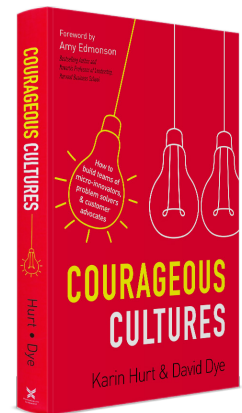


# Courageous Cultures

How to Build Teams of Microinnovators, Problem Solvers, & Customer Advocates

by **Karin Hurt & David Dye**



## Contents

What Is a Courageous Culture?

Page 2

Overcoming Courage Crushers, Common Mistakes, and Other Barriers to Courageous Culture

Page 3

Navigate the Narrative

Page 4

Cultivate Curiosity

Page 5

Respond With Regard

Page 6

Practice the Principle

Page 6

Galvanize the Genius

Page 7

## THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Employees have ideas and want to be heard. Leadership wants to hear them. Too often, however, employees and leaders both feel that no one cares about making things better. The disconnect typically only widens over time, with both sides becoming more firmly entrenched in their viewpoints.

In *Courageous Cultures*, authors Karin Hurt and David Dye argue that in our world of rapid change, a Courageous Culture is your competitive advantage. Why? Because a Courageous Culture ensures that your company is “sticky” for both customers and employees.

The authors explain that becoming a Courageous Culture means building teams of Microinnovators, Problem Solvers, and Customer Advocates working together. They explain these roles, along with practical tools to uncover, leverage, and scale the best ideas from every level of your organization. *Courageous Cultures* provides a road map to build a high-performance, high-engagement culture around sharing ideas, solving problems, and rewarding contributions from all levels.

## IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- What defines a Courageous Culture and how to build it.
- The main reasons employees often choose “safe silence.”
- How Clarity and Curiosity work together in a Courageous Culture.
- To transfer principles into the best practices that work for your organization.

### What Is a Courageous Culture?

Your success depends on quickly incorporating the best ideas from across your business, on understanding what's not working and how to make it better. But what if you never hear what's working well and what's broken?

For many companies, it's not senior leaders who fear making big go-no-go choices that stifle progress. Rather, it's the exponential effect of thousands of small opportunities missed because people didn't speak up when they saw something stupid or didn't share their idea because it might not be well received. The best practices languish, unshared and unspoken. Why?

Because people are often discouraged for saying the wrong thing and not rewarded for saying the right thing—so they say nothing. The consequences can be dire: Customers leave, problems multiply like the heads of the Hydra, and employees lose heart.

The tragic truth is, most of the time, leaders think they're creating an open environment that encourages employees to speak up and are surprised when they learn that employees are holding back. Too often, both employees and leaders feel that no one cares about making things better.

### Welcome to the World of Courageous Cultures

Instead of safe silence and frustrated leaders, what if you had a Courageous Culture? Seth Godin defines culture as “People like us do things like this.” A Courageous Culture is a place where “people like us” speak up. We share ideas. We solve problems. The default is to contribute. It's a culture where silence isn't safe and effort is everything.

Courageous Cultures go way beyond employee engagement. People are energized. They bring their whole selves to their work. Innovation isn't limited to the senior leadership team or R&D. Everyone innovates, every day.

When you build a Courageous Culture, you'll see teams of Microinnovators, Problem Solvers, and Customer Advocates working together to make things better.

A Microinnovator is the employee who consistently seeks out small but powerful ways to improve the business. She consistently wonders, “How can I make this easier, better, or faster?” Then she speaks up and shares what she's learned.

A Problem Solver is the employee who cares about what's not working and wants to make it better. Problem Solvers care

about the business, treat it as their own, and focus on solutions.

A Customer Advocate is the employee who sees through your customers' eyes and speaks up on their behalf. Customer Advocates actively look for ways to improve customers' experience and minimize customer frustrations.

