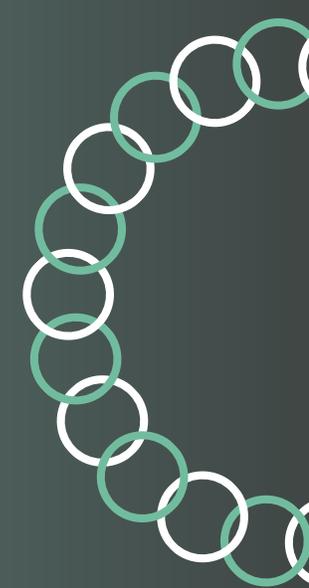




THE MONTHLY HOOP

August 2025



The Courage to Lead: An Introduction

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THE COURAGE TO LEAD

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Finding your voice in a noisy world is becoming ever more challenging. Our environment is saturated with competing narratives from financial, health, climate, family, and work; and the noise is clouding our best judgment. As business psychologists and executive coaches, we see a striking pattern: leaders are increasingly outsourcing decisions that once relied on hard-earned wisdom. They turn to trending articles, external “experts”, “playbooks” and AI recommendations to provide direction.

While these resources can offer value, overreliance on them risks diminishing the leader’s trust in their own discernment and weakening the ability to act from a place of conviction. At the center of this pattern is a deeply human attribute: **fear**. Fear is always present, whether recognized or not: fear of error, fear of being seen, fear of failure, the fear of missing out, and the list goes on.

The antidote to fear in this noisy world isn’t more data optimization, it’s **psychological courage**, defined as the capacity to tolerate uncertainty, remain rooted in core values, and act from a place of informed integrity. To help navigate this complexity, we introduce the Person–Role–System (PRS) framework grounded in systems-psychodynamic theory.¹

- **Person** – what is happening within me? How does my internal state influence my behavior?
- **Role** – what is expected of me, both explicitly and implicitly?
- **System** – what structural, cultural, and environmental forces shape my context?

- **Integration** – how do I align my internal state, my role, and the system I operate in to act effectively?

The PRS framework aids our understanding of where fear and noise arise, and guides courageous action in any context – from families to organizations.

Fear in a Noisy World

Addressing our fears is at the core of finding our courage. Our fears, though, are not always readily available to our conscious selves. A number of years ago we deeply researched resistance in organizations, especially resistance to change, and discovered that at the heart of *all* resistance is **the fear of loss**. Running workshops over two years that included thousands of participants, including CEOs of Fortune 100 companies, consultants, psychologists, and many other professionals, we compiled a large database of “fears” lurking behind resistance. The list of modern fears that can plague leadership is extensive and are often interrelated:

- **Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)** – anxiety that opportunities will be lost.
- **Fear of Missing Valuable Information** – worry about not seeing critical updates.
- **Fear of Being Excluded** – apprehension about social or professional marginalization.
- **Fear of Negative Evaluation** – concern about criticism or reputational harm.
- **Fear of Losing Standing or Influence** – anxiety over diminished relevance.
- **Fear of Not Mattering** – feeling insignificant or of being overlooked.

- **Fear of Intimacy** – hesitation to engage authentically as self-protection.
- **Fear of Social Media Fatigue** – exhaustion caused by relentless digital engagement.
- **Fear of Inciting Negative Reactions** – hesitancy to express dissenting opinions.
- **Fear of Authentic Self-Presentation** – tension between genuine expression and fear of judgment or fitting in.

Remote and hybrid work have exacerbated many of these fears by limiting face-to-face interactions and increasing reliance on mediated communication, where eye contact is limited and nuance often gets lost. These factors promote inauthenticity, lower self-esteem, and contribute to mental health challenges such as loneliness.² Consequently, many unconsciously avoid growth opportunities, drowning instead in noise.

The Dynamics of Noise

Noise is a critical psychological and organizational phenomenon that complicates judgment and amplifies fear. Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman defined noise as “unwanted variability in judgments.”³ It exists at three levels:

- **Occasion Noise** – internal states like mood, fatigue, or stress influence decisions differently on different days.
- **Level Noise** – different people interpret the same information differently.
- **System Noise** – inconsistencies in processes create unpredictable outcomes depending on who or what is involved.

Externally, noise may arise from various sources such as volatile markets, sensational news cycles, and algorithmically generated content. Internally, it manifests as self-doubt, perfectionism, and reactive

habits derived from personal history. Organizationally, noise produces inconsistent decisions and erratic stakeholder behavior.

Noise and fear create a feedback loop: noise increases uncertainty which fear attempts to resolve by reaching for premature or externally imposed solutions. This results in reactive leadership rather than thoughtful, values-aligned reflective leadership.

