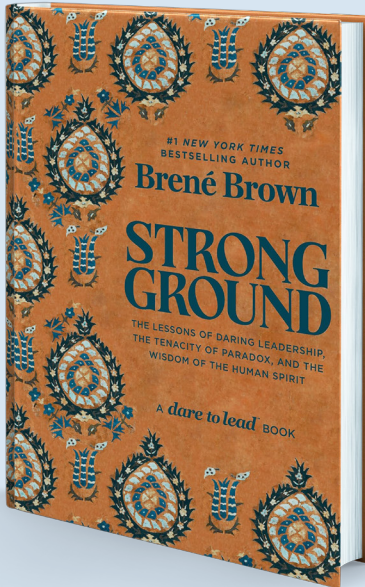


Book Snaps™

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Strong Ground

The Lessons of Daring Leadership, the Tenacity of Paradox, and the Wisdom of the Human Spirit

By Brené Brown

Brené Brown is a research professor at the University of Houston, where she holds the Huffington Foundation Endowed Chair at the Graduate College of Social Work. She is also Professor of Practice in Management at the University of Texas at Austin's McCombs School of Business. Brown is the author of six #1 *New York Times* bestselling books and the host of two award-winning podcasts. In 2024, she became executive director of the Center for Daring Leadership at BetterUp. Her research focuses on courage, vulnerability, and leadership. She lives in Houston, Texas, with her husband and two children.

A Book Review by Soundview

Learning How to Find Your Ground

Leading well is difficult. Too often, the examples seen are of leaders either misusing their power or leading weakly, resulting in little to nothing getting done, if anything at all, let alone well.

Some wish to change the status quo and change how things are done, and in a time when vulnerability and empathy are scorned, that takes an amazing amount of courage. So how did they get there, and how can we, as fellow leaders, follow their example?

In her book, *Strong Ground: The Lessons of Daring Leadership, the Tenacity of Paradox, and the Wisdom of the Human Spirit*, Brené Brown explores how having a strong ground can change how one shows up in various places in one's life, including the workplace.

For this to happen, however, they must, let go of the hope of a quick fix. There needs to be a willingness to put in the work to help them find their strong ground, and a refusal to build on the backs of dysfunctional, outdated systems.

Brown also proposes that humans are often held back by fear, and that to combat it, they need to stop running at top speed and slow down to implement the changes needed to help them stay grounded in who they are and what they are doing, rather than reacting out of urgency or pressure. These changes may feel small or even uncomfortable at first, but they will help build up the core muscles needed to effect a more sustainable lasting change.

Throughout the book, Brown uses stories, conversation transcripts, and excerpts and quotes from colleagues and others to encourage readers to open themselves up and be willing to discover and implement a new way of thinking and showing up with greater intention and awareness in their workplace and personal life. Brown also uses language that some may consider crude, but does so to emphasize the point she is making and to relate to the reader.

What It Takes to Have Strong Ground

Brown begins by stating that Strong Ground is composed of two critical elements: first, the reader's footing—shaped by their values, curiosity, and humility; and second, a deliberate connection with others who are similarly grounded in themselves and working toward the same goal. This is emphasized by her use of the “Tush Push” football play metaphor, which shows what can happen when a team moves forward with a shared goal and vision. While there are some who may not see the value in sports metaphors, the author states that she uses them because of what sports and organizational work have in common, that being the need for strong ground and showing up fully engaged in the work that needs to be done, rather than showing up in a disjointed way and eventually succumbing to exhaustion or illness.

This is followed by an explanation of the paradox and its relation to the human spirit, helping the reader confront intolerance for uncertainty and push boundaries. Paradoxes are an invitation to live in and tolerate the tension they bring, therefore freeing individuals to show themselves more grace when they make mistakes and to explore their dreams. This is similar to the idea of negative capability, the ability to remain in areas of uncertainty without needing to know all the facts. While this is a difficult muscle to build and tone, as a leader, it is necessary to stay grounded and be courageous enough to slow down and work it rather than rush ahead and have to undo mistakes later.