In our world of rapid change, a Courageous Culture is your competitive advantage. Such cultures include Trader Joe's, a grocer with the highest revenue per square foot and throngs of brand advocates, where continual improvement is fundamental and everyone does what it takes to serve the customer. And WellSpan Health, which is clear about its mission of health through exceptional care for all and which remains creatively curious about the best way to achieve it. And businesses like Nestlé, which creates a Courageous Culture through its commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Let's now learn the road map to build a culture of microinnovation, problem solving, and customer advocacy.

### How Courage Works—According to Research

Any discussion about courage at work quickly leads to Amy Edmondson. Edmondson is the Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at the Harvard Business School and author of *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*.

She describes how courage at work shows up when someone speaks up, challenges an idea, shares a different perspective, or reveals a mistake. Every one of these behaviors takes courage because, as Edmondson says, people default to “avoiding failure”—the loss of status, being labeled, or being viewed with disfavor that can result from speaking up. Until you build a Courageous Culture, “people at work are vulnerable to a kind of implicit logic in which safe is simply better than sorry.”

But why is safe silence the default over consistent contribution? Here are five reasons:

1. People don't think leadership wants their ideas.
2. No one asks.
3. They lack confidence to share.
4. They lack the skills to share effectively.

For most people, innovation takes energy and courage—the courage to be vulnerable, to risk rejection from their peers, or to invite uncertainty.

5. People don't think anything will happen, so they don't bother.

### What Counts as Courage?

Executives, managers, and frontline employees in Courageous Cultures programs were asked, "What's the most courageous act you ever did at work?" Most of their stories are not Courage with a capital C—the front-page news stories of whistle-blowing and confronting massive ethical breeches with career-threatening consequences.

They are stories of courage with a lowercase c—choices to take a small, uncomfortable risk for the good of the business, team, or customer. What are the small-c courageous acts that lay the foundation for Courageous Cultures?

**Show a bit of vulnerability.** Vulnerability builds trust. Have the courage to let people see a bit more of who you really are and to admit when you're wrong or don't have all the answers.

**Manage performance.** Have the courage to provide consistent performance feedback and address performance issues directly. When you do this early and often, the chances of you having to do the really tough stuff—like fire the guy—reduce significantly.

**Advocate for your team.** If you can't influence others, your team will wonder why they need you.

**Experiment.** Another huge reason employees say their boss lacks courage is their boss's unwillingness to experiment with new ideas or approaches. If "It ain't broke, don't fix it" is your favorite mantra, learning the art of a well-run pilot program can go a long way in increasing your courage while reducing your stress.

**Make timely decisions.** No one wants to work for a waffler. Have the courage to make decisions and stick to them. If you struggle with this, get your team to help you.

**Share credit.** A primary reason people are reluctant to share ideas is because they won't get the credit. A surefire way to stunt the growth of a creative culture is to steal the credit. When in doubt, credit the team.

## Overcoming Courage Crushers, Common Mistakes, and Other Barriers to Courageous Culture

Jane, a committed nurse, shared the exhausting list of daily stupidity she faced from a bullying, narcissistic doctor—just to get her job done. She felt like every day was a courageous battle to advocate for her patients' needs. She stated, for example, that the "doctor was trying to do an experimental procedure I knew could hurt a child (and was also against the parent's consent), so I blocked the door." She said that the administration knew of his antics but looked the other way because he was renowned in his field.

Jane eventually left for another role where her passion and commitment were appreciated. That department lost a remarkable nurse.

You can't possibly build a Courageous Culture if you tolerate even one guy like that—word spreads fast. Your Janes will go elsewhere.

For most people, innovation takes energy and courage—the courage to be vulnerable, to risk rejection from their peers, or to invite uncertainty. Your people can make that effort only a limited number of times before they're done. The more courage they use to address injustice, toxic leadership, needless politics, or poor decision-making, the less energy they'll have to spend on what really matters.

You won't get any of the courage you need to serve your customers or build your business if it takes a heroic effort just to fight against an existing caustic culture.

