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The Courage to Lead: Courageous Role-taking

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THE COURAGE TO LEAD: COURAGEOUS ROLE-TAKING

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Executive Summary

Courageous leaders don't just accept a job description, they shape the role they inhabit, including the risk they are willing and able to hold. This series peers into the courageous leader parsing key aspects of courage using the "person-role-system" framework. Our two prior posts offered an overview for the series and an exploration of the "person"–why courageous leaders need to "know themselves". In this next post, we explore "role" and the courageous leader. Role is core to understanding how one operates within a system, and requires the leader to be aware of the conscious and unconscious forces at play as they take-up their role.

Role as the Bridge

Role[1] is the bridge between the *person* and the *system*. It represents both expectations and identity: what is given to you and what you choose to take up. A role carries tasks, authority, and accountability, as well as the projections, fears, and hopes from the broader organization that often remain unspoken.

A role has an inordinate number of demands biting at all of its surfaces. From the demands we bring as the person in role, to the needs and expectations of the system in which the role operates, a role holder is pushed and pulled in extraordinary ways. Courage in role requires staying grounded in one's purpose, values and tasks, and maintaining clear boundaries amid a system's fear, noise, and competing expectations.

Role Given and Taken

Every role has two sides: what is handed to you and what you inhabit.

- *Role given*–the formal and informal position, replete with expectations, scope, authority, title, metrics, and the unwritten rules about "how things get done here."
- *Role taken*–how an individual inhabits the role, including interpretations, projections, personality, history, expectations, aspirations, and conscious and unconscious motivations.

The intersection of "given" and "taken" is where most dynamic forces play out–expectations, authority, boundaries, conscious and unconscious motivation, task, purpose, values, and more. This is why two subsequent people in the same role will have very different approaches, outcomes, and experiences.

Role given and role taken are further shaped by two systems present in all organizations: the task system and the sentient system.

- The task system is the set of responsibilities and deliverables for a particular role, with inputs and outputs that create a "system" of work.
- The sentient system is the subjective quality of experience–what it feels like to hold the role, including feelings about what one brings and what is given.

People have experiences and emotions about their role that form a sentient system around them, often

more powerful than the formal task system. Ignoring the sentient system is how leaders end up carrying unspoken anxiety, unresolved conflicts, and the emotional labor of the organization without realizing how it shapes their performance and well-being.

The following figure[2] is a quick look at how role given and taken engage the task and sentient systems:

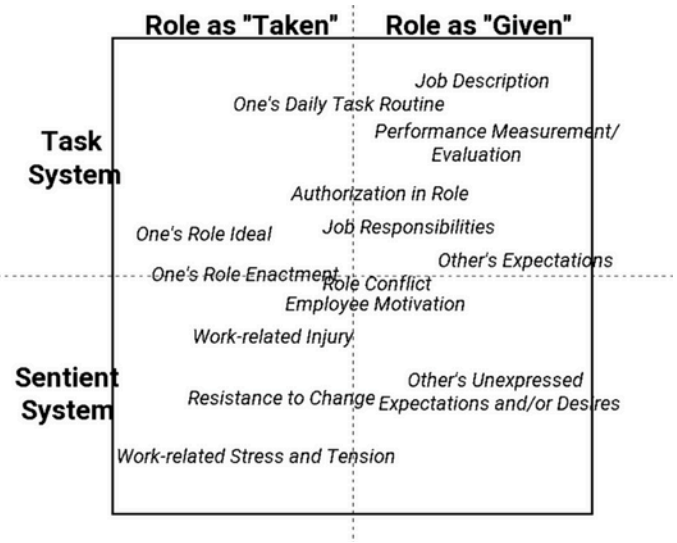

Fig. 1 2x2 Matrix: Role as "Taken" vs. Role as "Given" / Task / Sentient System

Knowing the Role

Before committing to, shaping or reshaping a role, courageous leaders study the role itself. They look beyond the job description and ask deeper questions about culture, colleagues, values, and the many "given" aspects that come with the seat. They also explore their own expectations, desires, ambitions, and the personal history they bring into the role.

Leaders must consider what psychologists call the "projective field", the matrix of conscious (stated and unstated) and unconscious expectations, wants, needs, perceptions, and biases projected onto the role holder by those around them. To know a role, at minimum ask:

- What are the non-negotiable tasks and outcomes required of this role?
- What authority does the role holder actually have for each of these tasks? (Empowerment is the sum of this authority.)
- Who are the key stakeholders and what are their expectations, connections (inputs and outputs), perceptions, and needs?
- As the role holder, who and what am I dependent on to complete specific tasks, and what are these relationships like?

This is a powerful place that requires unpacking and understanding; a place that stimulates reactions in us that are both in our awareness and not. These questions help map what is "given" and what will need to be consciously "taken" or negotiated.

