

**The Courage to Lead: Courageous Leaders Build
Courageous Systems**

hoopon@hoolahoop.io

hoolahoop.io

THE COURAGE TO LEAD: THE SYSTEM

by Jena Booher, PhD, Lee Kuczewski, Marc Maltz

Courageous leadership isn't about individual bravery—it's about developing systems with no need for heroes, where courage is distributed amongst many.

“If you tear down a factory but leave the thinking that produced it intact, you'll just build the same factory again.”

– Robert M. Pirsig, [Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry Into Values](#)

Introduction

In this fourth and final post of *The Courage to Lead* series, we explore how organizational systems offer both opportunities and challenges for the courageous leader. Organizations often mistake activity for effectiveness because they are unaware of or ignore the "sentient" (emotional and relational) dimensions of the system. Using the person-role-system framework, we examine how courageous leaders build systems where courage becomes distributed rather than dependent on heroics.

Previous posts in this series:

- *The Courage to Lead: An Introduction*
- *The Courage to Lead: The Person*
 - Self-knowledge as the foundation of courage
- *The Courage to Lead: Courageous Role-taking*
 - How courage is expressed through roles

The Person-Role-System Framework

Courageous leadership develops through three interconnected phases:

Phase 1: The Internal Foundation

- **The Person:** Courageous leadership begins with self-knowledge—understanding your values, strengths, and how you react to pressure.
- **The Role:** The bridge between you and the organization, where you examine both the role given to you as a leader, and the role you've taken based on your history and motivations.

Phase 2: Seeing the "Unthought Known"

The psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas¹ coined this term to describe patterns that everyone enacts but no one names. Courageous leaders develop the capacity to see and speak to what others sense but won't say out loud—the invisible dynamics that shape behavior.

Phase 3: Leading Task and Sentient Systems

Organizations operate simultaneously as task systems (structures, workflows, authority) and sentient systems (anxieties, identifications, fantasies, feelings, defenses, emotions, culture). Courageous leadership requires integrating both dimensions.

A Systems View

Systems are both rational and emotional, operating at a conscious level through their structures, and at an unconscious level where behavior is shaped by the interplay of psychological forces. A system is a network of roles, relationships, and structures through which work is done, and where unconscious motivations, fears, and conflicts exist below the surface. Organizations carry and contain individual and shared emotions, anxieties and

defenses that significantly influence performance, decision-making, individual and team behavior, overall group dynamics, and leadership.

A system, then, is a patterned whole where individual and collective inner worlds meet—often outside of awareness—and from which behavior and culture emerge. Systems, as noted, function simultaneously as a **task system** and a **sentient system**. Our previous post on *Courageous Role-Taking* explores how our actions and behaviors are influenced and directed by what is consciously and unconsciously taken by us and given to us.

Building Courageous Systems

Courageous leadership of systems—where multiple role-holders work in complicated task and sentient networks—rests on a foundation established in our previous posts:

Understanding Person and Role

A deep understanding of person and role is essential. Without it, systems work becomes abstract or defensive, focused on structure while ignoring the psychological forces that shape behavior. Courage is first cultivated internally, then tested relationally, before it can be sustained systemically.

Knowing and Managing Yourself

The building blocks of courage begin with the person. As leaders, we bring our full psychological history into our work, including our values, learned patterns, strengths, blind spots, and unconscious defenses. As explored in *The Courage to Lead: The Person*, self-knowledge is not optional—it's the foundation on which courage is built.

Leaders who understand how they react to pressure, how they learn, what motivates them,

and where fear tends to surface, are better able to pause, regulate emotion, and act thoughtfully rather than impulsively and reactively. Without this capacity, leaders often mistake urgency for clarity, consensus for alignment, and activity for effectiveness.

Peter Drucker's² four core questions anchor courageous self-management:

1. What are my values?
2. What are my strengths?
3. How do I learn and perform?
4. What will I contribute?

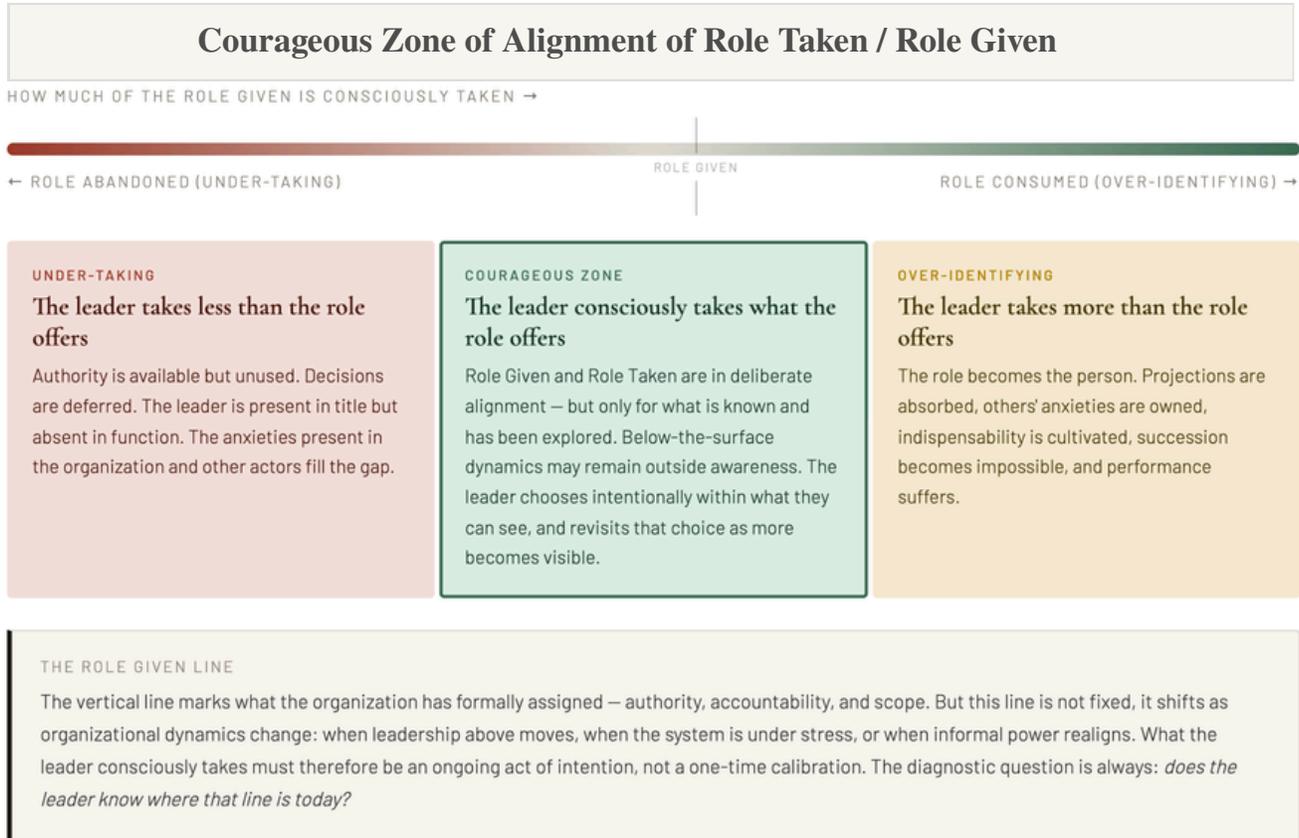
When these questions remain unexamined, leaders are likely to defer to others' opinions, become paralyzed by conflicting input, or rely on positional authority to manage anxiety.

Courage Expressed Through Role

Courage is expressed through the role—the bridge between the person and the system. As explored in *The Courage to Lead: Courageous Role-Taking*, every role carries both explicit and implicit responsibilities, expectations, authority, accountability, risks, and projections. Every role has two dimensions:

- **Role given** is the formal and informal expectations, authority, metrics, and norms assigned by the organization.
- **Role taken** is how the person inhabits the role, shaped by personality, history, interpretation, and unconscious motivation.

Courageous role-taking deliberately examines this intersection. Without it, leaders risk over-identifying with a role, absorbing projections and anxieties that are not theirs, or acting on expectations that were not consciously agreed to.



From Person to Role to System

Understanding person and role is a prerequisite for courageously leading a system. Self-knowledge and role clarity ground us and equip us to manage our impulses and reactions so we may observe patterns, mitigate risk, and promote thinking rather than suppress it. With this strong foundation, leaders can courageously lead systems that are complex, dynamic, fluid, while:

- Enabling courage to be distributed rather than relegated to heroics
- Mapping role and authority relationships at the task level to tie accountability to authority
- Establishing a coherent mission, vision, values, and strategy (see Collis & Rukstad, HBR³)
- Establishing organizational values, continuous learning, and performance development, bringing meaning to the sentient system (see *Double-Loop Learning* and *Model II Behavior*, Argyris⁴)