The Hidden Cost of Fear and Noise

Excessive noise leads to **decision fatigue**, depleting the cognitive capacity needed for thoughtful and complex judgments. Studies estimate that an average adult faces around 35,000 decisions daily.⁴ This tax on our attention leads to overwhelm and tends to lead us to shy away from difficult choices, lean too heavily on consensus, and/or shift responsibility elsewhere – providing short-term relief but gradually eroding credibility and authority.

Moreover, noise chips away at our sense of self, drawing us away from our core values toward conformity, anxiety management, or image preservation. It is here where the authentic voice of leadership risks being drowned out. While some degree of noise is necessary to inspire creativity and innovation, unchecked it is deadly. Fear-driven noise must be managed to avoid stagnation, groupthink, and a breakdown of trust.

Fear as a Designed Response

Fear evolved as a survival mechanism, managed by the amygdala to coordinate fight, flight, freeze, or shutdown responses. Neuroscientists distinguish between two types of fear:⁵

- **Anticipatory Fear** – anxiety about potential threats.

- **Reactive Fear** – response to immediate danger.

Modern threats are largely psychological – fear of insignificance, loss of control, disappointing stakeholders, or misaligning with values. Digital platforms amplify these fears through constant comparison and hyper-visibility.

Stoic philosophy offers enduring wisdom: “It is not things themselves that disturb us, but our opinions about them”.⁶ Leadership requires differentiating what is controllable/manageable (values, actions, responses) from what is not (others’ behavior, outcomes), reducing fear’s grip.

Self-Deception as a Coping Strategy

Rather than confronting fear directly, we often engage in self-deception to preserve psychological comfort:

- **Willful Ignorance** – avoiding information that could compel difficult action.
- **Systematic Ignoring** – keeping unsettling realities at the margins of awareness.
- **Distraction** – over-busyness as a substitute for introspection.
- **Self-Pretense** – acknowledging uncomfortable truths intellectually while avoiding emotional engagement with them.

While these strategies may protect us in the moment, they erode authenticity, impair decision quality, and limit the development of psychological courage.

Psychological Courage: Keeping Control of the Wheel

If fear is the “dark passenger” in the leadership journey – ever-present, sometimes quiet, sometimes insistent – psychological courage is the conscious act of keeping one’s hands on the wheel. It is not recklessness or denial of risk. It is the deliberate

choice to act when the perceived threat exceeds perceived resources, particularly when the threat is internal: shame, insecurity, or vulnerability.

Aristotle framed courage as the “golden mean” between cowardice and recklessness. Hemingway called it “grace under pressure.” In both cases, courage is a cultivated discipline, enabling leaders to act from their values rather than react from fear.

Courage as a Leadership Skill

Psychological courage is a skill that can be developed, not an innate trait. Each time a leader chooses integrity over comfort, truth over illusion, or responsibility over avoidance, the capacity for courage grows stronger. Cultivated over time, it equips us to navigate complexity without succumbing to over-control or appeasement.

The PRS Framework in Leadership

The PRS framework offers a practical map for navigating fear and noise in the pursuit of courage:

1. **Person** – the leader’s personality, including one’s internal world, identity, emotional history, and cognitive patterns, and their views of how they define and take-up their role (this also applies to the people they lead).
2. **Role** – the explicit and implicit expectations, authority, and boundaries given to a position.
3. **System** – the larger network of structural, cultural, and environmental forces in which the role operates.
4. **Integration** – aligning self, role, and system to make decisions consistent with both values and context.

Two distinctions sharpen this framework:

- **Role Taken vs. Role Given** – the interplay between what one brings to a role (taken) and what is assigned (given, i.e., the job description).

- **Task System vs. Sentient System** – the tangible deliverables of the role versus the emotional and relational dynamics shaping the role and its execution.

In a complex, technology-driven environment, courage is required to simultaneously navigate both task and sentient systems, and the complexities of role taken and given.

PRS and the Courage to Lead in Summary

Organizational life is dynamic, shaped by shifting interactions among people, roles, and systems. Fear and noise overlay this complexity, making the maintenance of clarity and cohesion challenging for leaders. PRS provides a framework for identifying where courage is required at the person, role, and systems levels, and for aligning these layers for purposeful action.

Subsequent articles in this series will examine:

- **Person** – how personality, namely identity, narratives, and emotional history shape courage.
- **Role** – how roles present a complicated dynamic life exacerbated by fear, and how courageous leaders restore balance.
- **System** – how organizations can design processes to attend to the person, align roles, contain noise, and enable courageous action.

Final Thoughts

We live in an era of complexity, speed, and scrutiny. Psychological courage is not optional – it is *the* foundation of effective leadership. Courage emerges from disciplined reflection on the intersection of self, role, and system, and from the willingness to face our fears and act in alignment with our values.

The noise will not go away. But our relationship to it, and to ourselves, can change. And that changes everything.

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