refers to a group of interconnected brain regions that show increased activity when a person is awake but not focused on external stimuli or specific tasks, such as during daydreaming, mind-wandering, recalling memories, or imagining the future.

7) Freeman, S., Hirschhorn, L. & Maltz, M., (2004). *The Power of Moral Purpose: Sandler O’Neill & Partners in the Aftermath of September 11th, 2001*, Organization Development Journal, Vol. 22, No. 4, 69-81, Winter 2004. Organizational Development Institute.

8) Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is a modern, evidence-based psychological intervention focused on increasing psychological flexibility through acceptance, mindfulness, and commitment to values-driven actions.

9) American scientist, Professor Emeritus of Medicine, University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School, and the creator of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, a widely influential program integrating mindfulness practices into mainstream medicine and health care.

10) Kabat-Zinn, J, (1994, 2023). *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*.



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