SHE LEADS
With
COURAGE

23 lionhearted women share their stories
of charting their career paths with
indomitable courage and endurance.

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Introduction

Bhavna Toor



CEO & Founder, Shenomics

If you've picked up this book, I know you are someone who believes deep inside that you are meant to do great things in life, but for whatever reason you also feel stuck.

I know the feeling. Let me share a short story.

The year was 2010. I was in New York, and interviewing for a role with a consulting firm.

I was just about to graduate from Business School, and thought it was best to follow the herd and do what most business school graduates do – opt for a job in either investment banking or consulting.

As I sat in front of the woman interviewing me, I felt visibly uneasy. At one point in the interview, the woman sitting across from me asked, "So, tell me about a time you failed, and what you learned from it?"

I looked at her dumbfounded. My mind went blank, and I couldn't think of any story that felt genuine enough to share. I fumbled my way through the rest of the interview, and went home feeling completely dejected.

And then began what I call my existential crisis. I reflected for days on end on why I couldn't answer her question, and then it struck me.

I couldn't share a failure story, because my entire life, I'd avoided failure at all costs. I was always playing it safe.

And then I asked myself, what did playing it safe get me? Was I truly living a life of my choosing? Was I happy? Was I fulfilled?

The answer to every single question was a big fat NO.

That is when I knew that unless I take the time to figure out how I can live a life of courage, I would always regret it. And, so I decided to leave my comfortable life in New York behind, and venture off to India in search of my truth. A decision that eventually led me to founding Shenomics as a mindful platform that helps women live and lead with courage.

Ever since that day, I have consciously sought to make every choice, every decision, every action of mine from a place of courage.

And you know what that got me? A life that is fully aligned with my values, and what is important to me. A career that allows me to positively impact the lives of scores of women (and men) on a daily basis. And, most importantly, a deep sense of contentment from knowing I am on the right path.

I wish all of this for YOU, and more. And that is why, with the help of the talented writer and editor Tapshi Dhanda, we have compiled inspirational stories of 23 courageous women in this book as a way to guide you on your journey of building unstoppable confidence.

As Joseph Campbell would say, I hope you too find the courage to enter that cave that you fear to enter. “It holds the treasure that you seek.”

Warmly,

Bhavna

CHAPTER 01

Uma Avantsa



Vice President – India & APAC Operations, Vimeo | Board Director, Aaraat

From her childhood spent in various parts of India to her pioneering role in the tech industry, Uma Avantsa's journey is marked by bold decisions and resilience in the face of challen ges. Whether it's pursuing higher education while raising a young family or co-founding startups in uncharted territories, she bravely confronts self-doubt, emerging stronger with each obstacle overcome. A seasoned executive with over 21 years of experience in senior leadership roles, she has received multiple awards for her contributions to the industry – like the Emerging Woman Leader in Technology Innovation (2020) and the Innovative Woman Leader of the Year (2019). Uma defines courage as the willingness to face hurdles head-on, regardless of how uneasy the situation might be.

Though I belong to Andhra Pradesh, I grew up mostly in North India owing to my father's career in banking, and his transfers in the region. My schooling began in Bhilai, where Hindi became the first language I learnt even before my mother tongue, Telugu. My father's love for books and travel instilled in me a curiosity and thirst for knowledge from an early age, shaping my perspective on life.

Early exposure to computers in the 1990s sparked my interest in technology, leading me to pursue a degree in computer science. My first job was with CMC Limited, which was a central government

organisation at the time, and took on inter-governmental software projects that young engineers like me got to work on. I was placed in their Ports & Cargo Department, where I worked on projects spanning continents. From the ports of Hamburg to the shores of Malaysia, each assignment was a lesson in adaptability and hands-on learning.

Transitioning to Citibank's software team marked my foray into the banking domain, where I played a role in pioneering Java-based solutions for forex trading. Five years into my career, my husband and I moved to Bangalore and began to contemplate higher education since we had the best of educational institutions in the city.

The first time I wrote CAT, I got through the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Kozhikode but I did not join because I was pregnant with our daughter. This was one of the earliest bold steps that I took – letting go of something I wanted, and had in hand.

The next courageous move was to write the CAT two more times, after the birth of our baby. It was a tough decision to continue to attempt CAT even after failure, and to not take up a job. I got calls from IIM Bangalore and IIM Kozhikode but could not get admission in either. Meanwhile, my husband joined IIM Bangalore in 2005 and encouraged me to attempt CAT again.

This time, I got calls from every IIM in the country (there were six in total, at the time). I narrowed down on IIM Bangalore because it was the only one where my husband – who had already joined the institute one year prior – my 3-year old daughter and I could live together as a family. The decision to pursue higher education at IIM Bangalore was a pivotal moment, one that required courage to navigate the challenges of academia while balancing family responsibilities.

The journey through IIM was not without its trials. With a young daughter in tow, my husband and I embarked on a whirlwind adventure of juggling coursework and childcare. From leaving our comfort zone to seek special accommodations for our family, to adjusting to the rigours of campus life, every decision demanded courage and resilience.

At the end of the course, I joined YES Bank on the investment and corporate banking side. Six months in, I quit to start a startup with my

husband. This was a daring plunge to take in 2008, when the world was going through a recession. It was also daring because we started a SaaS-based company at a time when no one in India had even heard of SaaS. The startup was bootstrapped and remote, and we employed women returning to the workplace after some kind of a break. Most of them were new mothers just like me in 2009, after the birth of our son, so our schedules matched wonderfully.

I decided to step away from the startup when I realised that our dinner-table conversations had become about work. I noticed that my husband and my undivided attention to the startup was beginning to affect our children and the time we spent with them.

I joined Livestream India as their first COO in 2011, taking another leap of faith and stepping into the unknown realm of a burgeoning startup. The acquisition by Vimeo and subsequent role as VP Operations for India and APAC further solidified my position in the tech industry. In between, I co-founded Aaraat Technologies with my husband, driven by our passion for education, where I now serve on the board and the advisory team.

Currently, we are in the process of starting another one in the Deep Tech arena, which only proves my life's pattern of shaking things up every now and then.

Amidst the highs and lows of my career, self-doubt often crept in, threatening to derail my aspirations. Yet, it was through confronting these doubts head-on and through the support of my husband that I found the strength to persevere. Whether it was the relentless pursuit of academic excellence while juggling motherhood or the daunting task of starting three startups over the years, each obstacle was met with a steadfast resolve to push forward.

> **Courage, to me, is more than just facing fears — it's about taking action in the face of discomfort.**

I want to mention here that we don’t just deal with self-doubt in our professional journeys; we also manage the doubts of others about us! One instance stands out vividly — the bet placed on my ability to withstand the rigours of IIM Bangalore by two professors. Their

scepticism only fueled my determination to prove them wrong, serving as a reminder that self-belief is often the most potent weapon against doubt.

In the face of uncertainty, self-awareness emerged as my guiding light, enabling me to navigate challenges with clarity and conviction. By acknowledging my strengths and limitations, I was able to chart a course that aligned with my aspirations, undeterred by the doubts of others.

Courage, then, is not merely an abstract concept but a lived experience — a journey marked by moments of vulnerability and triumph. It is the willingness to confront adversity with unwavering resolve, knowing that each step forward brings us closer to our goals.

Lessons for Building Courage

1 Acknowledge your fears

The first step to building courage is accepting that you have fears. Brushing them aside only perpetuates them. Be honest with yourself and admit your fears, even if it's difficult. This self-awareness is the foundation of courage.

2 Surround yourself with supportive people

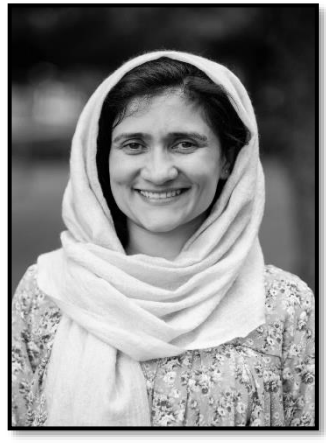
Identify who you can confide in and seek help from. Whether it's family, friends, or mentors, find those who uplift and encourage you. Avoid negativity and cultivate a support system that provides positive affirmations. Having a supportive network can bolster your courage and help you navigate challenges.

3 Try new experiences

Push yourself outside your comfort zone by trying new things and embracing uncertainty. Just as childhood experiences (of frequent transfers and biennial travels) shaped my readiness for change, exposing yourself to new experiences fosters resilience and growth. Embrace discomfort as a natural part of life and use it as an opportunity for personal development.

CHAPTER 02

Shabana Basij-Rasikh



Co-Founder & President, School of Leadership, Afghanistan (SOLA)

Shabana Basij-Rasikh, raised in Kabul during the Taliban's first rule, graduated magna cum laude in International Studies and Women & Gender Studies from Middlebury College, Vermont. She co-founded the School of Leadership, Afghanistan (SOLA) with the mission to provide access to quality education for girls across the country. In 2021, when the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan and cracked down on women's rights, Shabana led the evacuation and relocation of the SOLA community from Afghanistan to Rwanda – sustaining the operations of the world's only boarding school for Afghan girls. A recipient of the prestigious Malalai medal, Shabana defines true courage as looking beyond oneself.

The Taliban came to power in 1996, when I was 6 years old. They were driven out in 2001. In those intervening years, they made it illegal for girls to attend school – but my parents sent my sister and me to secret schools in Kabul, run by women inside their homes, where girls could gather and be educated.

During those five years of the Taliban's rule, I would dress as a boy and escort my older sister to a secret school since she was no longer allowed to be outside alone. It was the only way we both could be educated. We'd take a different route every day so no one would suspect where we were heading. We'd cover our books in grocery bags to make it appear as if we were just shopping.

My parents, and those women teachers, were taking enormous risks by doing this but they'd decided that the greater risk was the Taliban's intention of creating a society of uneducated girls who, upon becoming women, would be entirely reliant upon others for their well-being.

When the Taliban fell in 2001, girls could return to school in Afghanistan, and I did. Ultimately, I enrolled in college in the US, and it was while I was in college that I co-founded SOLA. I was committed then, just as I am now, to helping create the best-educated generation of women in Afghanistan's history.

SOLA grew through the years, finally evolving into a full-fledged boarding school for Afghan girls in 2016. We thrived in Kabul until 2021, and the Taliban's return. That summer, our entire campus community of roughly 250 people (including nearly 100 students) evacuated Afghanistan for Rwanda. Rwanda is where we've re-established our operations and where we exist today as the only legally operating boarding school for Afghan girls anywhere on Earth.

Many people look at my life story and tell me that they think I'm courageous. While I understand what they're saying, I always make the point that I'm going to make right now: I'm an inheritor of bravery. I'm an inheritor of the generational bravery of Afghan women who opened secret schools for girls like me in the 1990s, and of the women who came before them, and I pass this bravery on to my students at SOLA – the next generation of Afghan women.

Courage, to me, is seeing beyond yourself.

> **Courage is looking past your immediate personal wants and, sometimes, your immediate personal safety, and acting in the interest not only of the greater good, but in the creation of a more just and equitable tomorrow.**

In 2021, the number of girls openly attending secondary school in Afghanistan was 1.1 million. In 2024, the number of girls openly attending secondary school in the country is 0. The Taliban have raised their pursuit of gender inequality to the level of national policy. They know what educated girls are capable of. And so do we.

I don't look away from the hundreds of thousands of girls in refugee communities across the Afghan diaspora whose opportunities to learn are limited at best and nonexistent at worst. I don't look away from a single girl in Afghanistan, where the darkness has fallen with such weight.

At SOLA, we believe that girls' education is the lever that lifts society to a better place. My commitment to the women and girls of my country, just like my commitment to my students, is unwavering. They are the fires that will never go out. We innovate ways to bring education to more Afghan girls than ever because we know that educated girls are the peacemakers. They're the ones who can heal the world.