- Developing emotional awareness and empathy amongst the people they lead, containing fear and anxiety
- Building organizational resiliency (see Maltz et al.⁵) and adaptability (see *Adaptive Leadership*, Heifetz & Linsky⁶)

Courageous Leaders See What Others Don't

In organizations, the “unthought known” is everywhere:

- People whose influence consistently blocks decisions
- Topics that cause instant discomfort and swift avoidance
- Roles that become dumping grounds for organizational stress
- Initiatives that die without explanation
- Meetings where the real decisions happen elsewhere

Systems require the courage to see what is actually happening above and below the surface—a particular kind of observational discipline. The courageous leader steps back, observing patterns across time and context. They speak to what others sense or won't say out loud, bringing knowledge into conscious awareness where it can be thought about, examined, and addressed. They tolerate the discomfort of ambiguity, resisting the pressure to rush to solutions before understanding the problem. And critically, they question their own reactions and interpretations, recognizing that their view is partial and shaped by their "person" and "role" in the system.

When Sentience Overpowers Task

There are many examples of how systems succumb to sentience—where unaddressed emotional dynamics sabotage task effectiveness. Here are two examples:

AI Anxiety

Instead of just "integrating technology," leaders must address the fear of being replaced and the dread of loss of control. With the advent of AI, there is growing anxiety about whether people's work—and their jobs—will become obsolete. There are many examples of long-tenured, seasoned, and deeply knowledgeable leaders being warned to "find a way to integrate AI or your job may be in jeopardy." Instead of thinking about how AI might impact an area of responsibility, people become defensive and anxious.

To retain their best people and thinking, organizations need to capture the knowledge people contain, promote "human-centered AI," and build structures in which it is safe to talk about one's fears. And beware of what [Clay Shirky](#) describes as "emotional offloading"—

delegating social judgment to AI. Doing so can atrophy our capacity to navigate real-life relationships and lead to social de-skilling, further reducing our ability to engage the sentience present in our organization. A courageous leader can integrate new technologies like AI productively, enhancing the task system while respecting the underlying sentient system.

Tech Delays

What looks like a "technical debt" problem is often a "psychological safety" problem where the culture punishes bad news. A client company experienced last-minute delays with every product launch, explained as "unexpected technical debt and complexity." The new head of product noticed that these delays clustered around certain cross-functional handoffs, that certain voices were not heard while others dominated, and that the culture punished bad news.

What looks like a technical problem turned out to be anxiety about not meeting deadlines and disappointing the C-suite. This lack of transparency ensured that problems would surface only when they could no longer be hidden. The head of product created structured forums where risks could be raised early without blame, redistributed anxiety by making delay conversations routine rather than exceptional, and changed the consequences by publicly rewarding early problem identification. The sentient system in this client needed attention in order to build safety, redistribute and reduce anxiety, and change the consequences of speaking reality.

Integrating Task and Sentient Systems

The task system requires clarity about how work flows through the organization. Where does authority sit for decisions? What are the dependencies between roles, teams, and other stakeholders? Where are the

bottlenecks, the redundancies, and the gaps? Where does information flow or fail to flow? What gets measured and reported or conveniently ignored? Tools like responsibility charting (RACI) can help clarify role relationships at the task level, and input-output mapping can align roles, teams, and other stakeholders.

Though task clarity alone is insufficient, informal channels are always operating within systems. Dynamics such as competition, differing values, levels of trust and power, and undiscussed fears, stress, and anxiety must be surfaced and engaged. This represents the sentient system at work, where negative and positive dynamics coincide, acting as a dynamic field of driving and restraining forces (Lewin⁷).

Reading the sentient system requires additional skillsets. Leaders must pay attention to people's energy and emotions, noticing which topics generate disproportionate reactions, and where energy goes suddenly flat or defensive. They must:

- Listen for what gets discussed in hallways yet not surfaced in meetings
- Observe which roles or teams consistently are saviors or become scapegoats for broader failures
- Attend to the stories the organization tells about itself, and who the heroes and villains are in those stories

This kind of attention demands presence, patience, empathy, and the willingness to sit with uncertainty rather than retreat to the familiar territory of data, task, and structure.

Designing for Distributed Courage

If courage is to become a durable feature in an organization rather than a rare act of individual bravery, leaders must design it into the system. Distributed courage does not depend on heroic leaders. It occurs when structures, norms, and consequences make it safer and expected that many people in many roles will see clearly, speak honestly, and act responsibly.