### Shaming, Blaming, and Intimidation

Three of the most toxic behaviors tolerated (and even rewarded) are shaming, blaming, and intimidation. It's the chief operating officer who projects a list of all her senior leaders in stack-ranked order on the screen at the company off-site gathering and then works her way through the list from the bottom up, sarcastically criticizing them in front of their peers and handing them a microphone to respond, as all their peers laugh nervously while silently praying they'll be spared next time.

Or the vice president who berates his direct reports for a strategic choice “they made” that didn’t pan out, even though the VP was the one who made the final call despite the team’s concerns and objections.

Shame, blame, and intimidation have no place in a Courageous Culture. Don’t let one or two bullies undermine your Courageous Culture strategy. Instead, consider discussing these questions with your team:

- Why do you want a Courageous Culture?
- What specific outcomes are you looking to achieve?
- How will you know you are successful?
- What processes do you have in place to prevent (and make it easy to report) bullying and harassment?
- What do you do when a high performer regularly abuses or harasses other people?
- What behaviors will you have a zero tolerance for in your organization?

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### Navigate the Narrative

We all tell ourselves stories about what’s happening, who we are, and what other people think about us. To Navigate the Narrative means that you pay attention to the stories you tell yourself, the stories your teams tell themselves, and consciously tap into the stories that reinforce your values, culture, and commitments.

Don’t underestimate the role your personal courage plays in building a Courageous Culture for your team. Khalil Smith, head of the diversity and inclusion practice at the NeuroLeadership Institute, and his colleagues say it this way: “When voice becomes a priority for leaders, with the right habits and systems, it can become a non-heroic act for everyone to speak up, rippling out across all levels of the organization.”

That “non-heroic act” translates to “culture”—people like us, doing things like this. Your leadership is the first step; you are the first person “doing things like this.”

To Navigate the Narrative means you identify the stories in which you are the best version of yourself or learned positive lessons, consciously choose to remember them, and use them to inform your choices today. It becomes easier to be that best version of yourself the next time. As you do, your commitment to your values grows stronger than your fear.

### Create a Courage Map

Start your Courageous Culture journey by Navigating the Narrative with a Courage Map that helps you tap into your courage and give yourself the foundation you need to lead a cultural transformation.

To build your Courage Map, make a broad timeline of your career, thinking back to your early roles as well as more recent ones. Now think about the most courageous acts you did in these roles and lessons learned along the way. Once you’ve identified a minimum of three moments of courage, for each courageous act ask yourself the following questions:

What motivated me to be courageous in this circumstance? What did I expect to happen? What actually happened as a result? How do I feel about this incident? What values did it reveal as important to me?

As a leader today, where would it be helpful to show up more like this or with these values?

Look for the themes. What do you notice about yourself in these stories? What makes you proud? What is the essence of these stories that you hope to carry forward into your future stories? What lessons do you have to share with your team?

Invite your direct report team to complete the exercise and schedule some time to discuss as a team. Have each person pick one story to share. What themes emerge? What do you notice about the underlying values of these choices? What are the key lessons from these stories you can leverage as you begin your work to build a more Courageous Culture?

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### Create Clarity

At a leadership panel at an executive off-site conference, George, a financial services operations director, shared this story:

“I served in Afghanistan. One day we were driving through the desert in two Humvees. I was a passenger in the lead vehicle, and the other was close behind. I noticed that our driver was driving very fast, and it didn’t feel right. I was getting more and more nervous. I’ve been trained. I knew how dangerous this was. But I didn’t want to be seen as a back-seat driver, so I kept the feedback to myself. Finally, I took out my GPS and tracked our speed. We were going 75 miles an hour on those damaged streets! It was too fast for the conditions, but I still didn’t say anything. Then, my buddy looked back and we realized that the second Humvee was no longer behind us.”

“We turned back, and sure enough it had flipped. We lost a man that day. I’m haunted by the fact that I could have saved his life if I had just spoken up.”