Lessons for Building Courage

1 Commit yourself to honesty and truth

This may sound a bit obvious, perhaps even a bit silly – one might ask, "who isn't committed to honesty and truth?" – but in today's media and political age, in a world of artificial intelligence and disinformation, I think the answer to that rhetorical question is more difficult than it may first appear.

2 Instil in others the values of coexistence and sharing

We share physical resources and we share a single planet – and we also share the mutual reality of the coming of tomorrow, and next month, and next year. The future doesn't belong to a single person or a single group. The future belongs to everyone, and we make the future better by committing ourselves to coexistence.

3 Build critical thinking skills in young people

These can be your children, your nieces and nephews, your grandchildren, your students. Engage them, and encourage them to ask tough questions and challenge established wisdom. These three lessons are mutually reinforcing. When we commit to them, we come to a place of courage where we become selfless and giving – a place where we embrace our position as inheritors, and as co-creators of peace.

CHAPTER 03

Namita Bhandare



Independent Journalist

Namita Bhandare was appointed the country's first gender editor with Mint in 2013, and has since been instrumental in sparking crucial conversations around the theme. Her impactful series on women at work for IndiaSpend earned her a national award in 2017. With close to three decades in journalism, Namita now writes a fortnightly column for Hindustan Times and a weekly gender newsletter – Mind the Gap – reaching subscribers nationwide. Courage, to her, is in the small deeds that are not always recognised as bravery, just as much as it is in the big heroic deeds that are often celebrated as such.

I was born in Mumbai, and spent a little over the first decade of my life there. Mumbai was wonderful! I experienced freedom that I doubt would have been possible back in the day in any other city in India. I would take the public transport – buses and local trains – when I was just 12 years old. There was a sense of community and belonging in our neighbourhood. We celebrated all festivals together with the families in the society without thinking who was Hindu, and who was Muslim. It was an innocent time to grow up in.

My adolescence and post-adolescence, in Delhi, were restrictive. Girls were regulated much more in the city than boys. The family, the community, everybody was watching us, everybody stared.

So naturally, I was brought up to be a "good girl". I had a mother who would push the envelope but only to a certain extent. At the end of the day, the goal was to get me married to a suitable boy.

I, though, had other plans. I found the whole concept rather claustrophobic. Fortunately, I won a scholarship to study abroad, which became my ticket out of India.

I completed my master's in Journalism from Stanford University, and when I returned two years later, I was a different person altogether. I had gone through a period of discovery and autonomy, and there was no going back to being the old me.

When I started my career as the kid in the newsroom, I covered everything – politics, art, lifestyle, travel, what not. The turning point for me, as a writer and journalist, came when I was fairly senior in my profession. I'd already been the editor of the Saturday paper in the Hindustan Times and had, in fact, stopped working full time.

It came in December 2012, when the news of the Delhi gang rape broke. I still get gooseflesh thinking about the news, and the unprecedented nation-wide protests that followed.

Here was a story of a young, aspiring girl who wanted to be a physiotherapist. She had gone to the movies with a friend, not particularly late at night, and was trying to return home but never made it. In its ordinariness, the story was so deeply personal. It really could have been anyone.

My heart went out to her parents. They had moved from a village in Uttar Pradesh to the capital, New Delhi, in the hope of a better future for their children. Her father, employed as a loader at the airport, had sold land in the village to fund his daughter's education.

When I first went to interview her mother, I was working on a documentary for Channel News Asia. I, along with three other crew members, entered their home where her mother was lying on a bed covered with a bright pink blanket. She looked up at us with big, mournful eyes and the cameraman put down his equipment as we all just wept. I cannot explain to you what that girl's story still means to me.

From that day on I decided I do not want to write about anything else but gender. I was no longer interested in doing soft features, restaurant

reviews, travel pieces or anything else. Writing about gender was going to be my life's work.

I sent a mail to the then editor of Mint, R. Sukumar. The title of my email was: Are you looking for a gender editor? And 48 hours later, to Suku's credit, there I was India's first gender editor, to the best of my knowledge.

I focused on writing and commissioning pieces on gender issues. From workplace gaps and the digital economy to health, law and justice, intersections of gender with caste and socio-economic status, and sexual violence – we wrote it all. We published some great stories, of which I'm truly proud.

It wasn't easy. Suddenly the male hierarchy at work now had me telling them about gender, and insisting to include it in every section of the paper – business pages, edit pages, sports pages. Women are 49% of the population so it's only fair that we are represented everywhere! The decision to carve a niche for gender required tenacity and resolve.

There were many moments of self-doubt. As women, we don't always know our worth. Men on the other hand believe they are God's gift to mankind and often, I've noticed, have no shame in claiming that. Women are raised to be meek and quiet. It's no wonder we so easily feel like imposters, and are always self deprecating ourselves. It's how we were raised not only by our families but by society.

Overcoming social conditioning is the biggest challenge for women; the kind of discrimination we face is insidious. I'm continuously checking and questioning myself so I do better by my two daughters. I don't want feminism to only be the theme of my writing, I also want to practise it – I want it to be my life.

This requires courage. Not only the big-gesture courage but the small, steady kind.

Courage, to me, transcends the grandeur of heroic exploits; it resides in the resilience of everyday individuals navigating the complexities of life in a patriarchal society. From the courageous mother defying societal pressures to marry off her daughter prematurely, to the young girl daring

to dream of college despite societal norms, these acts of defiance against ingrained expectations embody the essence of courage. It is in these seemingly inconsequential moments that true bravery reveals itself, challenging the status quo and forging new paths.

I can think of countless instances especially from my journalism life where I've witnessed bravery manifested in the smallest of deeds.

> **The courage of small deeds is not the courage that is sung about. It is not the courage that people write poems or novels about, but it is courage.**

I hope we remember this and show up bravely, in the day to day of our lives.

Lessons for Building Courage

1 Practise courage

Courage is not an innate trait but a skill honed through conscious effort. Every interaction presents an opportunity to challenge patriarchal norms and assert your agency. By remaining mindful of your actions and their implications, you can cultivate a courageous mindset.

2 Ask questions

Asking questions serves as a catalyst for growth and self-discovery. By interrogating societal norms and interrogating your own beliefs, you expand your horizons and cultivate a deeper understanding of yourself and the world around you. Courage thrives in the pursuit of knowledge and the willingness to challenge the status quo.

3 Just do it

Sometimes you will make mistakes but it's ok to, if you're willing to learn from them. Courage is not synonymous with perfection but with resilience in the face of adversity. To be courageous is to live – that's all that it is.

CHAPTER 04

Chitra Byregowda



Head - Sustainability & ESG, Persistent Systems

Choosing to pursue a degree in Environmental Engineering in the 1990s, when everyone around her was opting for Computer Science, was a pivotal moment of personal courage for Chitra Byregowda. This bold choice set the stage for a dynamic career characterised by continuous growth and adaptation. Over the course of 23 years, Chitra has navigated various industries and roles, each time adding a new skill or responsibility to her portfolio. From her expertise in Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) to her proficiency in Environment, Health and Safety (EHS), Diversity & Inclusion, Wellness, CSR, Sustainability, GRI Reporting, CDP disclosures, Carbon Accounting and Management – her career trajectory reflects a relentless pursuit of personal and professional development. Today, as she oversees the crucial triple bottom line balance of people, profit, and planet, Chitra remains anchored to a cause greater than herself. Tethering courage to purpose, she confronts self-doubt and insecurities with unwavering resolve.

My father worked with Bharat Earth Movers Limited (BEML) in the small town of KGF, in the heart of South India. As a young girl in the BEML township, community living sculpted my ethos, fostering bonds that transcended mere friendships. Surrounded by the warmth of camaraderie, I imbibed the essence of unity and collaboration. Those formative years laid the groundwork for my affinity towards bringing people together, igniting a passion for community engagement that continues to resonate within me even today.

From participating in park clean-ups to advocating for waste segregation and donating books to the community library, I learned early in my life the value of taking action for the betterment of society. My school, St. Joseph's Convent, also taught us the importance of social skills beyond developing just bookish knowledge. These experiences planted the seed of environmental consciousness within me.

Despite the prevailing trend of computer science courses dominating the academic landscape in the late 1990s, I chose to pursue a degree in Environmental Engineering. My father was sceptical of the job prospects in this line, but my mind was made. I embarked on my engineering journey at PES College of Engineering in Mandya, where the absence of gender imbalances in my class offered a refreshing departure from the norm.

Once the degree was done, many of my peers ventured into the burgeoning IT sector, and quickly found jobs. I did not. That's when my father suggested I apply for the Graduate Apprenticeship Training (GAT) at BEML. Not many girls applied for GAT back then, especially in an industrial setup such as BEML.

The beauty of GAT was that every 30 days, our department would change. The roster was such that every month we would either be assigned a new function or department. Whether it was overseeing quality control measures, HR functions or liaising with different departments, I embraced each task with a sense of duty and resilience.

As I delved into the industrial landscape at BEML, the courage to assert myself in a male-dominated environment became a recurring theme. Tasked with the responsibility of assigning duties to seasoned factory employees, some of whom were also my father's friends, I found myself grappling with doubts, apprehension and backlash, yet refusing to falter in my commitment to fulfil my responsibilities.

The transition from BEML to General Electric (GE) marked a significant milestone in my career, thrusting me into the realm of environmental impact assessment and project management. It was a period of personal and professional growth, as I navigated the complexities of a greenfield project with unwavering resolve and a willingness to learn. After the

project was completed, in under 18 months, I was appointed as an Environmental Engineer at GE, which is where and how my corporate career started.

From thereon, my roles spanning IBM, Wipro, Mindtree and beyond, brought forth new challenges and opportunities for growth. Whether climbing the stairs of towering under-construction buildings as a pregnant life safety assessor or spearheading integration efforts in the wake of corporate mergers, each experience demanded a unique blend of courage and adaptability.

Every time I moved companies, I made sure that I added a new role or skill to my portfolio. Embracing roles beyond the confines of my formal training, I navigated new territories with a sense of purpose and determination. From leading EHS initiatives and sustainability projects to championing diversity and inclusion, each role served as a testament to the transformative power of courage in the face of uncertainty.

Stepping into new roles with every move has required me to muster the courage to continuously learn, be vulnerable, ask for help, meet new people, have difficult conversations, build new skill sets and expand my comfort zone.

In this regard, distinguishing between bravery and courage has been crucial. Bravery is an impulse, whereas courage is linked to a cause.

> **Courage is not merely about facing outward challenges but anchoring yourself in a sense of purpose that transcends fleeting doubts and insecurities.**

Amidst the outward manifestations of courage lay the lingering shadows of self-doubt and imposter syndrome, especially when we put ourselves in unfamiliar roles as I often do.

Yet, with each challenge embraced and every failure acknowledged, I find solace in the resilience that I have forged through my curious nature and will to persevere. This has got me far, and will hopefully only take me further.

Lessons for Building Courage

1 Step out of your comfort zone

Embracing fear and discomfort is the first step towards building courage. Avoiding things that scare you comes at a high price. By stepping out of my comfort zone early on, I opened doors to new opportunities and eventual leadership roles in my career. Embrace the discomfort of the unknown, for it is often the catalyst for growth and personal development.

2 Take calculated risks and move slowly

Building courage requires taking calculated risks and moving forward gradually. I cannot emphasise the importance of patience and perseverance in the face of challenges. In a world where instant gratification is often sought, it's crucial to recognise that meaningful progress takes time.

3 Accept that there will be failure

Failure is an inevitable part of both personal and professional life. Instead of fearing failure, accept it as a stepping stone towards success. By reframing failure as a natural part of the journey, you can cultivate resilience and develop the courage to pursue your goals with determination and tenacity.

