

A CALL TO COURAGE

Through her Dare to Lead programme, Brené Brown helps people to choose fortitude over comfort. Sarah Catherall speaks to three Kiwi women inspired by the author about learning to be brave in the workplace

For most of her life, Sue Johnston describes herself as a woman who was “living small”. The Wairarapa professional and personal development coach had raised five children in a blended family, and formerly worked as a nurse and public service adviser, but she often thought she wasn’t good enough. She held herself back out of fear. The 57-year-old found it difficult to have tough conversations – when she did speak out, she often worried how she might be perceived.

Sue’s entire world changed in 2016 when she became hooked on American self-help guru Brené Brown’s bestselling books, which cover the themes of courage, vulnerability, shame and empathy. While reading Brené’s book, *Daring Greatly*, Sue realised she often felt what she terms “shame” – her fear of criticism particularly in her work was so great that at times she felt paralysed. “I read all this and thought that the steps I was taking were all about being small. I realised my emotions were affecting my thinking and my behaviour. I thought, ‘Gee, how does Brené know me?’” she says.

Sue went on to train as a Brené Brown Dare to Lead facilitator. Now, she’s one of three women in New Zealand offering the programme through private and professional coaching sessions and workshops. She studied the two-day course with Brené in Australia, and since then, has coached about 60 people, many of whom are women.

A University of Houston professor, Brené is the author of five *New York Times* bestsellers: *The Gifts of Imperfection*, *Daring Greatly*, *Rising Strong*, *Braving the Wilderness*, and her latest book, *Dare to Lead*, which is the culmination of a seven-year study on courage and leadership. Her TED talk – The Power of Vulnerability – went viral, and has had more than 45 million views. She is also the first person to have a filmed talk available on Netflix – *Brené Brown: The Call to Courage* is about how bravery arises from engaging with our deepest vulnerabilities.

In her Netflix talk, Brené says that allowing ourselves to be vulnerable encompasses everything from dealing with being fired, coming out as gay to Christian parents, saying “I love you” first, and dating after a divorce. “Vulnerability is not about winning or losing. It’s having the courage to show up when you don’t know the outcome,” Brené says. “If you are not in the arena getting your arse kicked because you’re not being brave, I’m not interested in your feedback about my work.”

In her Dare to Lead programme, Brené cites 10 researched behaviours that stop people from reaching their potential, including that they get stuck and defined by setbacks, disappointments, failures and perfectionism, and that fear is what keeps them from learning and growing.

Sue relates. Running programmes with another Dare to Lead facilitator, Mary Beth Robles, Sue’s motto now is: “Lead with clarity, courage and confidence.” By becoming more self-aware, she >>

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Below: Brené Brown's *Dare to Lead* is a New York Times bestseller and has inspired many women to "dare greatly, rise strong and brave the wilderness".



has changed the way she behaves on a personal and professional level. In the past, she might not have spoken up about a topic, fearing she might be attacked for getting it wrong. "I've got a much better sense of my own emotional response and I've been equipped with the tools to navigate the world in a more courageous way."

Courage at work

Pippa Carey, the deputy prison director at Wellington's Arohata Prison, is courageous every time she steps behind the wire at the Tawa penitentiary. She is used to handling tough situations, and one of her roles is as a prison negotiator liaising with difficult inmates.

However, after regularly meeting with Sue for Dare to Lead coaching, Pippa says, "I've learned to be brave." She's not talking about physical bravery – her courage comes from the way she is challenging how she works and leads in a highly regimented, institutionalised environment. "I'm in a job where I can't share personal details for security reasons. And yet, we are asking inmates to rehabilitate and to open up. I struggle with that."

"I have learned to share things with the men and women in a professional way to connect with them and for our paihere (inmates) to know I'm a Māori female, and it's okay to share experiences. This makes a huge difference."



"I'm also in a male-dominated role, and I've had to learn how to be comfortable with that. For me, bravery means speaking up and walking alongside my staff."

Pippa has also learned that it is okay to fail. From a large, extended family, she was taught to strive for success. She has also found the courage to share her emotions. "On one of the courses, I shared my story and I cried. In the past, I would have gone off and cried on my own. It's only when you get out of your comfort zone that you grow."