“The stuff we’re talking about today is real. The concern you’re sitting on might not be life or death, but it matters. We need to care enough to tell one another the truth—and we don’t always do that. We have to figure out how to do this well. Today is an important start. I look forward to hearing your ideas.”

That’s Clarity. Hopefully you don’t have a story like George’s. But you do have stories that matter, and your team needs to hear them.

Clarity contributes three critical elements to a Courageous Culture: safety, confidence, and direction.

Clarity is focus, alignment, and doing what works. Clarity means that everyone in the organization has a shared understanding of what success looks like. Clarity ensures that your brand promise is kept in every interaction. People get where you are headed and why.

Clarity contributes three critical elements to a Courageous Culture: safety, confidence, and direction. Clarity helps people speak up because they know what success looks like, what’s required of them, and how they can contribute. Clarity produces confidence that you can take a good idea and make it happen. Finally, Clarity gives people a direction to focus their thinking, problem solving, and creativity.

Innovation starts with information. If you want your team to solve more problems or to bring more ideas, they need Clarity about where you’re headed and what matters most. They need to know the one to three big strategic priorities where their ideas would make the most difference and which kinds of best practices are most important to share.

When you build a Courageous Culture, you integrate Clarity and Curiosity. In the dance between the two, each

characteristic takes the spotlight, but they’re always holding hands. Let’s now discuss Curiosity.

### Cultivate Curiosity

Cultivate Curiosity means to intentionally seek out ideas, engagement, and solutions. In organizations with a strong Curiosity culture, executives ensure that infrastructure and training encourage microinnovation, sharing ideas, and advocating for customers. Leaders at every level ask courageous questions to uncover new ideas, and employees consistently look for ways to make things better—and then share their discoveries.

Cultivating Curiosity isn’t simply a matter of asking more questions. That helps, but it’s not just that you ask. In Courageous Cultures, leaders ask regularly and skillfully. Three qualities distinguish how leaders ask questions in a Courageous Culture:

**Intentional.** Cultivating Curiosity starts with intention: you must ask—a lot. Your leaders have to ask more than might seem reasonable. This kind of asking goes way beyond an open-door policy. In fact, most open-door policies are a passive leadership cop-out.

John Dore, senior executive program director at the London Business School, explains that permission isn’t enough. “Don’t permit innovation, expect it.” To overcome these hesitations, ask with intention and build systems that make sharing the norm.

**Vulnerable.** Cultivating Curiosity requires leaders to approach their work with confidence and humility. If you’re not vulnerable enough to admit that you can grow, that the current situation can improve, or that there might be a better way, you’ll never get the ideas you need.

**Action focused.** To Cultivate Curiosity, people need to know that you will act on what you learn. Action takes many forms. It might be that you implement the idea, that the feedback informs your decision, that you take it all in and then respond with next steps, or maybe it’s simply releasing the team to take action on their ideas.

### Best Practices to Find the Best Ideas

Questions that are intentional, vulnerable, and focused on action reflect a theme: the questions themselves are courageous. Courageous questions are your number-one way to Cultivate Curiosity.

A courageous question differs from a generic “How can we be better?” question in three ways. When you ask a courageous question, you get specific by focusing on a specific activity, behavior, or outcome. You also are humble. You are implicitly saying, “I know I’m not perfect. I know I can improve.” Finally, you don’t respond—yet. These questions require the asker to listen without defensiveness.

Examples of courageous questions include the following:

- What is the problem we have that no one talks about?
- What do we do that really annoys our customers?
- What is the greatest obstacle to your productivity?
- What must I do better as a leader if we are to be successful?
- What’s sabotaging our success?

### Respond With Regard

How you and leaders at every level respond to ideas and feedback will either build momentum or crush your culture before it gets started. This step is called Respond with Regard. Responding with regard means you receive ideas and react in ways that respect the other person, build momentum, improve your employees’ strategic thinking, and generate more useful ideas.