CHAPTER 05

Pradnya Desai



Global Technology Director of Delivery and Quality Lead, Accenture

Growing up, Pradnya Desai's path was charted out for her – follow in her father's footsteps, study mechanical engineering, and eventually take over his workshop. Instead, she took a leap into the world of information technology (IT), and pursued a major in computers in her final year in college. This decision thrust her into an industry completely unfamiliar to her, her family, and anyone who could offer her guidance. With no set plan in mind, she embarked on her career with a singular determination: to embrace opportunities that were more demanding and complex than her current role at any point. Over the span of 24 years, she has remained steadfast in this pursuit. For Pradnya, courage is the willingness to embrace the unknown and forge her own path no matter where the journey may lead.

Courage, to me, is more than just a word. It's a guiding principle, a compass that directs me towards growth and fulfilment. I've learned this through a journey that began in Mumbai, where I was raised with a belief instilled by my parents that education was the key to unlocking life's opportunities.

Growing up alongside my two sisters, our household was a hub of ambition and determination. From an early age, we were encouraged to envision our futures not in terms of societal norms – of getting married and starting a family – but in terms of our passions and potential. This

upbringing laid the foundation for the courage I would need to navigate the twists and turns of my career.

My journey into the world of technology was somewhat unconventional. Despite my father's aspirations for me to join his mechanical engineering business, I found myself drawn to the then upcoming field of IT. Armed with a degree in Electronics Engineering, I embarked on my first job, as a product consultant, which took me across the globe to Europe on several occasions.

Transitioning from a sheltered upbringing to my first job, via which I travelled to 18 countries, was a profound test of courage.

Leaving behind the familiar comforts of home, where books were my best friends, I ventured into unfamiliar regions of Europe, embracing independence at just 21 years of age – buoyed, of course, by my parents' trust and support.

This was just the beginning but I began to notice that charting untapped territories paid off well. I thrived on the fact that I had to push my boundaries constantly! Embracing the unknown and honing my ability to connect and network allowed me to flourish in uncharted waters, where every challenge became an opportunity for growth. This combination of daring to explore new frontiers and being prepared for the journey ahead became the cornerstone of my success.

> **Courage, to me, is fighting the urge to find comfort. The moment we find comfort; we lose the ability to face adversity.**

It was during these formative years that I learned the value of pushing beyond my comfort zone and seizing opportunities that stretched my capabilities.

One pivotal lesson came from a supervisor who emphasised the importance of taking ownership of my role and bringing value to the table. I developed the understanding that I have to invest in preparing for the role rather than expecting that the situation and the people around me will teach me. This mindset became my guiding principle as I

navigated through various roles and responsibilities, always striving to exceed expectations and make a meaningful impact.

Next came Accenture which, in 2000, was looking to scale up India. They wanted to do things that were ahead of their time, and were recruiting people who were willing to walk an unknown path, identify the gaps and build something out of them. I am that person – a problem solver, I ignite others to think, I network and collaborate, and I take people along. I joined Accenture to set up a technology architecture practice group and have gone on to do several roles over my 20 years of tenure with them.

At Accenture, from pioneering new initiatives to challenging established norms, I've never shied away from pushing the boundaries of what's possible. One such instance was in 2004 when I proposed the idea of offshoring complex work to India for a multinational client. I was onsite, and this was a clear experiment. When the client hesitantly agreed to give it a shot, I came down to India, set up a 14-people team which I scaled up to 140 and, later, even bigger. Over the next three years, we successfully implemented it across 14 countries, making this project the first where an integration factory was set up in India, from scale, and serving those many nations. This experience taught me the power of taking calculated risks and standing by my convictions despite self-doubt or the doubts of others.

As I rose through the ranks at Accenture, I continued to embrace new challenges and opportunities for growth. From setting up a technology architecture practice group in the beginning to assuming roles as a geographic lead, market lead, quality director, and client sponsor – I consciously diversified or expanded every five years in my career.

When I began my professional journey, I didn't have a set plan. Instead, I decided to take on opportunities as they came, especially if they challenged me. I never turned down a role, believing that the worth of a position isn't based on its heritage but on how I can make it my own. I focused on adding my unique touch and creating value, rather than just following the established norms. I’ve learnt that people will guide you based on their experiences, but unless you view the role or responsibility

from the perspective of your strengths, you take an extremely conservative approach to addressing it.

A big reason for taking on diverse roles was also to grow holistically. If you're in a business and you don't understand it, don't know how to initiate it, operate it, execute it, and sell it, then you're only doing half a job. And only growing unilaterally.

Today, as the Global Technology Director of Delivery and Quality Lead at Accenture, I'm tasked with overseeing the delivery of technology solutions across diverse markets. It's a role that requires not only technical expertise but also the courage to innovate and adapt in an ever-changing landscape.

Looking back on my career, I can see how courage has been the driving force behind my success. But perhaps the most profound impact of courage has been on my ability to speak my mind and advocate for what I believe in. In the (Indian) culture where conformity often takes precedence over dissent, I've made it a priority to voice my opinions and challenge conventional wisdom.

In doing so, I've discovered that the more senior you are, the more magnanimous you become in taking feedback, opinions, and inputs. I've learnt that true leadership is about fostering a culture of openness and collaboration, where diverse perspectives are valued and respected.

As I continue on my journey, I'm reminded of the title of Marshall Goldsmith's book, "What Got You Here Won't Get You There." It's a reminder that growth requires constant evolution and a willingness to embrace the unknown – something I've deliberately honed right from the start of my career.

Lessons for Building Courage

1 Don't tie your ambition to specific milestones

Embrace the idea that your aspirations can evolve over time as you gain new experiences and insights. By avoiding rigid expectations, you open yourself up to a world of possibilities and opportunities that may have otherwise gone unnoticed. This mindset encourages continuous growth and exploration, fueling your courage to step into uncharted territories and pursue paths that align with your evolving vision.

2 Be unapologetically self-centred about your career growth

Take ownership of your career trajectory by prioritising your own aspirations. Recognise that investing in yourself is not selfish, it's essential for personal and professional growth. Your career takes up 2/3rd of your lifetime, you better have the courage to assertively pursue opportunities that will propel you forward, even if it means challenging societal norms or facing criticism. So, be intentional about how you allocate your time, energy, and resources, ensuring that they align with your long-term goals.

3 Expand your network deliberately

Actively seek out opportunities to broaden your professional network and engage with individuals who can support your growth and ambitions. You may experience some discomfort by venturing outside of your comfort zone and building relationships with people with different perspectives and backgrounds but keep expanding your network strategically – and keep bringing them in alignment with your next goal.

CHAPTER 06

Satyavathi Divadari



Executive Director –
Cloud Security Services,
Wells Fargo

Twenty-five years ago, Satyavathi Divadari made a bold decision to enter the field of information security, despite the lack of a defined career profile or path. As a visionary cyber security leader, she has amassed diverse experience across industries like Finance, Telecom, BPO, IT, ITES, and Media. She advocates for resilience and finding inspiration in one's journey as essential elements in cultivating courage.

Growing up, my life was a blend of simplicity and indulgence. My father, a tailor, often reminded us to work hard like farmers yet enjoy the luxuries of life like kings. My mother, a devoted homemaker, made sure I lived like a princess. Life seemed blissful until I lost my father to a heart attack, when I was 12.

In the wake of his passing, reality hit hard. Despite living well, we had saved nothing for the uncertain future. Our livelihood depended on the steady whirr of my father's sewing machine; when it stopped, so did our financial security. Overnight, I found myself thrust into a world where affording three meals a day became a struggle.

Determined not to succumb to adversity, my mother, a beacon of resilience, took charge. She transformed herself from being a homemaker to working in a factory, something she had never explored before. Witnessing her unwavering resolve left an indelible mark on me, shaping my earliest perception of leadership.

Encouraged by my teachers and propelled by necessity, I too began to work. I started taking tuitions at the age of 12, to contribute to the finances of the house. Starting to work at a young age became a defining moment for me.

With time, I took up several part-time jobs from managing school accounts to repairing electronics, until I completed my diploma in electronics. Securing my first formal job at a public sector company,

VSNL (now Tata Communications Ltd), I witnessed a gradual improvement in our circumstances, signalling a return to stability.

Reflecting on those tumultuous times, I developed a mantra to navigate life's uncertainties. Whenever adversity looms, I pause and ask myself three fundamental questions to put things into perspective: Do I have enough to eat? Do I have shelter? Do I have loved ones to lean on? If the answer to all three is yes, I relax. It instils the confidence in me to face whatever challenges lie ahead.

About five years into my first job at VSNL (now Tata Communications Ltd), dissatisfied with the monotony and driven by a desire to align my passions with my profession, I embarked on a journey of self-discovery. Leveraging the company's self-assessment tool, I unearthed my innate strengths: critical thinking, a thirst for knowledge, a penchant for challenges, and a drive for innovation.

Empowered by this newfound self-awareness, I embarked on a quest to find my true calling. Extensive research led me to the burgeoning field of information security. In 2004, cybersecurity was still in its infancy, with limited career prospects and recognition. Yet, I was drawn to its dynamic nature and the perpetual challenge it posed.

In my mind, cybersecurity epitomised the convergence of my core motivators: the constant pursuit of knowledge, the thrill of overcoming challenges, and the opportunity to effect transformative change. Armed with this conviction, I pursued relevant certifications, such as CISSP, and took on roles that allowed me to hone my skills and expertise.

Nearly two decades later, my journey in cybersecurity continues to evolve. Faced with ever-evolving threats and adversaries, I remain

undeterred in my mission to safeguard the digital realm. As I navigate the uncharted territory of cybersecurity, I am fueled by a sense of purpose and the conviction that my efforts will contribute to a safer and more secure future.

In the end,

> **I want to advise women reading this to embark on career paths that align with their passions and energise them. This takes courage, but my personal experience tells me that by prioritising our own interests and aspirations, we can thrive professionally while maintaining a healthy work-life balance.**

Succumbing to external pressures or societal expectations can lead to burnout and dissatisfaction. Women must challenge limiting mindsets. By fostering confidence, assertiveness, and resilience, women can overcome barriers, effect meaningful change and influence decision-making processes – all while embracing their strengths and potential.

Lessons for Building Courage

1 Embrace resilience

Acknowledge that setbacks and obstacles are a natural part of life's journey. Instead of allowing them to discourage you, use them as opportunities to grow stronger. Remember your past triumphs over adversity as proof of your resilience, and draw strength from those experiences.

2 Cultivate self-compassion

Be kind to yourself during difficult times. Recognise that facing challenges does not diminish your worth or capabilities. Practice self-care, seek support from mentors or peers, and remind yourself of your strengths and achievements. By nurturing self-compassion, you'll develop the inner resilience needed to confront obstacles with courage.

3 Find inspiration in your journey

Reflect on how far you've come and the hurdles you've overcome to reach your current position. Your journey, marked by perseverance and

determination, is a testament to your strength and resilience. Draw inspiration from your own story and use it as a source of motivation to tackle new challenges with courage and conviction.

CHAPTER 07

Sherine John



Vice President &
Credit Leader India, Synchrony

Sherine John is a highly experienced management consultant specialising in cutting-edge analytics and data science solutions for top clients in finance, worldwide. With expertise across five continents and various financial business models, she now holds the position of Vice President and Credit Leader India at Synchrony Financials. In this role, she manages credit and fraud risk across the consumer lifecycle. Beyond her corporate success, Sherine shares her insights as a keynote speaker at universities, addressing aspiring data scientists. She is dedicated to mentoring women in data science and first-generation female professionals, helping them excel in their careers. Sherine emphasises courage as a vital quality, defining it across four distinct yet interrelated dimensions: moral, emotional, social, and intellectual or creative courage.

I was born in the Kottayam district of Kerala, but it was in the bustling streets of Delhi that I truly began to understand the essence of courage. Raised in a middle-class household, my father's dedication to his work in the Central Secretariat Services and my mother's unwavering commitment to our home illuminated the path of resilience and independence for me. From a young age, they encouraged me not just to think independently, but to voice my convictions with unwavering courage, regardless of the outcome.

