



BOOK REVIEW

Dare to Lead

Brené Brown

Brave work. Tough conversations. Whole hearts. What courage actually looks like at work.

The Single Most Important Idea

Brown's central argument is simple: courage is not a personality trait you are born with. It is a set of skills, and skills can be taught, practised, and got better at. The engine of all of it is vulnerability. You cannot lead bravely while armouring up to avoid discomfort. The leaders who make the biggest difference are the ones willing to have the hard conversation, sit in uncertainty, and stay open when shutting down would be easier.

For principals, this matters because the job is one hard conversation after another. The teacher who is coasting. The parent who wants a scalp. The board member who keeps wandering into operations. Most of us armour up: we go vague, we go busy, we go nice, we avoid. Brown's point is that the armour is the problem, not the protection. The discomfort you are dodging is the exact thing leadership asks you to walk towards.

You cannot get to courage without rumbling with vulnerability.

Section Breakdown

Dare to Lead is built around one big claim, that daring leadership is a collection of four skill sets, and then it teaches each one in turn. That is the natural way to break

the book down, so the four courage skills are used here as the primary units rather than individual chapters.

"Courage is a collection of four skill sets that can be taught, observed, and measured. The four skill sets are: Rumbling with Vulnerability, Living into Our Values, Braving Trust, and Learning to Rise." — Brown, Dare to Lead

Skill One: Rumbling with Vulnerability

One-line summary: courage starts with being willing to show up when you cannot control the outcome.

Key argument

Vulnerability is not weakness, oversharing, or losing. It is the willingness to act when you cannot guarantee how it will land. Every act of courage requires it, so avoiding vulnerability quietly caps how brave you can be.

Main lesson

A "rumble" is a real conversation held with honesty and curiosity rather than armour, and leaders have to be able to start one and stay in it.

Quote

"Our ability to be daring leaders will never be greater than our capacity for vulnerability." — Brown, Dare to Lead

What it means

Whatever ceiling you have on being uncomfortable is the same ceiling you have on your leadership. Duck the awkward stuff and you shrink.

Why it matters

Principals set the emotional tone of a school. If the leader cannot name the hard thing, the staffroom learns that hard things do not get named here.

How to use it today

Name the conversation you have been avoiding this term. Book it. Go in curious rather than armed, and use "the story I am telling myself is..." to say what you fear without accusing anyone.

Skill Two: Living into Our Values

One-line summary: values are only real when your behaviour shows them, especially when it costs you something.

Key argument

Most people and organisations have too many values, which means they have none. Brown pushes you to name two, then define the behaviours that show them and the behaviours that betray them.

Main lesson

A value you cannot see in someone's diary, decisions, and hard calls is just a poster.

Quote

"Living into our values means that we do more than profess our values, we practise them." — Brown, Dare to Lead

What it means

Values are a verb. They are what you do under pressure, not what you print on the wall by the office.

Why it matters

Schools are values-heavy places, and staff read the gap between what the leader says matters and what the leader actually protects. That gap is where trust leaks.

How to use it today

Pick your two. Then write, for each, three behaviours that show it and three that slide against it. Test your last hard decision against them. If it fails, that is useful.

Skill Three: Braving Trust

One-line summary: trust is not a grand gesture, it is built one small moment at a time.

Key argument

Trust feels vague until you break it into parts. Brown uses the marble jar image, small deposits and withdrawals over time, and the BRAVING inventory to make trust something you can actually talk about.

Main lesson

When trust wobbles, you do not need a big speech, you need to find which specific element has slipped.

Quote

"Trust is built in very small moments." — Brown, citing John Gottman, Dare to Lead

What it means

Nobody hands over trust in one go. It is the stacking of small, reliable, honest moments, and it comes apart the same way.

Why it matters

"I don't trust her" is a dead end in a staffroom. "She agrees things in the meeting then does something else" is a reliability problem you can name and fix.

How to use it today

Next time trust feels off with a colleague, run it through BRAVING (below) and find the one letter that is the real issue. Talk about that, not the whole person.

Skill Four: Learning to Rise

One-line summary: brave leaders will fall, and the skill is getting back up on purpose rather than by accident.

Key argument

If you dare, you will get knocked down. Resilience is not toughing it out, it is a process: recognise the emotion, get honest about the story you are telling yourself, and rewrite it against the facts.

Main lesson

The stories we invent in the low moments are usually harsher and less accurate than the truth, and left unchecked they drive our behaviour.

Quote

"The most dangerous stories we make up are the narratives that diminish our inherent worthiness." — Brown, Dare to Lead

What it means

In a setback our brain fills the gaps fast, and it usually fills them with "I'm not good enough." That first story is rarely the real one.

Why it matters

Principals take knocks weekly: the complaint, the failed initiative, the staff member who leaves unhappy. Whether you rise well decides whether you are still standing in October.

How to use it today

After a hard day, write the sentence "The story I'm telling myself is..." Then ask what you actually know versus what you are assuming. Rewrite it honest.

Leadership Tools and Frameworks

Tool: The BRAVING Inventory

What it is: a way to break trust into seven parts so you can name exactly where it has broken instead of writing a person off.

How it works. BRAVING stands for:

- Boundaries: you are clear about what is okay and what is not, and you respect mine.
- Reliability: you do what you say you will do, again and again, not just once.
- Accountability: you own your mistakes, apologise, and make it right.
- Vault: you keep confidences; what I share stays with you, and you do not trade in other people's information.
- Integrity: you choose courage over comfort, and what is right over what is easy or fast.
- Non-judgment: I can ask for help, and you can too, without either of us keeping score.
- Generosity: you assume the most generous interpretation of my words and actions.