Five Strategies for *Distributed Courage*

01 Build Early-Warning Systems, Not Post-Mortems

In fearful systems, truth arrives late, if ever.

Courageous systems create explicit forums where uncertainty and risk are named early, before decisions harden and defensiveness sets in. Use “pre-mortems” to imagine what could go wrong before launch. Rotate risk ownership so anxiety is distributed across the group instead of accumulating silently. Make standing questions like “What are we worried about but not saying?” part of regular team practice.

MEASURABLE INDICATOR

Track the lag time between when a risk is first identified and when it's raised to leadership. In courageous systems, this gap shrinks.

02 Align Authority with Accountability

Courage erodes when people are held accountable for outcomes they lack authority to influence.

Leaders must clarify decision rights, audit recurring escalations, and explicitly name the boundaries of responsibility to reduce learned helplessness and increase responsible risk-taking. Give people the authority for which they are being held accountable.

MEASURABLE INDICATOR

Count how many times decisions that should be made at one level are escalated upward. Frequent escalations signal misaligned authority and accountability.

03 Develop Leaders as Containers

At scale, a core feature of leadership is containing anxiety.

Leaders who can tolerate uncertainty without prematurely resolving it create space for others to think, speak, and act with courage. Develop this capacity through reflection, coaching, peer consultation, and deliberately practicing sitting with uncertainty without rushing to premature solutions.

MEASURABLE INDICATOR

Notice how quickly decisions are made after problems surface. Premature closure suggests anxiety, not clarity.

04 Change the Consequences of Speaking Up

Most organizations say they value candor, yet far fewer examine what actually happens to people who deliver bad news or challenge assumptions.

As Kim Scott argues in *Radical Candor*⁸, candor only works when leaders challenge directly while caring personally. When challenge is punished or care is performative, people learn quickly that silence is safer than truth. Leaders must change the consequences for delivering bad news by responding with curiosity rather than blame, reward early risk escalation, and hold themselves accountable for encouraging dissent. These shifts make courage repeatable rather than exceptional.

MEASURABLE INDICATOR

Survey teams anonymously about whether they feel safe raising concerns and whether people are penalized.

05 Design for Replaceability, Not Indispensability

The healthiest systems are led by those who assume their role is temporary and who actively develop their people to one day take over.

Courageous leaders do not position themselves as indispensable. Instead, they deliberately train others to think critically, exercise judgment, and challenge assumptions, even when that means being disagreed with. This requires leaders to build their team's thinking capacity. Rather than giving instructions, courageous leaders explain how decisions are made, invite others into the reasoning process, share data and access, and ask their teams to surface risks, alternatives, and dissenting views. Over time, authority becomes less centralized and courage becomes interdependent and distributed. Train your team to challenge your assumptions and exercise their own judgment.

MEASURABLE INDICATOR

Can decisions continue to be made effectively when you're absent? If not, you've built dependence, not capability.

Courage Is a Practice, Not a Trait

Courageous leadership is a set of choices made repeatedly in the face of fear, uncertainty, and complexity to rethink your lived experience, context, and judgment in alignment with your values. Courageous leadership requires the willingness to engage uncomfortable questions, address what others avoid, name what remains unspoken, make the hard choices, and act with empathy when the path is unclear.

The courage to lead emerges from understanding who you are, the roles you inhabit, and the system you serve.