My journey into the realm of courage commenced early, spurred by an innate version to injustice. I confronted bullies with defiance. Though my methods lacked finesse in those early days, my refusal to tolerate intimidation earned me the moniker of "Fighter Sherine." I would not allow anyone to trample upon my spirit or that of others.

As I matured, each challenge became an opportunity to reclaim my space in the world. From navigating the chaotic bus rides in Delhi, where I faced unsettling glances and unwanted attention from strangers to taking on organisational inertia later on in my career. I discovered that courage isn't always about grand gestures; sometimes, it's about finding the strength to stand up for oneself, to demand respect, and to speak up for change.

This courage took various forms – moral, emotional, social, and intellectual. Whether standing firm against opposition or advocating for the marginalised, confronting inner demons and past traumas to embrace my authentic self or innovating new approaches in my career, I tapped into my inner resilience to confront adversity with conviction. Let me share with you how these four forms of courage have shaped my life and career.

I did my schooling from New Delhi's Holy Child Auxilium School. I was passionate about Economics from the time I was introduced to the subject. This passion led me to pursue both my Bachelor's and Master's degrees at Lady Shri Ram College and Delhi School of Economics; institutions that laid the foundation for my transition into a heavily male-dominated field of data science at GE Capital.

Along with navigating a male-dominated sector, I was also working outside my homeland for a considerable duration. My career led me across five continents, exposing me to diverse business models and fuelling my passion for growth. But, as I continued to advance in my career, it demanded immense emotional courage to persevere on this unconventional path, challenging societal norms surrounding career choices and marriage. My parents played a huge part in helping me stay true to my passion and my choices.

As I continued my focus on work and gaining a nuanced understanding of data science, my global exposure broadened my perspective and deepened my understanding of the systematic biases ingrained in our data. I realised how societal prejudices manifesting in data can perpetuate inequality when simplistically applying algorithms at scale.

As a fervent advocate for equitable data practices and responsible adoption of AI, I've spearheaded several empirical studies aimed at unravelling biases ingrained in algorithmic decision-making, and instituted many ethical guardrails. This required tremendous moral and intellectual courage to innovate new approaches and to prioritise unbiased, sustainable solutions over short-term commercial gains. It is never easy to present a dissenting opinion. I've had to stand my ground respectfully yet firmly, meticulously reframing mind-sets toward a more inclusive, long-term vision of technological equity.

Over the years, I have seen myself evolve as an unwavering advocate for diversity, equity and inclusion at my workplace and in the society at large. Operating in a field where women are significantly underrepresented, especially in leadership roles, I have witnessed first-hand the insidious effects of systemic bias and the vital importance of confronting it. I would see this confrontation and the pursuit for change as the most courageous aspect of my life and career.

Asking uncomfortable questions that challenge the deeply-rooted status quo and expose the troubling gender disparities demanded courage and conviction on my part. Raising these issues meant facing resistance from those invested in preserving the established norms. I recognised that achieving true equality necessitates conscious effort to dismantle systemic barriers. As a leader, I was determined to bring about the change and this required an innovative approach – setting measurable goals for equitable representation of a diverse workforce, actively sponsoring and mentoring women, and encouraging an organisational culture of meritocracy over bias.

Sustainable change needed appreciation over appropriation. Organisations needed to acknowledge that women are often overlooked due to not fitting into conventional leadership archetypes. Focusing on diversity isn't just about meeting quotas; it's about improving overall

decision-making, based on the unique perspectives women bring to the table, and ensuring that we don't have the same blind spots.

Through this journey, I learned that any transformation is often characterised by disturbing narratives and overcoming them is imperative to drive change, and that demands immense emotional resilience. I too had to persevere through disheartening statistics, dismissive narratives about "diversity hires," and the psychological toll of battling deeply entrenched mindsets. Yet, I was motivated by a profound conviction that progress is only honest and sustainable when it uplifts all people. It required courage to move away from a "cancel culture" to a counsel culture i.e. building coalitions, rallying support, and giving voice to marginalised perspectives that are often excluded or dismissed from decision-making spheres.

The results, though still imperfect, have been deeply gratifying. My team's talent pool has become 45% gender diverse, up from a mere 20% just two years ago. Women are steadily advancing into leadership roles once exclusively occupied by men. More importantly, we are cultivating a culture where opportunities are seized equitably, without the weight of systemic handicaps.

Courage, undeniably, is a potent catalyst for empowerment, authenticity and positive change, not just for myself but for all those who draw inspiration from practitioners of courage.

> **Though immensely Striving for greatness: one team, one dream challenging, courage breeds profound metamorphosis – of individuals, organisations and society itself.**

It's the most authentic expression of my values, enabling me to tackle adversity head-on rather than succumbing to the path of least resistance.

Lessons for Building Courage

1 Face your fears

One of the most effective ways to build courage is to confront your fears. Take small steps outside of your comfort zone, gradually exposing yourself to situations that make you feel uncomfortable. With each

success, you'll gain confidence in your ability to overcome adversity and tackle larger challenges.

2 Practice self-compassion and give grace

Recognise that courage doesn't mean being fearless; it means facing your fears despite feeling afraid. Be kind to yourself and acknowledge that it's okay to feel scared or uncertain. Treat yourself with compassion and understanding, and remind yourself of your strengths and past successes when doubts arise. Also, courage needs you to give grace to others as much as you give it to yourself.

3 Set goals and take action

Break down your goals into manageable steps and create a plan of action to achieve them. Focus on the process rather than the outcome, and celebrate your progress along the way. Taking proactive steps toward your goals, even in the face of uncertainty, will help you build resilience and confidence in your abilities.

CHAPTER 08

Dr. Krithi K. Karanth



CEO & Chief Conservation Scientist, Centre for Wildlife Studies

Dr. Krithi K. Karanth, CEO at the Centre for Wildlife Studies, and Adjunct Associate Professor at Duke University, has had a remarkable journey. With a childhood spent in and out of jungles, her 25-year research and conservation work across India and Asia delves deep into the human dimensions of wildlife conservation. From studying species distributions to the impacts of wildlife tourism and human-wildlife interactions, Dr Krithi's work has led her to publish over 100 scientific and popular articles. She's a recipient of 50+ awards including the National Geographic Society's 10,000th grantee and Emerging Explorer titles. Notable accolades include the WINGS Women of Discovery Award, Eisenhower and Aspen Fellowships, and the Rolex Award for Enterprise. Named among the Explorer's Club 2024 EC 50 – as one of the 50 individuals shaping our world – she's a driving force in shaping global conservation efforts.

I had a pretty unusual childhood. With a father renowned as a tiger biologist and conservationist, my childhood was immersed in observing wildlife and accompanying him on journeys. While my fascination with nature blossomed, I also witnessed the challenges he encountered. There is allure and enjoyment, but conservation work is arduous. Witnessing my father's struggles deterred me from pursuing a similar path.

I started out majoring in environmental science and geography but, along the way, I fell in love with research and asking important and relevant environmental questions.

It was during my Master's program at Yale that a pivotal research project in India's wilderness sparked a personal revelation. I realised my calling lay in conservation, where there were enough big questions to be asked and definitely room for a lot more people to ask them. Completing my Master's, PhD, and postdoctoral, I returned to India in 2010 to embark on this path.

When I started out, it was purely to be trained as a scientist with the goal of asking interesting research questions and publishing extensively. But my career trajectory has evolved significantly over the past 15 years. I've spearheaded five acclaimed conservation programs—Wild Seve, Wild Shaale, Wild Surakshe, Adopt a PHC, and Wild Carbon. Moreover, I have mentored over 250 young scientists from India, US, Chile, UK, Australia and Indonesia, and engaged over 750 citizen science volunteers in my research and conservation projects.

Beyond scientific inquiry, my focus has shifted towards influencing policy and initiating actions to tackle pressing environmental issues. Despite its challenges, this shift holds profound significance for me.

I’m focused on becoming a better storyteller and communicator. As a scientific community, we often struggle to articulate the relevance of our projects to society at large. Collaborating with artists, filmmakers, and photographers, I've endeavoured to bridge this gap. My work has been showcased in award-winning BBC series – The Hunt, Big Cats, and Dynasties – and in documentaries by CBC and PBS, amplifying its reach and impact.

Over 250 prominent media outlets have featured my work including Washington Post, Time magazine, Al Jazeera Television, Christian Science Monitor, GQ India, Harper's Bazaar, Mongabay, Monocle, National Geographic, National Public Radio, New York Times, Scientific American, All India Radio, Deccan Chronicle, Deccan Herald, Down to Earth, Kannada Prabha, LiveMint, New Indian Express, Prajavani, The Hindu and Times of India.

I have been fortunate but in India, gender biases still prevail in the scientific domain. Despite changing attitudes, scepticism towards women in science persists. They are rarely taken seriously as scientists. Whenever I've had to deal with older individuals, particularly government officials who almost always disdain scientists anyway, doubts about my capabilities due to my gender subtly linger. Overcoming these biases requires persistent effort to convey the importance of my work and expertise.

Let me give you an example: When I decided to become a mother while I was pursuing my PhD, I faced an unwarranted backlash! I was told, "if you're choosing to be a mom while you're doing a PhD, then you're not serious about your PhD." The misconception that motherhood compromises dedication to a career is baseless. I disproved this notion by completing my studies more swiftly than most of my peers who didn't have children.

My husband and I are raising our two daughters, aged 16 and eight. In India, societal and cultural norms often impose limitations on girls from an early age. I aspire for a shift away from such attitudes, advocating for girls to pursue their aspirations freely and independently, including in their career choices.

My career, of my own choosing, involves navigating its many highs and lows. Securing funding for research and conservation projects is a perpetual challenge. While some endeavours flourish effortlessly, others face scepticism and funding hurdles. There is always the tussle (and the frustration) between what you want to pursue and what has funding. Some projects take off and some don't. Some papers get accepted and some rejected. Embracing this cyclical nature is essential to resilience and growth. This comes easy to me because I'm a persistent, passionate human being who never gives up.

> **I believe refusing to relent in the face of obstacles, because you are driven by an unwavering passion for effecting positive change, is courage.**

Lessons for Building Courage

1 Embrace your unique abilities and be fearless

Stay focused on what you want to do and not get disheartened by naysayers. Be willing to take risks and try new things. Do not be afraid to challenge the status quo with your perspective.

2 Develop adaptability and resilience

Leading multiple projects, working with communities, partners, funders and the government as a non-profit requires adaptability and resilience. Open mindedness, looking for different ways to do things and being able to survive the ups and downs is essential.

3 Be authentic and find your tribe

Surround yourself with people who know you and genuinely care. People who will give you real feedback, voice concerns, and offer constructive criticism. This could be through mentors, friends or leadership programs.

CHAPTER 09

Jayashri Kulkarni



General Manager & Country Head, Janssen India and South Asia (Johnson & Johnson)

Jayashri Kulkarni's journey from a small town near Mumbai to becoming a senior corporate leader exemplifies her exceptional resolve and adaptability. Starting her career in healthcare, she swiftly ascended through strategy, consulting, and insights and analytics roles – eventually running a P&L and managing a team of over 500 members today for the Janssen Pharmaceutical Companies of Johnson & Johnson. Her leadership has not only earned her respect and influence in the industry but has also inspired many. Jayashri practises courage by acknowledging fear but moving ahead regardless.

I grew up in a small town called Khopoli, nestled between Mumbai and Pune, where I had the best childhood and, looking back now, learnt some fantastic life lessons. In the 1970s-80s, it was a buzzing industrial town in the most lush and scenic place possible. Early on, it normalised for me that people from different parts of the country chose to leave their hometowns for work and embraced diverse cultures and communities of the country. The resulting network provided an enriching experience!