The definition of leadership has not changed. A leader is someone who sees potential and is willing to work with others to bring it out in the people around them. This takes courage and dedication, as it might entail stepping out of one's comfort zone to help others grow. One change that has occurred is the recognition that courageous skills alone are not enough; a daring mindset must accompany them, and that requires digging beneath the ingrained fear. Why? Because at the heart of being a daring leader is the acknowledgment that courage and fear are not mutually exclusive, and that it is perfectly normal to feel both emotions at the same time.

That means being vulnerable and choosing courage anyway. Brown states that courage is a collection of four skill sets that can be taught and observed:

- **LIVING INTO OUR VALUES:** understanding one's core values—the driving force behind why we do what we do—and developing systems to ensure that intentions and behaviors stay aligned with them.
- **RUMBLING WITH VULNERABILITY:** being willing to engage in difficult conversations, even when they are uncomfortable.
- **BRAVING TRUST:** building trust with oneself and others through the following:
 - Boundaries
 - Reliability
 - Accountability
 - Vault
 - Integrity
 - Nonjudgment
 - Generosity
- **LEARNING TO RISE:** remaining flexible in the face of setbacks or failure and using those experiences as opportunities for learning.

The foundation of these skills is the ability to rumble with vulnerability; without this core skill, it is almost impossible to put the others fully into practice.

Transformation and Clarity

Transformation is a term many tend to overuse because it has the potential to get team members to buy into what they are hoping to accomplish. The problem is that leaders use it to convey urgency or primacy about a task, when in reality the “transformation” may only require slight adaptation, or be implemented over a longer span of time. It is important to remember that real transformations are relational, not transactional. When leaders label something a “transformation” to secure buy-in, they risk losing their team's trust if it is poorly executed or mislabeled. However, when the term is used correctly and done well, it can be effective and exciting, even when it feels scary.

The book states that meaningful transformations not only require time to be implemented well but are defined by paradox. Paradoxes may seem absurd or self-contradictory but often prove to be true when the time is taken to research. This is because, while transformation is about building, it is also about deconstructing the mantles that are already in place to make room for something new and better. It means that things will be broken, potentially big things that make some uncomfortable, in order to protect the vital parts of the organization's mission that are central to its identity.

By breaking down what isn't necessary or isn't working, leaders can protect the core elements of the mission while making way for new protocols and a stronger foundation. When assessed correctly, it becomes clear what should be preserved and what should be dismantled. There will still be those who disagree, because change feels personal and



Transformation is not just about building—it is also about deconstructing what no longer serves.”

can evoke fear. A successful transformation will respect the current strategies already grounded in the mission and allow them to continue beyond the transformation.

Those leading their organization must ensure that everyone is clear on the mission and that their people do not feel overwhelmed by high-impact communication. Teams can feel off-kilter when they lack the full context of what they are working toward. Brown states that when leaders are purposeful in helping others understand where they fit into the big picture, team members tend to be braver and feel a greater sense of agency in their work. They are then able to operate within the tension of the paradox and make more meaningful contributions.

In addition to clarity, the reader learns how to strengthen communication skills through a discussion of Above/Below the Line practice. The line, in this case, is fear. When one is above the line, they can acknowledge fear without reacting to it; there is an awareness that allows them to remain in control and not crumble. Being below the line heightens the likelihood of acting out of fear, with behavior driven by it.

Awareness, naming the feeling, and communicating it are skills that must be practiced to keep them in shape. One way to do this is to ask for a pause when feeling below the line. This may seem simple, but it demonstrates vulnerability and skill and shows honesty and respect toward those in the room with you.

Grounded Confidence

Brown explains that Grounded Confidence is not built on arrogance but on the stable ground of self-awareness, courage, and practice. It is a collection of paradoxes: being both curious and knowledgeable, and recognizing that while perfection is unattainable, growth is always possible. As each category of Grounded Confidence is introduced, the reader is given a road map to understand where they are in the process.

Core

Five skill sets make up the core of Grounded Confidence: self-awareness, metacognition, emotional awareness and regulation, mindfulness, and systems thinking. Together, they form the central “muscle group” that must be stretched and strengthened so one does not default to overcompensating with weaker muscles in place of a strong core.

Strength

Strength is made up of fifteen elements: vulnerability, courage, trust, compassion and empathy, connection, humility, deep curiosity, mastery, discipline, power, accountability, adaptability, and lock-in and lock-through power. These elements foster connection not only with others but also with oneself, allowing the reader to embrace vulnerability and pursue new levels of growth.

