Leadership doesn’t happen without courage. In fact, leadership might be defined as *courage in action*. But the truth is that courage is both poorly understood and not what you typically think it is.

*Courage* is one of those big, bold words. Courage has the reputation of being something way out there on the edges of human experience, commonly associated with superhuman feats, life-and-death struggles, and overcoming impossible odds. It gives rise to images of daring acts of bravery and nerves of steel. It has such a mystique about it that many think the concept doesn’t apply to them. But when you look beyond the headlines, you find out that this account
Finding the Courage to Lead

of courage is certainly not the whole story. It’s not even most of the story. And it’s definitely not what we uncovered in our research on courageous leadership.

Surprisingly, there is very little relevant discussion of courage in the leadership literature. For all the talk about how leaders need to be courageous, there is next to nothing written about what it really means for leadership. That’s not to say that no one writes or talks about courage. The dialogue on courage is ancient. It’s just that those who have written and talked about it are generally philosophers and historians, and for most people philosophy and history are subjects they stopped reading after those mandatory classes in school. It’s our intention with this short book to offer a perspective on what ordinary leaders tell us about what courage is to them, and what their courageous experiences mean for the daily practice of leadership.

But first, let’s reflect on what some of those early deep thinkers had to say that is relevant to a contemporary discussion of courage.

Courage Is a Mindset

The ancient Greek philosophers—Socrates and Aristotle, for example—thought of courage as one of four cardinal virtues that made for a civil society (the others are prudence, temperance, and justice).
Courage, though, sat at the head of the table. These philosophers saw it as the grand virtue that made possible all the others, just as did Winston Churchill, who called courage “the first of human qualities . . . because it guarantees all the others.”

They spoke of courage as being on a sliding scale between cowardice and foolhardiness. To them, acting courageously is not an extreme sport. It’s the disposition that gives one the capacity to face danger without being overcome by fear. It’s the capacity to persist under highly adverse circumstances. It’s not being fearless so much as it is being able to control one’s fear. There is a willful crossing of a limit.

There is such a thing, according to the Greeks—and most of us would agree—as excessive fearlessness. A person who exudes too much confidence when he or she should be fearful is considered rash. These folks are the maniacs among us, and they can be very dangerous. At the same time, fear might be so overwhelming that people run away from what is difficult. These individuals are considered cowards.

The Greeks recognized that people differ. People don’t all fear the same things. Therefore, courage is not an absolute. It’s relative to the situation and the person. Courage takes many different forms. What requires courage from one person might seem easy for another. To the Greeks, courage wasn’t necessarily
demonstrated only by the heroic actions of a warrior in battle. It could also be the determined actions of an ordinary citizen in the pursuit of a better life. The Greeks believed that courage wasn’t a purely emotional experience—what many call “guts.” Courage, they said, had a rational component. Courageous acts weren’t just something that you did without thinking. Courage required making a choice in the face of adversity. In other words, courage is situational, and courage is personal. What you consider courageous, another might consider “just part of the job.”

In order to study courage, then, you have to explore individual examples of courage before you can make any useful generalizations. You have to take a look at what real people do in real situations in real time.

**Courage Is Within Everyone**

We began to investigate courage in the same way that we began exploring leadership. Instead of making the “great person” assumption and looking at famous leaders at the top of the ladder, we decided to ask ordinary people for their stories of personal courage.

We were particularly interested in what we called moments of courage. We asked people to reflect on
the times in their lives when they believed that they demonstrated courage, whatever they understood that word to mean. It was up to them to define courage for themselves. We told them that their moments of courage could be related to something recent or something in their distant past. These could be experiences that occurred at work, at school, at home, in their communities, or in any other setting.

Initially we asked people to complete this sentence: “It took courage for me to _____. “ We then followed up with such questions as “What was the context of your personal moment of courage? Where and when did it occur? Who else was involved?” We also asked, “How did you feel when you were in this situation? What specific actions did you take? What motivated you to take these actions?” These personal experiences informed our understanding of what courage means in the world of the everyday leader.

What did we discover?

First, every single person we interviewed had a story to tell. That, in itself, is highly significant. Everyone we interviewed could recall an experience that required summoning up courage. All of them could recall at least one moment in their own lives when they had the mental and moral strength to sustain initiative in a challenging circumstance. Courage is not just for heroes after all.
Second, for the most part the stories of courage weren’t monumental, life-and-death struggles, but were instead meaningful encounters with everyday challenges. The military and law enforcement officers we interviewed didn’t tell us about being in the line of fire. The businesspeople we interviewed didn’t talk about risking it all on an entrepreneurial venture. The stories were much more mundane and much more personal. Some were about taking a stand on an important issue. More than one was about speaking in public when stage fright was so bad that it made them tremble. Another case was about “outing” oneself as a lesbian when working in a conservative financial institution. A few cases were about quitting jobs to go back to school or completely change careers.

At first it would seem that these examples were about little things, and many of our interviewees wondered if they really qualified as courageous. Yet they found that no other word—such as “risk”—quite described the quality or character of the experience. Courage is about making tough choices, but those choices are more often than not about the little things we do. Do I say yes, or do I say no? Do I stay, or do I leave? Do I speak, or do I stay silent? On the surface, none of these choices feel particularly frightening, but in the proper context, they can be terrifyingly difficult.
Although the details of each story were highly personal and unique—no two were identical—a number of common themes emerged from these stories, and the pattern of the responses can offer guidance as you reflect on your own leadership journey.

It seems to us that people call upon their courage when

• They care deeply about something, and
• There is significant challenge or difficulty, and
• There is fear, and
• It requires personal initiative to overcome the fear and push through the challenge in order to attain or sustain what they deeply care about, and
• They suffer in the process, and
• They remain hopeful, and
• Their lives are transformed by the experience.

The last observation is critical. After telling us their moment-of-courage stories, people related how their lives were never the same after they’d chosen to act. Courage wasn’t a word used to describe every challenging experience or every situation that demanded change. It was reserved for those that were liberating and transformative.

Courage is the X Factor in change. Courage is the virtue that’s needed to truly transform your life.
Courage is the virtue that’s needed to enact anything that is significantly important to you. Courage is the virtue that’s needed to meaningfully change the status quo and create something profoundly new.

Courage is something that everyone has, and it manifests itself daily. It may be precious, but it is not rare. Courage is within you. You may not call on it very often, but it’s there when you need it.

You Have to Care

Many years ago we were asked the question, “So, when does leadership begin?” It seemed obvious that nothing changes until someone becomes dissatisfied enough with the status quo to do something about the situation. After all, leaders are never complacent about things that aren’t going well, and are never content just to complain and moan about how bad things are. But this response was insufficient to explain exemplary leadership. There was something missing.

In our book The Leadership Challenge, we wrote that leadership is an affair of the heart, and we reported on a story told to us by Major General John Stanford about how the secret to success in leadership is “to stay in love.” Then we came across a comment from Senator John McCain, who asserted