Living there as a family, I watched my father evolve in his career from being a shift engineer to heading the manufacturing plant. I saw him manage lockdowns deftly and courageously. His commitment to integrity and ethics left a lasting impression on me, teaching me the value of standing firm in my convictions. I saw my mother and sister

create a warm home that welcomed all to celebrate the big and small joys, and just as easily provide a safe place to share losses and seek a genuine listening ear. They were always there for people.

My journey into the corporate world was driven by a desire to make a difference in healthcare, fuelled by personal experiences, and it soon lent itself to my purpose.

From my first role as a sales representative to setting up a consulting practice just five years after it, then returning to the pharmaceutical industry to position India differently to the world, then pivoting to MedTech, followed by building an APAC function for insights and strategy that served 14 markets, and now leading a large team while running a P&L – every decision has come from a place of purpose, which was strengthened by three things (a) watching people around me model courage and integrity in how they lead their lives (b) unwavering support from my husband in acknowledging the uncertainties in life and work, yet moving ahead with confidence that we would be able to tackle them together (c) mentors and sponsors who were always there to cheer me on.

Each transition made me reflect on whether I was ready for it and what it would take for me to succeed in that role. Often, we spend too much time thinking about what we've done so far that equips us for the next role, instead of thinking or simulating the next role and introspecting what it really needs or what will make the biggest difference in it.

A pivotal move for me was deciding to establish a consulting practice for an American company, despite being a young mother and having limited experience in structured consulting. Helping change the business model from being just one chapter in an APAC market report to creating sources of revenue through consulting and custom projects was a big deal. Further, doing it not only for pharmaceuticals, but also expanding it for medtech, hospitals, and health IT was very exciting, and definitely a bold step I took.

That said, my most recent move from a strategic and advisory role to being in a role where the buck stops at me has perhaps been my most courageous leap yet. Stepping into a position where the accountability

of ~500 people rests squarely on my shoulders, as does creating equity and credibility for the organisation externally in India and internally in the region and worldwide teams demands a very different level of self-awareness, an agility to zoom in and out for every decision to be made and its implication, and a sharp focus on the big picture. Yet, it is acknowledging my vulnerabilities and seeking support from mentors and sponsors that has propelled me forward.

Self-doubt often crept in as I embarked on unfamiliar paths, but I've learnt to travel the journey from self-doubt to courage by understanding what it involves. It is an intense phase of observing, listening, seeking, and synthesising as much information as I can on the expectations the organisation has from my actions. Rather than dwelling on uncertainties, I focus on understanding the task at hand, things that I can control, and staying focused on the objective – whether it's building a clear vision, coaching teams to focus on aspirational growth, or people development. Simply put, I acknowledge what I do not know, and I prepare well.

Seeking guidance from mentors and experts, which has become second nature, has always empowered me to navigate through uncharted territory with confidence. I truly believe that the sooner we make asking for help a habit the easier it is for us to dream bigger.

Taking courageous steps has not only changed my life but also inspired others to challenge their own boundaries. As a role model, I strive to empower fellow professionals, particularly women, to pursue their aspirations with confidence. I know how much I've benefited from my role models, so I endeavour to pay it forward, demonstrating that with courage, anything is possible.

> **Courage is not merely about bravado or fearlessness but rather the willingness to confront fears and embrace vulnerability.**

Courage has been my guiding light, illuminating the path to personal and professional growth. It has made me wiser, and it has transformed my impulsive bravado into thoughtful decision-making, rooted in awareness and foresight.

Lessons for Building Courage

1 Acknowledge what you don’t know

One of the most vital steps in building courage is acknowledging your own vulnerabilities and being transparent with yourself about what you don’t know. Remember, this isn’t about self-doubt – it's about self-awareness. When I first took on a role in a new industry, I was acutely aware of the gaps in my knowledge. Instead of seeing this as a deficit, I viewed it as an opportunity to learn. Acknowledging these gaps helped me set realistic goals, thus turning potential weaknesses into areas of growth.

2 Be open to ask for help

Asking for help is not just about gaining assistance; it's a powerful way to build trust and respect. When I started consulting for an American company, despite being relatively inexperienced in structured consulting, I openly sought advice and insights from more seasoned professionals. This not only helped me learn faster but also established strong relationships and a supportive network.

3 Stand by your choices

It’s easy to give excuses and say it was a bad year or a bad market, but courage involves standing by your decisions, regardless of external circumstances or outcomes. I can tell from experience that my commitment to my choices has been crucial in shaping my leadership style and personal growth.

CHAPTER 10

Geetika Mehta



Managing Director, Nivea India

Geetika Mehta's life reflects a courageous journey through the world of business leadership, in which she has spent over two decades. Her approach to her career is guided by a "marathon, not a race" philosophy, which has enabled her to prioritise long-term goals over short-term gains. Winner of the Economic Times 40 Under 40, Impact 50 Most Influential Women, ET Prime DEI Ally of the Year 2023, and BW Most Influential Women 2024 – she consistently demonstrates the courage of her convictions in daily decisions, guided by a strong value system that steers her through both challenging and prosperous times. Formerly with Unilever and Hershey, Geetika's journey reflects a steadfast commitment to doing what's right, even when it's the harder choice.

It all began with my mother, a beacon of courage in my life. Widowed at a young age with two children to raise, she epitomised resilience as she transitioned from homemaker to educator, eventually ascending to the role of a school principal in Delhi. Her unwavering determination in the face of adversity instilled in me the belief that no obstacle is insurmountable.

The loss of my father at a tender age catalysed a sense of purpose within me and my brother. Fuelled by the desire to seize every opportunity life presented, we embarked on a journey of relentless perseverance. Despite hailing from a modest background, we dared to dream big. I pursued my

education at esteemed institutions like Shri Ram College of Commerce and IIM Ahmedabad, a feat that seemed audacious at the time but laid the foundation for my future.

Upon graduating, I stood at a crossroads, torn between lucrative offers in banking and the uncharted territory of sales and marketing. I called my mother for advice, who suggested I pick anything but sales which, she believed, was not a profession for women. That reversely prompted me to take it up! Little did I know, this leap of faith would shape my professional trajectory.

Sales, with its inherent challenges and unexpected encounters, tested my mettle in ways I never imagined. From confronting armed distributors in remote towns to weathering unnerving incidents in the dead of night, each experience underscored the importance of unfaltering trust in myself and my teams. I learned that courage isn't solitary; it thrives within the bonds of collective support.

From leaving our comfort zone to seek special accommodations for our family, to adjusting to the rigours of campus life, every decision demanded courage and resilience.

> **Trust is the backdrop to courage.**

As I transitioned to slightly more cushy roles in brand management, I embraced discomfort as a catalyst for growth. Stepping out of my comfort zone became second nature, a conscious choice to expand my skill set and broaden my horizons. I sought out opportunities that stretched my capabilities, whether it meant diving into unfamiliar territories or spearheading global initiatives.

With each career transition, I found solace in preparation and the belief of those who placed their trust in me. I draw courage from watching people around me who are courageous; from knowing I have teams and systems backing me up; from women who have forged the way before me; and from the bold bets I’ve made that have paid off.

The recent invitation to address a convocation at IIM Kozhikode served as a poignant reminder of my journey's magnitude. Though my instant response to the invitation was, “No, thank you,” my husband’s belief in

me being deserving of this honour encouraged me to say yes to it. Despite the onerous responsibility of inspiring the next generation, I summoned the courage to share my insights with a crowd of 700+ audience members.

As a human, I believe that life is more of a marathon than a race, and having run a full marathon, I understand that the pace varies throughout the 42 kilometres, similar to how my career has fluctuated over the past 21 years. There will be times when you might lag behind peers and other times when you're ahead. This broader perspective helps me focus on doing the right things for long-term benefits rather than short-term gains. I'm not just looking at my next job; I'm building a 40-year career, which encourages me to choose tougher but right actions. I think this ability to do difficult but correct things stems from a strong value system that not only gives me courage but also prevents me from taking shortcuts.

That said, we cannot muster all the courage only from within. Our environments play a huge role. In navigating the corporate landscape, I've come to recognise the pivotal role of the environment in nurturing courage. Organisations that foster psychological safety and champion diversity empower individuals to embrace bold decisions and pursue uncharted territories. I've been fortunate to encounter leaders who bet on potential, and I consider it my duty – as someone in a position of power and authority – to create an environment conducive to courage.

Just four months ago, I made a bold decision to join a new organisation, a move that is always a bit unnerving. For me, courage is shown in daily actions — whether I'm making decisions that aid in prioritisation or making the right people calls. I believe that in this new role, I will truly demonstrate my courage through every action I take. And I'm looking forward to that journey.

Lessons for Building Courage

1 Focus on the long term

Consider life as a marathon, not a sprint. Viewing your journey and challenges with a long-term view helps put everything into perspective,

making it easier to build courage as you understand the role each challenge plays in your larger life story.

2 Learn from failure

Embrace failure as a part of your growth process. It's crucial to quickly dust yourself off and rise again with renewed passion and insight. This resilience not only builds courage but also defines your future success.

3 Cultivate support networks

Never underestimate the power of a strong support system. Whether it’s mentors, friends, family, or your team and colleagues, having people to lean on can bolster your courage. Ask for help when needed and draw on the encouragement and guidance of others to strengthen your own resolve.

CHAPTER 11

Shaheen Mistri



Founder & CEO, Teach For India

Shaheen Mistri founded The Akanksha Foundation in 1989, and Teach For India (TFI) in 2008, igniting a movement to combat education inequity in India. Over three decades, she has rallied thousands and touched the lives of millions of children by bringing about systemic change in education. She has been an Ashoka Fellow, a Global Leader for Tomorrow at the World Economic Forum, and an Asia Society 21 Leader. Recognised with prestigious awards such as the DCPCR's Children's Champion Award (2023), and the Niti Aayaog's Women Transforming India Award (2022), among others, Shaheen defines courage as the strength to act despite fear or self-doubt.

I was born in Mumbai, and studied in 10 schools across five countries. I grew up a shy kid. I struggled to speak up in class, fearing the judgement of others. From that to founding two organisations dedicated to educational equity, which have gone on to impact millions of children, I sure have come a long way. What shifted was focusing on something that wasn't about me; that was about something much bigger than me. And something I deeply cared about.

I would not say I was courageous during my childhood. I was a diligent student, a rule follower and often easily influenced by peers and trends. I also grew up with a fair amount of privilege across the board – material, family, friends, education. There was no real reason to be brave in my little world.

Early signs of wanting to take risks or do something different, which may be the precursor to where courage comes from, came from volunteering. From the age of 12, I spent summers volunteering around the world whether it was working with visually impaired kids, autistic children or rescuing stray animals. These experiences opened my eyes to the realities of the world and fuelled my desire to make a difference.

At 18, I left Tufts University and moved to India. I remember the specific moment when I was travelling in a taxi in Mumbai, and a few children ran to my window, begging, which shifted something in my heart. A few days later, I walked into a low-income community, and started teaching. This grew into the first Akanksha centre.

Moving back to India was a defining moment of courage for me. Despite having no connections here or knowledge of the language, I followed my instincts and left behind the comforts of home in the US to pursue my passion for children and education.

It was a very different environment for me. Spending time in the community, being with people who were different from individuals I'd interacted with before, and learning about them and their circumstances took a lot of vulnerability on my part because I had to constantly depend on others.

Starting Akanksha and Teach For India were monumental acts of courage. It wasn't easy to mobilise others to join my cause, especially as a shy person. But my belief in the power of education to change lives gave me the courage to persevere.

There were moments when I questioned my abilities and felt overwhelmed by the challenges ahead but, overall, I would not say I've experienced profound self-doubt. That is probably because I've always been a huge believer in asking for help, and continuously learning. Underpinning learning is the realisation that you're never enough. I wake up so many days remembering that I will never be able to advance at the rate that this mission needs me to advance at, and that the cause is so much bigger than any skill or value that I can bring to the table. But here's the game changer – when you accept your incapacity, it liberates and energises you to finally get down to doing the work.