Five Strategies at a Glance

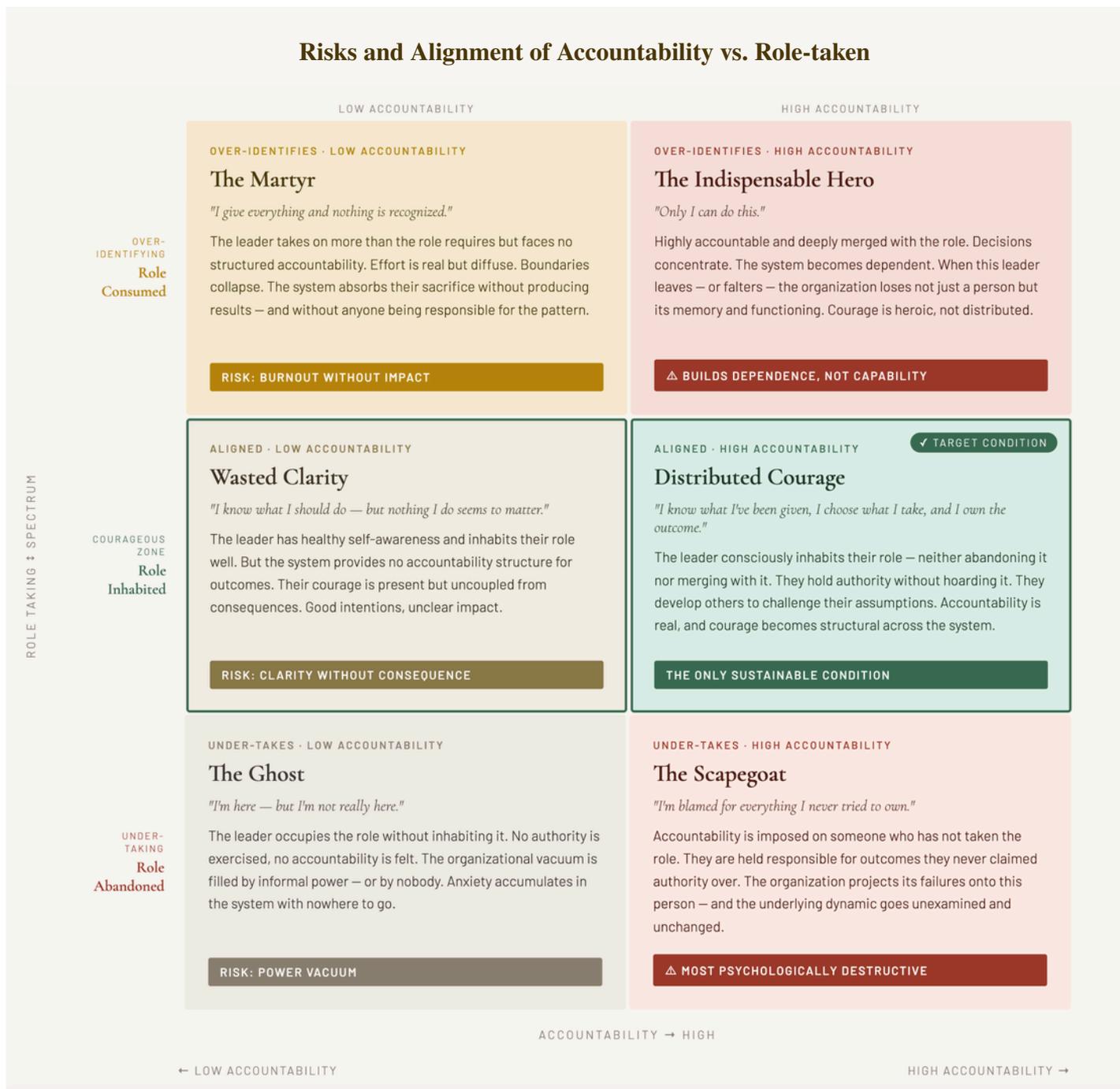
1. Build Early-Warning Systems
2. Align Authority with Accountability
3. Develop Leaders as Containers
4. Change the Consequences of Speaking Up
5. Design for Replaceability

Which strategy would have the greatest impact in your organization? Choose one and start tomorrow.

Under-taking, Aligned, Over-taking vs. Role-Given



Risks and Alignment of Accountability vs. Role-taken



References & Notes

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Marc Maltz, MBA

Marc is a partner at Hoola Hoop and brings over 40 years of experience as an advisor to the C-suite. He has helped for profit and nonprofit executives, boards and senior managers develop and transform their organizations. Marc teaches organizational psychology and sits on a number of boards. He has held executive positions at Triad Consulting Group LLC, Music Mining Co., NYNEX Corporation (Verizon), Westinghouse Electric Company, and AT&T.



Lee Kuczewski, ABOC, MS

Lee is an entrepreneur, interim executive and acting Chief Customer Officer at Heru, Inc. (Hoola Hoop sits on the Board of Heru). His work over the last 20+ years has been focused on co-founding, co-inventing, and advancing visual healthcare technologies. Lee advises founders, executive teams, and boards on transformational change, turnarounds, and customer-focused growth initiatives.

Authored by



Jena Booher, PhD

Jena Booher is a business psychologist, social scientist, and trusted advisor to startups across the country. Her mission is to help high-growth businesses transform their culture, build engaged teams, and chart the path for sustained success.

Clients describe Jena as an outcome-driven leader who is passionate and analytical with entrepreneurial hustle and strategic vision. On numerous occasions, she's been named the "secret weapon" of a company's success. Her ability to drive desired outcomes stems from her unique expertise. She holds a Ph.D in Psychology and worked in leadership at J.P. Morgan for over a decade.