Knowing Yourself in Role

Courage in taking up a role requires tolerating tension between who we are authentically and what others want or need from us. This tension is impossible to navigate without a strong understanding of self. In the previous article, four questions from Peter Drucker[3] were highlighted to cultivate courageous self-knowledge: what are my values, strengths, learning and performance styles, and contributions?

Once leaders can answer these questions for themselves, they can use them to shape a specific role. They might ask:

- How do my values map onto the team's and stakeholders' values?
- How do my unique strengths align with the demands of this role?
- How does my learning style fit within this organization's pace and structure?
- How can I contribute to positively influence the broader system?

Courageous role-taking involves an expanded awareness of how we fit within a system, what we bring to it, and what it demands of us in return.

Tolerating Fear, Uncertainty and Risk

Every role carries risk. Will I succeed or fail? Do I have what it takes? Not all roles hold the same degree of risk even within the same executive team. Roles that are more senior, have greater span of responsibility, and/or require long-term vision and building for the future, inherently carry more risk.

Leaders should assess the risk profile of a role and consciously decide whether they have the tolerance, temperament, resources, and support system to hold that risk. Beyond their immediate responsibilities, they must consider:

1. *Relational risk*–will my team accept my leadership? Will peers recognize me as an equal? What is the relationship of my team with other teams?
2. *Stakeholder risk*–what is my relationship to all of my stakeholders and do they value my perspective and listen?
3. *Systemic risk*–how much tolerance for change does the organization actually have? Have we adequately assessed systemic risks? If I see clear issues, will I feel safe enough or have the courage to name them?

Much of this risk is subjective and only revealed once we're in the seat. Courageous leaders develop the capacity to tolerate not knowing; to act amid uncertainty while staying connected to values and purpose.

Managing Fear and Reducing Unnecessary Exposure

While tolerating uncertainty and taking risk is essential, courageous leaders also find ways to manage fear and reduce unnecessary exposure.

They:

- *Stay grounded in purpose, task, and values amid external pressure.* When peers or executives pull you in conflicting directions, clarity of purpose acts as an anchor.
- *Build a network and seek guidance from trusted peers, mentors, or coaches who have held similar roles.* These relationships dampen the noise and normalize uncertainty.
- *Maintain contained role definition*. In startup and politically charged environments, role creep is common. The key is to remain open to evolution while holding firm boundaries, knowing where you end and someone else begins. This combination of tolerance and boundary-setting is at the heart of courageous role-taking.

How Courage Shows Up: Confidence, Character, and Credibility

Amos and Klimoski's research on courage[4] in teams identifies three dimensions that bolster courageous action in role: confidence, character, and credibility. These dimensions interact with both role given and role taken, shaping how leaders act under pressure.

1. *Confidence*–insecure people rarely take chances. Confident leaders take chances even amid uncertainty, and have an increased capacity to see the unseen and using this knowledge to set themselves up for success. Amos & Klimoski describe two key forms of confidence relevant to courage:
    a. Generalized Self-Efficacy (GSE)–our belief in our ability to perform competently in a range of situations. High GSE increases our willingness to act courageously in the presence of risk and underscores the importance of building

competence where confidence follows mastery.

b. Leadership Self-Efficacy (LSE)–the belief that one can successfully exert leadership influence by setting direction, gaining commitment, and overcoming obstacles. LSE introduces a social dimension to confidence where confidence in oneself is combined with one's ability to mobilize others.

Leaders high in both GSE and LSE are more likely to exhibit courage. They act despite ambiguity because they trust their skills and their capacity to lead through others, and they can more clearly see "role given" because they are not consumed by self-doubt. For example, a newly hired executive inheriting a role with a history of failed hires can recognize unsaid expectations and organizational shame, ask who held the role before and why it did not work, and co-create a 30/60/90-day plan to clarify expectations.

2. *Character*–character combines moral and non-moral attributes of effective leadership, including judgment, work ethic, honesty, integrity, respect, and service to the greater good. Two facets are especially relevant to courageous role-taking:
   a. *Duty*–the commitment to meet team needs through consistent follow-through and doing what is right rather than merely expedient, maintaining a high say/do ratio and modeling accountability for others.
   b. *Authority*–understanding the nature of one's power and how to use it responsibly. There are two forms of authority in any system, formal and informal. Formal authority is usually given by the organization through title, reporting lines, and decision rights. Informal authority is often taken by the role-holder through credibility, trust, competence and consistency between words and actions.

Both are necessary and neither alone is sufficient. Leaders who rely solely on their given formal authority risk rigidity and fear-based compliance. Those who rely only on their taken informal authority risk blurred accountability. Courage lies in using authority *in service of the task and the system*, not in defense of ego or identity.