Anu Aga, a dear friend and mentor, taught me the importance of being honest about my limitations and finding strength in my imperfections.

Running Akanksha and Teach For India has been both challenging and rewarding. It's given me a sense of purpose, my most precious relationships, a loving community, space to continuously learn and evolve, and the opportunity to make a meaningful impact in the lives of others. It's given me the conviction that if this takes multiple lifetimes, it's work worth doing.

It has also taken from me. It's taken cultivating within me the all encompassing value of love such that I'm willing to do whatever it takes for the thing that I love, which is this work. Also, the explicit building of deep relationships, which has been very central in enabling me to stay the path. I invested a lot of time early on in relationships that over the years have become partnerships, ideas and people I can lean on in difficult times. And finally, it's taken a high degree of optimism. A high bar of what's possible, which means believing that things that are difficult, complicated and unfathomable can come true – and come true within our lifetime.

At Teach For India, we emphasise the importance of courage as a pertinent 21st century skill. I believe what holds children back from attaining their potential are their fears, and their inability to be resilient and stick with things through difficult times. Children become courageous when they are allowed to struggle, fail and fall i.e. when they are not overprotected.

However, I've observed a troubling trend of declining courage and resilience among today's youth. With well-being becoming a big discussion in the world today, though rightly so, I worry we will build a generation of children who will not have the resilience they need to navigate discomfort in an increasingly complex world.

Lately, I'm actively thinking about what's the sweet spot between wellness – which is so important – and making sure there's enough discomfort in our lives to build the resilience that we need. Courage has been a guiding force that has propelled me forward on this journey of education and social change. I'd like to see every child at Akanksha and TFI to value courage so it can positively and rewardingly impact their lives too!

In the end, I'd say the most courageous thing I've done is to just stay the course. To persevere.

> **Staying is a big act of courage.**

For me, deciding this is it – educational equity is the one thing I want to work on in my life, no matter the ups and downs on the path – has taken courage. It's given me the strength to overcome obstacles, the resilience to bounce back from failure, and the conviction to keep fighting for what I believe in.

Lessons for Building Courage

1 Put yourself in a situation of discomfort and don't give up

One of the key practices for building courage is to challenge yourself by putting yourself in uncomfortable situations and persisting through them. Even small acts of discomfort, like meditating for 15 minutes despite finding it difficult, can help build resilience and courage over time. By pushing through discomfort, we develop the strength to face larger challenges with courage and determination.

2 Surround yourself with courageous people

Seek out the company of individuals who embody courage in various aspects of their lives. I had a high-income student who was inspired to overcome her fear of maths and pursue her passions after hearing the life stories of children from a different, comparatively underprivileged background who have significant challenges in their lives. Engaging with courageous individuals can provide motivation, encouragement, and perspective, ultimately empowering us to take bold steps towards our goals.

3 Don't let what others think of you matter as much

Courage often requires us to break free from the fear of judgement and live life on our own terms. Don't let the opinions of others dictate your actions or limit your potential. By embracing your authenticity and refusing to be swayed by external pressures, you cultivate the inner strength and confidence needed to pursue your dreams fearlessly. As my grandmother exemplified, living life unapologetically and embracing our true selves is a powerful catalyst for courage and personal growth.

CHAPTER 12

Zia Mody



Co-Founder & Managing Partner, AZB & Partners

Zia Mody is one of India's foremost corporate attorneys. She is an alumna of the University of Cambridge and Harvard Law School, and a member of the New York State Bar. She was ranked No.1 in Fortune India's 'India's 50 Most Powerful Women in Business' list in 2018 & 2019 and has also served on regulatory and advisory committees worldwide. Courage, Zia asserts, stems from expertise and a resolute inner value system.

I grew up in a middle-class family in Mumbai, India. When, as a young girl, I expressed my desire to marry my husband, I was shipped off to England to study law. My mother thought I was too young to think about marriage. When I brought it up again, after my bachelor's, I was sent to the US to do my master's. And after that, to get a job in New York.

Going abroad to study law was a defining moment for me because my life journey, thereon, became radically different. It involved studying for at least 6-7 years. Gradually, it dawned on me that I was investing in a professional experience from which I couldn't simply walk away. It was then that I knew if I had to be a lawyer, I had to be a successful one.

At 28, after working in New York for four years, I returned to India to be a junior counsel. What I came back to, on the work front, quite shocked me. I'd done large Merger & Acquisition (M&A) deals in Manhattan and here, in India, there were hardly any women appearing

in court! I had my own room, a secretary, and the freedom to do my own deals in New York but back home, I had a tiny desk that I shared with my then senior and wonderful mentor.

In court, I would see maybe two women lawyers, both not speaking, only dutifully listening to their male counterparts. Potential clients would not take me seriously on account of being a woman in the profession. To add to this, my senior in my second week at work gave me unsolicited advice to swap the formal skirts and blouses that I wore in America as work attire, with the Indian salwar-kameez. I felt like my boundaries had shrunk.

The same senior, after I got my first legal case, told me it was better not to charge too much to the clients for a while. To work nearly for free, essentially. It sounded absolutely absurd but in hindsight, as a result of that, a lot of work came my way and I got several chances to prove myself. Over the years that followed, once India opened up its FDI regime, I dared to believe that I can achieve great heights of success as a corporate lawyer.

> **One of the most profound realisations in my journey was the necessity of establishing a robust value system in order to be courageous.**

Passion fuels my dedication to my work, serving as a sustaining force through challenges. Integrity, as a principle guiding my actions, ensures that I advise clients with honesty and their best interests at heart. Forthrightness becomes paramount – to maintain clarity in communication. These are sacrosanct values.

Moreover, affection weaves through my interactions, extending to all who have contributed to my journey, from colleagues to family. I believe that ambition survives, and we want to keep going forward, when we know that the stakeholders in our ecosystem are proud of us. This sense of connection fosters courage in us. As a woman, especially, this support and connection goes a long way.

To women leaders reading this I'd say, it's incumbent upon us to champion the retention of women in the workplace. We cannot let them leave without us having done our best to make them stay. Nothing speaks

louder than implementation of what you promised them, so deliver on your promise – be it organisational support post maternity leave, a seat at the table, an opportunity or a promotion. Women hold up half the sky and therefore they are critical to the success and growth of any organisation, any nation.

Whether in supporting other women, or our own lives and careers, recognise that compromises are an inherent part of both. But creating a value structure that holds you through your life, and daring to do the right thing, will get you far.

Lessons for Building Courage

1 Build expertise

Courage comes from the confidence you have over the subject matter in the profession.

2 Build a strong value system

Courage comes from an inner value system that your conscience trumps over any client expectation or requirement.

3 Recognise and acknowledge your mistakes

Courage comes from recognising your mistake, and being able to say sorry and genuinely mean it.

CHAPTER 13

Shivya Nath



Founder, Climate Conscious Travel | Travel Storyteller

At the age of 23, Shivya Nath quit her corporate job to travel the world. Haili ng from the quaint town of Dehradun, nestled at the foothills of the Himalayas, she has since embarked on solo travels, explored sustainability, authored her memoir, launched her first self-paced course and founded her consultancy. Each step in her journey has been a chapter in her pursuit of purpose and fulfilment. Recipient of the prestigious Lowell Thomas Travel Journalism Award in 2023, to Shivya courage means acknowledging one's comfort zones and actively pushing beyond them.

I was based in Singapore and working with the Singapore Tourism Board between 2009 to 2011. I distinctly remember a conversation with an older colleague there, in which I told him that I was beginning to feel a creeping sense of stagnation despite my love for the job. His casual remark, "you get used to it," served as a wake-up call. He had been with the company for 20 years.

A pivotal realisation struck me: the longer I remained in my current position, the more entrenched I would become in a routine devoid of passion.

I yearned for a life defined by purpose and excitement, where each day held the promise of new adventures and meaningful experiences. I took a leap of faith; I decided to bid farewell to corporate life and embarked on a journey of self-discovery.

Embracing the unknown, I ventured into the world of solo travel – a decision that defied societal norms and challenged conventional wisdom. Armed with a backpack and a sense of wanderlust, I set out to explore the far reaches of the globe, one destination at a time.

Maybe I'm romanticising this but in my 20s, the uncertainty and unpredictability that came with choosing this path was exhilarating. Sure, there were some sleepless nights like when I woke up with just 150 rupees in my bank halfway across the globe in Panama but, on the whole, the positives outweighed the negatives. To document my travels and the many learnings from my life on the road, I started my blog The Shooting Star, with the intention to inspire others to embrace the boundless possibilities that awaited beyond their comfort zones. In 2018, I published my travel memoir, its namesake.

My focus in my initial years revolved around empowering women through solo travel, a journey rooted in personal liberation and cultural exploration. Coming from a small town in India, I understood the transformative power of stepping beyond familiar borders. Yet, as the years unfolded, my perspective expanded to encompass broader issues of sustainability and environmental stewardship.

The realisation dawned upon me gradually, fuelled by my encounters with the fragility of our planet during my travels. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and the extractive nature of mass tourism became stark realities that demanded attention. However, amidst the challenges, I also discovered the potential of tourism as a force for good – it could become a tool to protect and conserve rather than to destroy and extract. In response to this both my travelling and storytelling style evolved to ask more questions.

As I navigated these shifts in focus, I found myself at a crossroads during the pandemic. I literally had nowhere to go. Stranded without my nomadic lifestyle, I confronted the limitations imposed by borders and (Indian) passports. It was a sobering moment of introspection, prompting me to reevaluate my role in shaping the future of travel.

Thus began a period of transition and reinvention. I embarked on a journey of academic pursuit, enrolling in a master's program in

sustainability and environmental management. Armed with newfound knowledge, I ventured into the realm of consultancy, launching Climate Conscious Travel – a platform dedicated to fostering climate action within the tourism industry.

My path is not without its doubts and uncertainties. From grappling with financial instability as a freelancer to being blindsided by the advent of Instagram and recently questioning the validity of my voice in teaching travel writing workshops, moments of self-doubt have been plenty. But they were and continue to be integral to my growth. With each challenge, I discovered resilience and adaptability – the essential ingredients of courage.

In the pursuit of courage, I learned to embrace discomfort as a catalyst for growth.

Launching my self-paced course last year, especially, was a courageous leap forward. It's called 'Get Paid to Travel the World with Purpose', because we need greater purpose reflecting in the way we travel and tell stories. I've taken everything I've learnt over the last 10 years and weaved it, thoughtfully, into the curriculum.

With the course, my desire is to empower others to turn their passion for travel into a purposeful career – such that it is not only financially sustainable but also good for the planet and its people. Launching it made me embrace the challenge of stepping into the education space with determination and conviction. I was nervous about being in front of the camera to record the modules, but I knew I had to do it. At the end of the day, I believe courage is to understand and acknowledge that we have a comfort zone, and that we have to be consciously willing to push it.

> **Courage is the recognition that growth, and some of life's most amazing experiences, happen outside of our comfort zone.**

Amidst my many trials and triumphs, I have found solace in the journey itself – the relentless pursuit of creative truth and meaningful impact. From celebrating small victories to curating a supportive community,

courage has manifested not as a singular act but as a continuous journey of self-discovery and self-affirmation.

Lessons for Building Courage

1 Be in touch with your inner voice

In my experience, every time I feel there's something stopping me from pushing my comfort zone, I take a step back and unpack my feelings. By regularly checking in with yourself and understanding the roots of your fears and self-doubts, you can gain clarity and perspective. This self-awareness enables you to confront your fears head-on and take decisive action, despite any reservations you may have.

2 Fear breeds fear and courage breeds courage

Surrounding yourself with like-minded individuals who inspire courage and resilience is crucial. I consciously seek out literature, social media accounts, films and other sources of inspiration that feature protagonists who have pushed beyond their comfort zones. By immersing yourself in a supportive community, you can draw strength and motivation from shared experiences, fostering a culture of courage and growth.