The Dare to Lead programme has been life-changing for Louise Aitken, CEO of Akina, the primary organisation that supports more than 1500 social enterprises and impact investors. She has also been coached fortnightly by Sue for the past two-and-a-half years, and says one of her key learnings is that she's realised she doesn't have to lead like her male predecessor, nor does she have to be an expert at everything. Thanks to the programme, Louise is in a better space to handle any changes her organisation needs to go through and opens up to her colleagues when she is having a moment, which has been a huge shift.

Rather than being stuck and limited by failure or setbacks, she now shrugs her shoulders and gets on with it. "It's about being courageous and realising we all fail at times, and we have to brush ourselves off and continue. I see that more and more with people talking in the public domain, and vulnerability being celebrated a bit more. It's about being honest and being true to yourself."

Sharing the message

Standing in front of a packed room of mainly millennials at a workshop in Wellington, Kaila Colbin shares the story of a US general who once told her it is harder to be brave in the boardroom than on the battlefield. It is one of the

'It's about being courageous and realising we all fail at times'

From left: Sue Johnston was inspired by Brené Brown's award-winning book *Dare to Lead*; Akina CEO Louise found the Dare to Lead programme a game-changer; Kaila is one of New Zealand's three Dare to Lead facilitators; Arohata deputy prison director Pippa learned about bravery from Sue.



stories she reveals over the next hour, as the Christchurch-based Dare to Lead facilitator talks about the need to find courage in the workplace, and for employees, managers and the self-employed to allow themselves to open up to being vulnerable, without seeing this as a weakness. "This work doesn't stop something being difficult, but it allows you to stop letting the difficult thing prevent you from taking the action you need to take."

"When we talk about courage, it is the ability to engage in vulnerability without it holding you back," Kaila says. "It's about making sure that we are heard."

What we all fear

Her messages clearly resonate with participants, especially when she talks about how the number one "shame" in the workplace is a fear of being irrelevant. Heads nod, and participants scribble on notepads, or take photos of her PowerPoint presentation.

She tells *NEXT* later: "We are all taught somewhere along the line that there is a difference between being our full selves and being 'professional' – that being professional means not showing emotion, not acknowledging our fears and feelings. And I think this is dangerous because we are feeling machines that think, and our fears and feelings are very much present in the room, even if we don't acknowledge them explicitly. So what happens is we end up arguing about surface things instead of dealing with what is really going on."

The dynamic where words are about one thing but the behaviour is about something else plays out all the time in organisations. "If you're ever in a meeting where someone gets shut down by someone else, or where there's back-channeling, which is like the



meeting after the meeting ('Can you believe her? She's out of her mind!'), there will be something going on there that's remaining unsaid," she says.

Born in New York, Kaila trained with Brené in Texas. Describing herself as a serial entrepreneur, Kaila moved here 15 years ago with her now ex-husband, and has spent the past decade running TED X Christchurch and TED X Scott Base, along with her leadership and education business, Boma.

Typically, about three-quarters of any Dare to Lead workshop participants are women. She tells *NEXT* about the ideals women are fed from a young age, which are challenging in the workplace. "Women are taught that it's important to be liked. We are taught that being kind means not being in opposition to anyone. All of those things are detrimental to being our full selves."

With women underrepresented in senior roles and in board rooms, she says it can be difficult to know how to behave in a male-dominated environment.

"One of the things we have done when women get into any senior position, is we risk overcompensating by feeling we have to yell or be pushy in order to be heard. And that can be fair when you think of women and the history of the world."

"However, what you want is to have grounded confidence without putting someone down or diminishing someone else. To be clear and confident, and to be open to being right or wrong."

Pippa and Louise are first to admit they are not perfect, and to put their hands up when they do something wrong. By being confident and courageous, taking informed risks, and showing their fears and feelings at work, their new leadership style is spreading to their teams and the wider workplace. Louise has told her staff she needs to get balance between home and work, and chooses to do one school pick up a week. Akina now has a strong focus on wellbeing, and her staff speak out about their own needs outside the office.

For as Brené says, "Courage is contagious. Every time we choose courage, we make everyone around us a little better and the world a little braver." ★