A COO, for example, may have formal accountability for operational excellence and cross-functional alignment. One COO might interpret their duty narrowly and execute within a tight remit, while another may interpret their duty more expansively, anticipating downstream issues and initiating difficult conversations early. Character reveals itself in how leaders interpret and enlarge (or shrink) their duty within the role.

3. *Credibility*–the power of inspiring belief–determines whether others accept your leadership, especially through uncertainty. It is composed of:
   a. *Relationship Capital*–the trust and goodwill built through authentic, consistent interactions.
   b. *Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities*–the technical and interpersonal competence that supports credibility.
   c. *Influence*–the ability to align and mobilize others toward a shared goal.

Without credibility, even confident or principled leaders will struggle to act courageously in role. Credibility can be eroded when leaders with unresolved past trauma (e.g., prior layoffs or toxic cultures) overcompensate with people-pleasing or political maneuvering, taking up the role from anxiety rather than grounded presence. Highly credible leaders, by contrast, face less resistance, see their ideas trusted and acted upon earlier, and require less socialization to gain alignment.

Integrating Confidence, Character, and Credibility

In practice, confidence, character, and credibility reinforce one another. Confidence without character becomes arrogance; character without credibility risks moral intention without impact; credibility without confidence erodes authority. Courageous leaders cultivate all three in balance, developing self-efficacy to act, anchoring decisions in integrity, and building trust through consistent follow-through. Together, these three dimensions form a psychological foundation for courageous role-taking. They allow leaders to see what is being given and projected onto them, to decide consciously what to take on, and to use their authority and relationships in service of the organization's task and health.

The Leadership Paradox: Authority and Control

Not all leadership roles carry equal risk. Understanding where a role sits on the risk spectrum is essential for courageous role-taking. A leadership paradox emerges when mapping formal authority against personal and organizational risk: *as authority increases, actual control over outcomes often decreases.*

An individual contributor might have a small share of formal authority but control the vast majority of outcomes through direct execution, while a CEO may hold full formal authority yet control only a fraction of the company's fate due to delegation, market forces, regulation, competition, and capital availability. This widening "authority–control gap" as one moves up the hierarchy fundamentally changes what leadership requires and how courage must be exercised.

Fig. 2 Role Risk Matrix - Formal Authority x Risk

Comparative Role Data

Role	Formal Authority	Actual Control	Authority-Control Gap	Personal Risk Level	Dunbar Status
CEO	100%	10%	90%	EXTREME	Far beyond (>>150)
Chief Customer Officer	75%	10%	65%	Very High	Beyond (>150)
CTO / COO	75%	20%	55%	Very High	Beyond (>150)
VP / Senior Director	60%	35%	25%	Moderate-High	At threshold (~150)
Director	50%	40%	10%	Moderate	Approaching (~100-150)
Project Manager	30%	20%	10%	Moderate	Below (<150)
Manager / Team Lead	40%	65%	-25% (Surplus)	Low-Moderate	Below (<50)
Individual Contributor	20%	85%	-65% (Surplus)	Low (Contained)	Well below (<20)

Fig. 3 Comparative Role Data & Authority Control Gap

The Four Risk Zones

Roles tend to cluster into four risk zones when considering formal authority and personal/ organizational risk.

Zone	Typical Roles	Core Risk Dynamics
Safe Zone	Early-career leaders, senior ICs	Low authority, low risk; success driven by personal competence and direct execution.
Building Zone	Mid-level managers, some directors	Moderate authority, moderate risk; success requires influencing others and navigating politics.
Pressure Zone	Functional heads, senior directors	Moderate authority, high risk; outcomes depend on multiple teams beyond direct control.
Crisis Zone	CEOs, C-suite executives	High authority, extreme risk; maximum responsibility with limited control over key outcomes.

Fig. 4 Table of Risk Zones by Core Risk Dynamics

When considering a new role–or re-examining a current one–leaders can profitably ask where their role sits on the risk matrix. The answer has direct implications for the level of emotional resilience, support systems, and courage required to hold the seat.

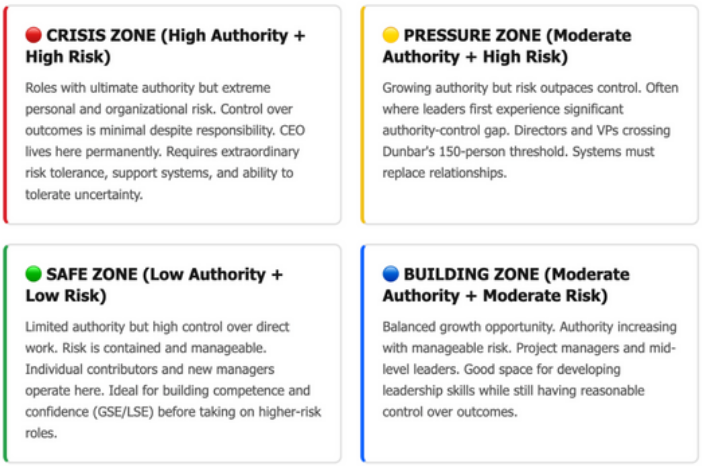

Fig. 5 The 4 Risk Zones

Inherited Baggage and Unseen Risk

When accepting a leadership role, you inherit far more than a job description. You inherit organizational history, a previous leaders' failures or successes, unresolved conflicts, and what psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas[5] calls the "unthought known", the unconscious organizational patterns that everyone acts on but no one names.