3 Celebrate small victories

Acknowledging and celebrating even the smallest achievements is essential for building courage. Recognise that everyone's journey is unique, and progress should be measured not by comparison with others but your own personal growth. By celebrating incremental successes and pushing the boundaries of your comfort zone gradually, you can cultivate a positive relationship with your abilities and foster a sense of self-assurance and empowerment.

CHAPTER 14

Anisha Pahuja



Program Director - Risk & Compliance Change,
Standard Chartered Bank

Anisha Pahuja grew up an Army kid, where adapting to new schools, friends and cities every few years was a way of life. It built in her an appreciation for exposure to the new, and the resilience and agility to find her way around it. Over 15 years in the banking industry, she has leveraged those traits to strategically move roles every couple of years, and in doing so, meaningfully accelerated her leadership journey. Unsurprisingly, constantly stepping outside one's comfort zone is how Anisha defines courage.

My childhood was a whirlwind of change, thanks to my father being in the Indian Army. Every few years, we packed our bags and moved to a new city, bidding farewell to old friends and welcoming new faces into our lives.

Growing up as an army officer's daughter came with its own challenges and blessings. While I missed having childhood friends who stayed constant, the experience taught me invaluable lessons in adaptability. Changing schools frequently meant I learned to thrive in diverse environments, soaking in different cultures and perspectives like a sponge.

I completed my B.Com Honours from the esteemed Shri Ram College of Commerce (SRCC) in Delhi University, and my foray into the corporate world began with a remarkable opportunity at the Bank of Tokyo

Mitsubishi. The selection process was nothing short of daunting, with 10,000 applicants vying for a handful of spots. To my surprise, I was among the chosen few, setting the stage for an exciting career in banking.

For five years, I immersed myself in various roles at the Bank of Tokyo, from humble beginnings as a teller to navigating the intricacies of back-end operations.

Once my daughter was born I decided to take a sabbatical to spend time with her, since children grow up so fast.

When my daughter started school, I began teaching spoken English and personality development at an institute in Gurgaon. Nearly 20 years ago, Gurgaon was slowly upcoming. There were a lot of adults from nearby small towns who were keen to learn English and enhance their personalities in anticipation of the opportunities that were sure to come to the burgeoning area. I taught with passion and dedication.

As fate would have it, a new opportunity came knocking at my door – a chance to venture into business development for a startup specialising in educational tools. All schools in South Delhi and Gurgaon came under me. The first contract that I bagged for the startup was a huge learning for me because I had not tried my hand at business sales before. But once I did it, I truly believed I could do anything.

I was with the startup for a year and a half after which, my husband got a job in Singapore, and we moved. The move to Singapore presented unforeseen challenges, as I grappled with the intimidating and unnerving task of reentering the corporate workforce in a foreign land. The road ahead was fraught with uncertainty, but I refused to let setbacks dampen my spirit.

The process was rather demoralising and dispiriting. The economy was tough and there were thousands of applicants for every position. I felt as if I was sending out my resume into a black hole; I didn't hear back from anybody in two years. It would not be an exaggeration to say that it was one of the toughest phases of my career. The rejections made me wonder if there was something wrong with me.

After two years of perseverance, I finally received an offer from Standard Chartered, marking a triumphant return to the corporate arena.

Though the role was humble – I started from scratch joining at the same level as fresh graduates – I approached it with unwavering determination, eager to prove my worth once again.

In my first three months there, I convinced my manager that I could do much more than the responsibilities they were giving me. Management took a chance on me and made me a team lead. When they saw me grow the team from four to 30 individuals, they were quick to recognise my potential. Ever since, the bank has been extremely fair to me, giving me ample opportunities for growth.

I'm proud to have taken charge of my career. I made sure that my reputation preceded me as a leader who is effective, energetic, collaborative and consistently surpasses organisational objectives.

Over the 10 years that I've spent with Standard Chartered, I've intentionally moved roles every couple of years – working in different departments, learning new things and meeting new people. This has undoubtedly been the fastest way to grow, especially after the seven year hiatus in my career. From leading teams to spearheading major projects, each role has been an opportunity to step outside my comfort zone and take on new challenges.

> **To me, embracing change with open arms is courage.**

Having changed so many roles over the last decade, I still feel the initial trepidation when I start a new role or project. But I've learned to approach these transitions with a sense of curiosity and determination.

From immersing myself in unfamiliar subject matter to building relationships with new colleagues, I recognise that each opportunity is a chance to grow and evolve. Over the years, I've gotten extremely comfortable with the initial discomfort of starting a new project where one doesn't know anything or anyone.

What has also helped is my unwavering commitment to fairness and integrity. Whether confronting impostor syndrome or challenging the status quo, I've always stayed true to my values. Upholding them has taken a lot of courage, but they have held me in good stead throughout.

In the end, I would just say that there are very few shortcuts to courage. You have to put in the work not only to learn all that you need to for the role you are in – be it at work or home – but also to do it with your values intact.

Lessons for Building Courage

1 Find what gives you confidence

For some it may be dressing the part and for others, having a large network. For me, it is gaining knowledge. In one of the projects where I had to roll out a comprehensive policy to multiple countries, I recognised the importance of thorough preparation. I took a day off and meticulously read through the 160-page document, ensuring that I was well-equipped to address any questions that arose during the rollout process. This dedication to gaining knowledge bolsters my confidence and underscores the significance of preparation in overcoming challenges with courage.

2 Don't let the fear of others judging you put you down

It takes courage to own what you don't know and be willing to learn it. I have asked basic, elementary questions in forums and meetings, even if it meant risking scrutiny or sarcasm from peers. If I don't ask, it's my loss. I prioritise self-improvement over fear of judgement. In doing so I've cultivated a culture of continuous learning and personal growth, which in the long run has clearly benefited me.

3 Accept the worst case scenario

By acknowledging the potential for failure or rejection, you free yourself from the fear of what might happen. Once while taking on a daunting senior role, I recognised that the worst outcome would be poor performance on my part leading to the management firing me, but I was willing to accept that possibility and remain true to myself. In another instance, I felt I was being cast in stone and pressured to act a certain way. I knew I cannot compromise on who I am or my values. So, I accepted the possibility of rejection but continued being myself. Accepting the worst-case scenario is like giving yourself the permission to be you, no matter what might happen.

CHAPTER 15

Sucheta Pal



Women's Health Advocate | Zumba® Ambassador | Creator of Mom.Bod.Strong

Sucheta Pal has been leading the disruptor life since 2009 when she went from being a techie to changing the face of dance-fitness in India forever. Known for pioneering the growth of Zumba® in India, she was the brand's first official Global Ambassador & Master Trainer for the country. She did it all while battling social anxiety disorder. After a decade of her global career – teaching over 15,000 people across 15+ countries – she was awarded the prestigious "First lady" Rashtrapati Award in 2018. In 2019, when motherhood struck, she founded India's first of its kind, doctor's recommended fitness program Mom.Bod. Strong to help mothers return to fitness the right way. Today as a women's health advocate and speaker, she believes true courage is not a one-time act.

I come from a middle-class family settled in a small town in India called Ranchi. It was both my parents' and my dream that I become an engineer. This came from an innocent place of lack of exposure to other career options, in small towns, in the 90s.

After successfully completing my engineering degree, I worked with Tata Consultancy Services in Mumbai for over four years, but the hustle of the big city and the accompanying lifestyle took a toll on my health within a few years of the job. I developed several gut issues that manifested in my body as social anxiety disorder. I couldn't sit for

meetings without having to use the restroom five times; I'd panic if I had to speak in front of people; I'd take the stairs if there was even one person in the elevator besides me and, overall, life felt extremely difficult to live. I went into depression. I knew deep down I could not continue on the corporate path.

So in 2008, I quit my well-paying job, started therapy so I could heal, and decided to pursue my passion for dance – which was another kind of therapy that worked the best for me. To sustain the passion for professional dance training, I had to work three part-time jobs – I was an assistant to a fashion entrepreneur and overlooked the work of artisans in the slums of Dharavi, Mumbai; I taught English in municipal schools; and I transcribed and sold books for an NGO.

In going from a comfortable corporate job to this, I had to bury my ego 10 feet under the ground. Following my passion required much sacrifice at a personal level. But through it all, I discovered immense resilience which kept me going.

I was 25 years old and competing with 15 year olds in my professional dance training school. To be honest, it was a struggle. But destiny had other plans. Marriage took me to the US with my husband in 2009 and that's where I discovered the world's largest dance-fitness program Zumba – and my life changed.

I became a licensed Zumba® Trainer in 2009, and later was chosen to become the first official Ambassador and Master Trainer for India, by the CEO of Zumba®.

I returned to the country in 2012 to lead India's instructor community growth. I trained thousands of aspiring instructors every weekend, I toured to spread the word from Mumbai to Madurai and Kolkata to Kota, I organised some of India's largest dance-fitness events, hosted several dance-fitness reality TV shows and much more – the list is long. Along with my wonderful team and community we slowly but surely changed how fitness was viewed especially by women in India. Fitness, they realised, could be fun, easy and simple!

Early 2018, I found myself standing in the grand halls of the Rashtrapati Bhavan, the official residence of the President of India. I had just been

awarded the “First Lady” Award by the Ministry of Women and Child Development. It was an award for my work towards Women’s Health & Wellness, a recognition that I had worked tirelessly for.

Despite having trained 15,000 people in 15 nations, I couldn't shake the feeling that I hadn't done enough. This award was a sign that there was more to be done.

In 2019, at the peak of my career, I planned my pregnancy at 37 – a decision that took immense courage. It was not a part of my life goals, but I knew that motherhood will show me a deeper purpose.

In my second trimester, after my doctor's green signal, I curated India’s first #ZumbaPregnancyTour called the Pregnant and Perfect Tour, where I taught live to hundreds of people across seven cities, with the sole purpose of breaking myths and societal taboos around women’s age, exercise and career when it comes to pregnancy. It was a disruptor move, but one that I knew was necessary to challenge societal norms and empower women.

I gave birth to my son in December 2019, and I remember being back on stage at 2 months postpartum, in February 2020, right before the pandemic hit.

It was supposed to be a triumphant return to the stage after giving birth, but instead, I found myself peeing my pants on stage (due to urinary incontinence). Thankfully no one saw it, but I knew. It was a personal and humiliating experience, one that shook my confidence to the core.

I had always prided myself on my fitness and resilience, but in a single moment, that crumbled.

But as I navigated the challenges of motherhood and the pandemic, I realised that courage isn't just about facing external challenges. It's also about facing our internal struggles and fears. I had always been passionate about women's potential, and I knew that if I could empower women through movement and healing, I could help them live their fullest lives.

So, I embarked on a new journey, becoming a certified pre & postnatal specialist to (first) heal myself. Sadly, in India, the mainstream fitness

industry (which I was a part of) is still not equipped to help new mothers return to fitness the safe way. The 10 day weight loss challenges and the Post Baby-Flat Tummy programs are still out there misleading women.

I knew I had to change it in my own unique way. So creating India's first doctors recommended postpartum fitness program, Mom.Bod.Strong, became my purpose. One that was aimed not only at offering empowering science-backed knowledge to new moms but also to help women thrive in motherhood, feeling and looking their best as "women first". This is now my value add to the world – especially to new mothers, all the way to women who are navigating midlife. I know that if I can help even one woman feel empowered and confident in her body, it is all worth it.

In my career so far, I have continuously navigated the complexities of being a disruptor, and I have realised that courage often comes from being uncomfortable.

> **Courage comes from re-defining success different from societal norms, and from not fearing your own potential. It requires resilience and unwavering determination.**

Lessons for Building Courage

1 Being vulnerable equals being authentic

Everyone knows deep down when they watch someone on social media or elsewhere if they are authentic or not. It all boils down to being vulnerable, and that requires courage. It took courage to share my body struggles of motherhood and midlife on social media. But it has built a community of women like never before, who are pulling each other up in motherhood and beyond. Being authentic in real and reel life takes courage but it's every bit worth it.