Awareness

There are four types of awareness the reader must develop on the journey to Strong Ground: situational, temporal, and multicultural awareness, as well as visualization. The more mindful they are of the needs and cultures of those around them, the time pressures related to their work, and how to visualize and rehearse what needs to be said, the more successful they will be.

Thinking

The way one thinks has a significant impact on outcomes. Whether anticipatory, strategic, critical, paradoxical, intuitive and pattern recognition, creative and design, or symphonic, these modes of thinking must be honed so that each scenario is fully considered, conversations are thoughtful, and outcomes align with what is intended—without rushing and missing crucial details.

Communication

Communication grounded in confidence and strength must be measured by both its impact and its value. It can either elevate or diminish the efforts and contributions made.

The book outlines seven principles to guide communication:

- LEGO Complexity? DUPLO Simplicity
- Emotionally Resonant Language Matters
- Chekhov’s Gun
- Become a Student of Aesthetic Force
- Own and Communicate the Changes—Yes, All of Them
- Beware of Invisible Armies and Bullshit Disclaimers
- Metaphors, Analogies, and Stories

Each of these principles helps the reader communicate more effectively with those around them.

Lessons in Locks and Transitions

With all of these new tools for a strong foundation, Brown shares how hard it can be to transition from a work mindset to home and navigate relationships with loved ones. When it is preferable to sit in one's car rather than go inside and interact with family, it signals a problem that needs to be addressed with intention.

She uses the metaphor of the Teddington Lock, where the River Thames transitions from non-tidal to tidal waters under the lockkeeper's careful management, who raises or lowers the gates as needed for each boat.

This reflects a similar balancing act individuals face when coming home from work: they must learn to transition from their professional self to their home self so they can be present and available for those who need them.

The book describes different ways to “lock in” on a task—that is, to direct all available resources and attention to the task at hand. It outlines four distinct experiences that require different cognitive, emotional, and behavioral resources:

- **Mental toughness:** how a person faces challenges and pressure, often linked to resilience.
- **Flow:** a state of deep involvement that allows full commitment and focus.
- **Deliberate practice:** working just beyond one's current ability to build mastery.
- **Deep focus:** the practice of paying attention to one's attention and resisting divided focus.

Next is the idea of locking through, which marks the transition. In the context of the River Thames, this refers to the shifting of water levels to accommodate boats; for people, it represents the transition from work to home.

Too often, the shift is rushed, and instead of moving into calm waters, individuals flounder and lash out, especially because there is a great demand for cognitive flexibility, which takes a biological toll. Many struggle because they do not take the time to lock through and allow their mental state to settle so they can show up fully in their spaces.

To create the time needed to lock through and recharge after work, the reader must trust those around them enough to communicate their needs. This requires time and practice. While it may feel selfish at first, doing so ultimately benefits both themselves and those around them by ensuring they are fully present. Although it may feel uncomfortable initially, persevering demonstrates bravery and commitment, laying the groundwork for more intentional living and leadership.

Finding the Space Between

There is much to consider as the reader reflects on what they have read and prepares to apply it in their own lives. Brown closes by inviting them to consider the space between stimulus and response, which she expresses through the formula S()R. She developed this concept after getting sober and working to find a new rhythm in her life. While there was no space between the parentheses at first, over time she learned to keep that space open—S()R—through practices such as prayer, Above/Below the Line, and others.

This space can be disorienting because taking time to think is not typically celebrated or practiced. It is up to the reader to recognize its importance and find practices that help keep it open. The more consistently this is done, the more clearly the reader can think and respond.

Strong Ground: The Lessons of Daring Leadership, the Tenacity of Paradox, and the Wisdom of the Human Spirit by Brené Brown is an encouraging and insightful book that invites not only leaders but all in the workforce to take a moment to pause, reflect, and assess who they are and how they show up in different areas of their lives. Through stories, quotes, and conversations with colleagues, Brown helps readers connect with her ideas and better understand her message. Throughout *Strong Ground*, she offers tools and assessments that provide a strong starting point for those looking to begin this journey.

This is not a book to be skimmed, but one that invites readers to dive in and sit with its ideas so they can apply them to their lives and lead well, confident that they are on strong ground in who they are becoming.

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