This baggage may show up as skepticism if prior leaders failed, impossible comparisons if they succeeded, or deposited anxiety as the organization uses the role as a container for fears that should be distributed across teams. Contradictory unspoken expectations remain "unthought" until the leader stumbles into them, often in moments of crisis or change.

Leaders with high GSE and LSE are better equipped to navigate inherited baggage. Their confidence allows them to observe projections more clearly and differentiate between what is legitimately theirs to hold and what is being put on them. They ask critical questions before accepting roles: Who held this role before and why did they leave? What systemic issues will I inherit? Where will my authority actually end, even if accountability extends further?

Making the Invisible Visible: Seen and Unseen Risk

Finding ways to make the invisible undercurrents of an organization visible takes deliberate practice. The distinction between visible and unseen role realities helps illuminate undercurrents that increase role risk. Visible risks include clear performance targets, budgets, and timelines, while unseen risks include unresolved power struggles, cultural taboos, and conflicts between stated and actual values.

Exploring both seen and unseen risk allows leaders to enter roles with realistic expectations rather than the idealized description they were sold. Courage here is not fearlessness but clear-eyed assessment of risks, wisdom to distinguish legitimate demands from deposited dysfunction, and the confidence to set boundaries that serve both leader and organization.

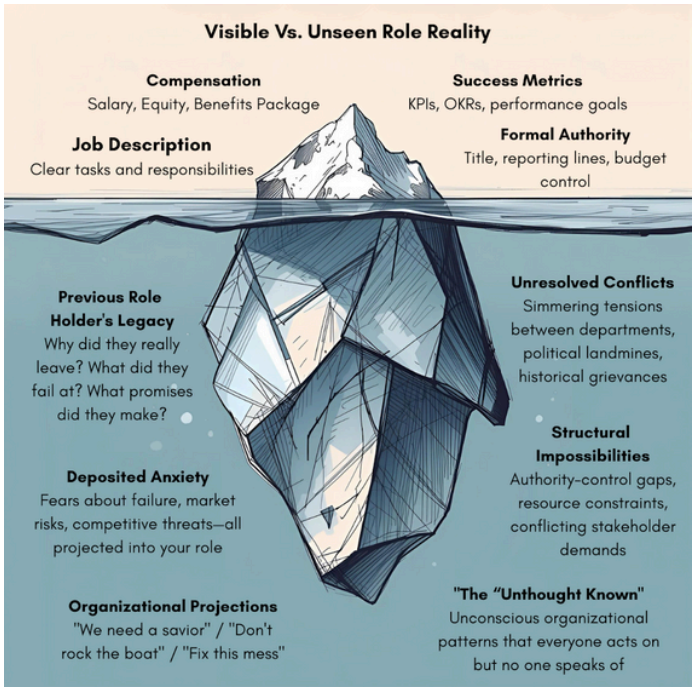

Fig. 6 Visible vs. Unseen Role Reality

Four Questions for Courageous Role-Taking

Courageous role-taking requires assessing at least four dimensions before saying yes to or deciding how to reshape role:

- Where does this role sit on the risk matrix, and what does that imply for my energy and resilience?
- What inherited baggage and "unthought knowns" am I likely to encounter in this role?
- Do I have the tolerance, temperament, and support system for this level of risk at this point in my life and career?
- Can I negotiate for the authority, resources, and boundaries I will need, and am I willing to let go of what is not mine to carry?

Understanding the give and take of a role is key. Leaders who explore these questions enter roles more intentionally, having a greater capacity to act courageously amid uncertainty, and a finer sense of what to take on, what to challenge, and what to put down.

References & Notes

1) Role can be defined in a number of ways: as the character assigned or assumed, such as a part played by an actor in a performance; the function or part performed in a specific operation, organization, or process; an individual's characteristic and/or social behavior; and/or someone's purpose, part or influence.

2) Krantz, J. & Maltz, M., (1997), "A Framework for Consulting to Organizational Role", *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, American Psychological Association.

3) Drucker, P. F. (1999). Managing oneself. *Harvard Business Review*, 77(2), 64–74.

4) Amos, B. & Klimoski, R.J., (2014), *Courage: Making teamwork work well*., Sage Journals.

5) Bollas, C., (1989), *The Shadow of the Object*, Columbia University Press.

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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.