Let’s discuss practical ways to Respond with Regard and build a flow of ideas that are increasingly strategic, relevant, and useful.

Recently, David Dye made a “contribution”—he donated blood through the Red Cross. Four weeks after donating, he received the following email:

“Thank you for giving blood with the American Red Cross on May 23. Your blood donation was sent to The Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, to help a patient in need. Your donation is on its way to change lives! Every day, patients receive blood for a variety of conditions, including life-threatening illnesses, blood disorders, and traumas. Your blood donations are critical to helping save patients’ lives. Schedule your next donation today!”

The message was followed by a large red button to schedule his next donation. This is a fantastic example of how to Respond with Regard. There were three elements that you can include in your responses: gratitude, process, and invitation. They thanked him, told him how his

contribution was making a difference, and invited him to do it again. The same approach works for leaders when team members contribute ideas.

**Gratitude.** If you want more solutions, start with thank you. When people take the time to think about how things could be better, let them know you appreciate it. Don’t celebrate only the ideas that work; celebrate the act of sharing thoughtful ideas and solutions. You’ll get more solutions, and some of those will work.

**Process.** Next, share the process. Let them know what happened with their idea and the relevant time frame. You may not have an elegant automated response system like the Red Cross, but it only takes a moment to circle back and close the loop with team members. If it will take six months before you consider these ideas because of other strategic priorities, say so and explain the other priorities.

**Invitation.** Finally, invite them to do it again—to think, problem solve, and advocate for your customer. The Red Cross invited David with a large red button to schedule his next contribution. Your invitation to contribute again can take many forms. If their ideas need work, give them the additional information they need and ask them to recraft it. If their ideas were tried in the past and didn’t work, tell them what you learned from that attempt and ask them to consider how to overcome those problems. Even if you can’t use the ideas at all, a sincere “I’d love to hear your thoughts about how we can achieve our goal this year” will keep the ideas flowing.

### Practice the Principle

When you Practice the Principle, you commit to finding the core idea within best practices and help your teams to localize best practices for their unique circumstances.

To Practice the Principle, executives clarify core values and principles, support their leadership teams to review and try out new ideas that align with those principles, and work strategically to improve them. Managers work with their teams to learn from new approaches and identify the principles within their best practices. Employees try new ideas and look for ways to build on them or make them more relevant to their circumstances.

A principle is a concept that works universally. For instance, treating your customer with respect is a principle of customer service. But the practice of respect can look very

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different from culture to culture, city to city, and between industries.

For example, cooking a homemade meal for your team is a practice. For most people, that practice isn't transferrable. But the principle of personally investing and connecting to your team is transferrable—every trained leader can do that. You don't scale practices; you scale principles.

### How to Find the Principles in Best Practices

When your top performing team seems to have discovered the secret to transform their productivity, customer relationships, or sales, it may be tempting to immediately make everyone in the organization do the same thing. But even if it looks good on paper, your leadership team is on board, and it worked well in the IT war room, field test the change first. This is one of those times it really does work to go slow to go fast.

The following steps will help you and your leaders identify why a best practice works and how to make it work in other contexts.

**Ask why it works.** You can find the principle within a best practice by asking, “Why did this work?” Sometimes you'll have to ask why several times before you get to the essence of what really happened or the fundamental reasons for success.

**Test the principle.** Once you've found the principle in the best practice, you're ready to test that principle and see if it works the way you and your team think it does. Try it in a couple of different settings, with different people. For example, a manufacturing client empowers their teams with 3D printers to experiment with designing and testing new parts to improve their products, which has led to powerful microinnovations they can scale.

**Listen closely.** This is perhaps the most important part of testing a principle. As you test the principle and roll it out, really listen to what your people tell you. Check in with stakeholders, partners, and customers. Respond to feedback with solutions, not selling.