Worked example. A DP feels her principal does not trust her. Run BRAVING and it turns out the issue is the Vault: the principal shared something the DP said in confidence during a staff meeting. That is specific, and it is fixable. "I don't feel trusted" was not.

Introducing it to a team. Hand out the seven elements and ask each leader to self-score, then pick the one they most want to strengthen. It works far better as a self-audit than as a stick to measure others with.

Caution: do not use BRAVING to build a case against someone. Used as a weapon it destroys the very thing it is meant to build.

THE BRAVING INVENTORY

Trust becomes easier to repair when we can name exactly where it has broken.

B

BOUNDARIES

Be clear about what is okay and what is not – and respect the boundaries of others.



R

RELIABILITY

Do what you say you will do, again and again – not just once.



A

ACCOUNTABILITY

Own your mistakes, apologise, and make things right.



V

VAULT

Keep confidences. What is shared with you stays with you.



I

INTEGRITY

Choose courage over comfort, and what is right over what is easy or fast.



N

NON-JUDGMENT

Ask for help – and allow others to do the same – without keeping score.



G

GENEROSITY

Assume the most generous interpretation of another person's words and actions.



WORKED EXAMPLE

A DP feels her principal does not trust her. BRAVING identifies the real issue: VAULT. Something shared in confidence was repeated at a staff meeting. The issue is now specific – and fixable.



USING IT WITH A TEAM

- ✓ Self-score each element. Choose one area to strengthen. Share the action you will take.
- ✓ Use BRAVING as a self-audit, not a scorecard for judging others.



CAUTION

Do not use BRAVING to build a case against someone. Used as a weapon, it destroys the very trust it is meant to build.

Tool: “Clear is kind, unclear is unkind”

What it is: Brown's rule for hard conversations and feedback.

How it works. Being vague to spare someone's feelings is not kindness, it is avoidance dressed up as niceness. Feeding someone half-truths, stalling on a decision, or hinting rather than saying it leaves them worse off. Say the real thing, plainly and with care.

Worked example. A teacher is not meeting expectations. The unkind move is a warm chat that never quite says so, then a shock at appraisal time. The kind move is naming the gap early, clearly, with a genuine offer of support.

How a principal uses it. Before a tough conversation, write the one sentence you are tempted to soften into mush. Then say that sentence, kindly. Clarity is the respect.



CLEAR IS KIND. UNCLEAR IS UNKIND.

THE BIG IDEA

Being vague to spare someone's feelings is not kindness. It is avoidance dressed up as niceness.



UNCLEAR



Half-truths



Hints instead of honesty



Delayed decisions



Warm words with no clear message



CLEAR



Name the real issue



Speak plainly and with care



Be specific about the gap



Offer genuine support



WORKED EXAMPLE

A teacher is not meeting expectations.

UNCLEAR: A warm chat that never names the concern — followed by a shock at appraisal time.

CLEAR: Name the gap early, explain the evidence, and offer support to improve.



FOR PRINCIPALS

➤ Before a tough conversation, write the one sentence you are tempted to soften into mush.

➤ Then say that sentence — kindly.

CLARITY IS THE RESPECT.

Framework: Armoured Leadership vs Daring Leadership

What it is: Brown lists the self-protective behaviours leaders reach for, and the braver alternative for each.

- Armoured: being a knower and always right. Daring: being a learner and getting it right.
- Armoured: hiding behind cynicism. Daring: modelling clarity, kindness, and hope.
- Armoured: using power over others. Daring: using power with, to, and within.
- Armoured: leading for compliance and control. Daring: cultivating commitment and shared purpose.

Worked example. A principal who answers every staff question with the final word trains a staff that stops thinking. The daring move is to say "I don't know, let's work it out," which costs a little status and buys a lot of ownership.

How a leader uses it. Notice your go-to armour when you are fired or threatened. Most of us have one. Name it, and you can choose the braver move instead of defaulting to it.

Framework: Learning to Rise — the reckoning, the rumble, the revolution

What it is: Brown's three-step process for getting back up after a knock.

- The reckoning: notice you are hooked. Something has landed, and you feel it in your body before you can explain it.
- The rumble: get honest about the story you are telling yourself, then check it against the facts. What do you actually know?
- The revolution: the rewrite sticks and changes how you lead, rather than being a one-off pep talk.

Worked example. A principal bombs a staff meeting on a new initiative. The reckoning is the sick feeling driving home. The rumble is writing "The story I'm telling myself is that I've lost the staff," then noticing the actual evidence is three people frowned. The revolution is changing how you introduce the next change, not abandoning it.

Brad's Take

This is the one I keep coming back to when a principal is stuck on a conversation they know they have to have. Brown gives you language that lands with school leaders: rumbling with vulnerability, clear is kind, the story I'm telling myself. Those phrases stick because they name what people already feel but could not say.

I would use BRAVING with any leadership team where trust has gone quiet, and "clear is kind" with every leader who confuses being nice with being honest. It suits principals, DPs, and aspiring leaders more than boards.

The honest caveat: it is more memoir and story than tight manual, and it is very American in places. Read it for the ideas and the language, not for a step-by-step system, and it earns its place on the shelf.