**Ask how it can be better.** As you continue to test and roll

out the principle, ask questions that will help refine the principle: How can we address challenges that come up and make the change serve its purpose? What's working well and how do we leverage it? What enhancements do we need? Where should we head next? All these questions help refine the principle—and they also build morale by including employees in your change efforts. At the heart of a Courageous Culture is the idea that great organizations build change together.

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## Galvanize the Genius

In the Courageous Cultures Cycle, it isn't enough to do the work in the Curiosity phase without looping back to Clarity to Galvanize the Genius.

First, galvanize means to “excite someone into action”—and that's certainly what you and your team want to happen with all the genius ideas you've discovered. Galvanize has a second relevant meaning as well: It's the process where iron or steel is treated with a protective layer of zinc in order to prevent rust and corrosion.

In Courageous Cultures, corrosion looks like that slide back to old behaviors or safe silence. None of that. It's time to Galvanize the Genius: to excite your team to action and prevent the slow decline of the culture you've all worked so hard to build.

### How to Galvanize the Genius

When leaders struggle to maintain new cultural norms, there are usually three areas that cause trouble. Problems in one or more of these areas make it difficult for people to commit to new behaviors and undermine their willingness to share new ideas.

But when you and your leaders master these three elements, you can rapidly respond to changing circumstances, quickly adapt new principles, and react to customer needs before your competition has started to look for a solution. The three elements to galvanize your genius are Know, Flow, and Show.

**Know.** Know means to clearly articulate what success looks like and the fundamental behaviors that make it

happen. Has this ever happened to you? You get everyone focused on doing what's right for the customer—and a few well-meaning folks, trying to do the right thing, lose sight of the bigger picture.

Even talented, motivated people understand the same ideas differently. And unless your leadership team and managers know how the strategic goals translate into daily behaviors, you'll stay stuck.

In *Courageous Cultures*, knowing doesn't mean *you* know everything—your job is to make sure that the most important things are known. As you get curious and identify new principles and best practices, can your leaders clearly articulate what success looks like and the behaviors that will make it happen?

**Flow.** Flow is your ability to translate vision into behaviors and ensure all employees understand what they're doing, why they're doing it, and how their work fits into the big picture. Flow means that everyone is aligned with strategic goals, understands what matters most, and knows what to do to succeed. To achieve that level of Clarity, executives communicate strategic priorities and behaviors that bring success.

Managers model these success behaviors, translate organizational goals into department and team goals, and equip their teams to succeed. Employees demonstrate success behaviors and ensure they understand the why behind the work. When you successfully flow Clarity to every corner of your organization, innovation, problem solving, and customer advocacy—not to mention accountability and breakthrough results—become much easier.

**Show.** Show means that you measure and inspect outcomes and behaviors at every level of the business. You and your team are certain where the desired behaviors are happening

and where they break down—both through quantitative analysis and direct observation. You ensure that managers are reinforcing behaviors through celebration and accountability, and employees are doing what they've committed to do.

Demonstrating results isn't just a matter of ensuring that everything is going according to plan. People, at every level, benefit from clear feedback and the confidence that they're heading in the right direction.

Courage is often portrayed as a lonely act—taking a stand when no one else will; being the first to speak truth to power; being the only one to do what they said couldn't be done.

At times on this journey you will feel incredibly lonely. When you do, don't wear that as a badge of honor—instead, find the others. They're out there. They're doing powerful and important work.

Your first tracks on this journey will likely be the most difficult, as well as the most rewarding. As you find the others, those lonely footprints will begin to form into a well-laid path of courage and hope for others to follow. That's the power of a Courageous Culture.

### IF YOU LIKED THIS SUMMARY, YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE:

- *The Critical Few: Energize Your Company's Culture by Choosing What Really Matters* by Jon R. Katzenbach, Gretchen Anderson, James Thomas
- *Contagious Cultures: Show Up, Set the Tone, and Intentionally Create an Organization That Thrives* by Anese Cavanaugh



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