2 Focus and commit

I've found that focusing on one thing at a time and giving it my all is key to building courage. By setting a timeline and dedicating myself to a single goal, I can overcome the fear of failure and gain confidence. For instance, I focused on Zumba for a decade, and now it's a household

name in the country. I have left behind a small but significant legacy in the fitness industry, simply by focusing and committing.

3 Fear is a prerequisite for courage

I believe that courage isn't about being fearless but about facing our fears head-on. It's okay to feel afraid; in fact, it's necessary. For me, fear often manifests as uncertainty about whether I'm using my time wisely or if I'm truly qualified for the roles I'm in. I've faced these fears by acknowledging them and understanding that they're a natural part of growth. For instance, when I realised that my dance career in India wasn't progressing as I'd hoped, I made the courageous decision to move to the US and start over. It changed my life and how!

CHAPTER 16

Ramya Parashar



COO & Executive Board Member, MiQ

Courage is Ramya Parashar's constant companion. As a strategic IT executive, she's known for leading through ambiguity, prioritising people, and championing disruptive innovation. Over her career spanning 22 years, courage has guided her through leadership challenges, and she eagerly embraces stepping out of her comfort zone to tackle uncertainties head-on.

I was born and brought up in Bangalore, India, where I studied electronics and later pursued a digital marketing course from the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore. I started my career in a non-technical role but soon found myself drawn to the world of technology.

One of the defining moments of courage came early on, when I was transitioning from being a manager to being a leader. I was faced with the task of building a new team and setting them up for success in a highly competitive industry. It was a daunting challenge, but I knew that I had to confront my fears and take the leap.

I focused on hiring experienced resources who brought specific skills and expertise to the table. I made sure that the team understood their roles and responsibilities, and that we were all aligned on our goals. I also had to make some tough decisions about who would be the right fit for the team as we scaled up. Processes, people, their skill set and the technology landscape, everything has to scale when an organisation is

going from one phase to the next and, as a leader, that was my responsibility.

It wasn't easy, and there were moments when I doubted myself. But I knew that I had to stay true to my values and my vision for the team. I had to be brave and take the necessary steps to move the organisation forward.

Another key moment in my journey was when I was asked to join a business applications team. It was a completely new domain for me, and I had to learn everything from scratch. I focused on learning as much as I could about business applications and how they intersected with technology and infrastructure, which were my areas of expertise. I worked closely with my team to streamline processes and improve efficiency. I essentially saw the opportunity as one that would challenge me and grow me as a leader.

> **An integral aspect of courage is being vulnerable and open to new experiences, even when it's difficult.**

My work over the years in Unisys, Mansanto, FireEye, and JCPenney, has led me to my COO role at MiQ, a position I've held for nearly four years. My journey to this role began with my extensive experience in technology and operations, coupled with my strong background in leadership and people-centric practices. Add to the mix my deep understanding of India's operations, and I became the right choice for MiQ.

After a rigorous selection process, which included 12 rounds of interviews, I was offered the position of COO, where I have since excelled in leading the organisation's Centre of Excellence (COE) and driving operational excellence. My role has given me a complete view of how COEs operate, and has allowed me to contribute significantly to MiQ's growth and success.

At this point, I want to say that just because I'm in the C-Suite or the executive level does not mean I'm full of confidence and have figured it all out.

I still experience moments when self-doubt creeps in, just as it did in the beginning, especially as I navigated a male-dominated industry. I faced unique challenges, including the "boys club" mentality and the need to adapt my leadership style to work effectively with male colleagues. But I remained steadfast in my commitment to authenticity and focused on building trust and confidence with my male counterparts through open communication and collaboration. I continue that approach even today.

As a leader, I've found that courage is not only about overcoming challenges, but also about inspiring others to do the same. It's about creating a culture of courage and authenticity, where everyone feels empowered to confront their fears and pursue their goals.

Lessons for Building Courage

1 Face your fears incrementally

Courage is not built overnight. It's about taking small steps and gradually pushing yourself out of your comfort zone. Start by identifying one fear or challenge and work towards overcoming it. As you build confidence, you will find it easier to face bigger challenges.

2 Seek support

Don't be afraid to ask for help. Whether it's from a mentor, coach, or trusted colleague, having a support system can provide valuable guidance and encouragement. Surround yourself with people who believe in you and your abilities.

3 Develop self-compassion

As women leaders, we must also practise self-compassion. We often strive to excel in every aspect of life – balancing work, family, and personal growth. It's important to accept that we may be mediocre in some areas at times, allowing us to prioritise and focus on what truly matters in that phase of life. This gives us the permission to not berate ourselves, and to work towards our goals with a clear headspace.

CHAPTER 17

Japleen Pasricha



Founder-CEO & Editor-In-Chief, Feminism In India

Japleen Pasricha smashes the patriarchy for a living. Founder-CEO & Editor-In-Chief of Feminism in India (FII) – an award-winning digital intersectional feminist and bilingual media platform – she is also a TEDx speaker and has been a part of fellowships such as Acumen India, Swedish Institute, and Rise Up Youth Championship, among others. A dynamic example of the adage 'be the change you wish to see in the world', Japleen defines courage as being real with oneself.

It all began over a decade ago, in March 2013, when I was an M.Phil student grappling with the frustrations of being a young woman in India. I started to look around on the internet for accessible resources on the feminist movement in India but all I found were academic articles that were dense, theoretical and mostly hidden behind a paywall. So I read content on western feminist platforms like Bitch Media and Feministing, which sadly, are now shut down.

Fuelled by a desire for change, I started the Feminism In India (FII) Facebook page with a vision of providing easy to understand, accessible Indian feminist content – written by Indian women for Indian women. Little did I know then that I was embarking on a journey that would forever alter the trajectory of my life.

The FII Facebook page initially contained curated content from all over the internet as well as my opinion pieces but, slowly, people began to

engage with the page and a nascent digital feminist community started to build. As I continued to explore the world of feminist discourse, I realised the glaring absence of a platform dedicated to the experiences of Indian women. I took matters into my own hands and launched the FII website in 2014.

Today, that modest initiative has grown into a thriving media company, challenging societal norms and amplifying the voices of marginalised communities across the country.

Since 2018, FII has undergone significant growth, both in terms of team size and scope of work. What started as a small team of 3-4 individuals has now expanded to include 12-13 dedicated staff members. Our reach has extended beyond metropolitan cities, thanks to the launch of FII Hindi in 2019 – catering to a wider audience especially from Tier 2 and 3 cities – with content on gender and sexuality in their native language.

We are creating resources in Hindi because the discourse around feminism, gender and social justice is dominated by English. So much so that certain words and concepts like ‘lesbian’, ‘LGBTQIA’, 'being queer’, and many others, do not exist in Hindi vocabulary. It has been quite a challenge for my team but also equally rewarding to reach people in a language that is accessible, and not academic in nature.

During the pandemic, FII also expanded into multimedia, which was a pivotal moment for us. With the launch of podcasts and YouTube channels, we embraced new mediums to engage with our audience, adapting to changing preferences in content consumption.

Amidst these achievements, one of the most profound changes for me personally was becoming a mother in 2023.

Transitioning into motherhood while leading a growing company presented its own set of challenges. As the sole founder of FII, I had to navigate the complexities of balancing work and family life. Planning for a six-month maternity break required meticulous preparation, from building an interim leadership team to creating detailed guidelines for day-to-day operations in my absence.

The journey of building FII has not been easy by any standard. As a young startup founder without any seed capital or prior work experience, I found myself wearing multiple hats and juggling numerous responsibilities from the get-go. With limited resources at my disposal, I had no choice but to roll up my sleeves and dive headfirst into every aspect of building Feminism In India. From content creation to website development, social media management to HR tasks, I was the one-woman army keeping the wheels turning. It was a daunting yet exhilarating experience filled with late nights, steep learning curves, and moments of self-doubt. But I'm a 'get things done' person; I enjoyed the hustle.

> **In my time building Feminism In India, I've realised that courage is about being vulnerable, and being real with yourself.**

Today, my company is stable and I'm not struggling to make ends meet. I can sit back and relax. But this is a result of relentless drive and perseverance to create a beacon of change in the realm of feminist activism in India.

The path ahead may be uncertain, but with courage as my compass, I'm ready to face whatever lies ahead.

Lessons for Building Courage

1 Recognise when you need help

As founders, we often feel the pressure to maintain a facade of invincibility, but acknowledging our vulnerabilities is the first step towards growth. Seeking support, whether it's emotional or practical, demonstrates strength rather than weakness.

2 Embrace vulnerability

In a culture that glorifies hustle and productivity, it's easy to overlook the importance of vulnerability. Yet, it's through vulnerability that we connect authentically with others and cultivate resilience in the face of adversity. Accepting our imperfections is not a sign of weakness but a testament to our humanity.

3 Fake it till you make it

Confidence is not always innate; sometimes, it's a skill we learn through practice. At FII we encourage employees to take up different leadership opportunities, and to embody confidence while delivering them. Advising them to do so, even in their moments of self-doubt, can empower them to realise their full potential.

CHAPTER 18

Natasha Pinto



Former Global Co-Lead, London Stock Exchange Group (LSEG) Accessibility Network

Natasha Pinto, an NCPEDP-Mindtree Helen Keller Awardee 2021 and finalist for the 2020 D&I Champion of Change Award by Community Business, is as resilient as they come. Living with Multiple Sclerosis for over a decade, she enables and promotes a disability-inclusive environment in her organisation and community. Her zest for life is infectious and her belief in herself, a force to reckon with. For Natasha, courage means taking the plunge.

I noticed early on that I was different from others. It was effortful for me to do the things that people did with ease. I'd experience difficulty every day. One day I'd have an issue with my vision, the next day with my legs, the third day with my hands and so on. I tried to seek help but for over 10 years no one believed me or my symptoms. Everyone thought I was making things up. According to the doctors the symptoms seemed vague and did not add up.

Things kept getting worse over the years. My vision blurred, I walked with a walking aid, I needed help to change clothes, and I got 45-50 spasms a day. I had to use brain teasers daily like translating letters to their corresponding numbers, repeating 1A, 2B, 3C and then backwards 26Z, 25Y, 24X, just to keep my brain active. I would get lost in the washroom at work; it would appear to be a maze and I would be unable to find the exit.

On the outside I looked like any other person but all the drama was happening inside me.

I tried figuring out the reason for all this but gave up, every time, believing what others often said to me – that it's all in my head. And sure enough, it was, although more literally than I had hoped.

I went for my first MRI in my early 20s. It wasn't prescribed; I asked for it because I knew something was wrong with me. I had fallen seriously ill shortly before, had suffered three attacks of Typhoid, was experiencing vertigo, and my body randomly either went numb or tingled with pins and needles. I did not know what I would find out but I knew something big was about to hit me.

Fast forward a decade later, the MRI revealed several lesions in my brain, spine and optic nerve. My nerves were under attack from my own immune system. The protective cells in my body were instead destroying the coating on the nerves that played an important role in taking signals from the body to the brain and vice versa. I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) – an invisible behemoth of a disability – and yet, at that point, I was happy to finally know what I'd been battling.

My journey with MS has been arduous, to say the least. But it has not broken my will. If anything, it has fuelled my thirst for life.

After a particular hospital visit when my doctor told me that I can now only walk 2 kms at a stretch, I decided that was not going to be me. In the years that followed I ran Pinkathons (while limping, and with an ice-pack one time!), climbed mountains, jumped off cliffs, bungeed, skydived, trekked, backpacked across Europe with a 10 kg rucksack, and rode a bike. Those adventures have taken courage, no doubt, but they were exhilarating! I was set on not surrendering despite the relapses.

Every day, when I wake up in the morning, I have to check if I can see and if I can move my hands and legs. Mundane tasks like folding a bedsheet and washing utensils are a win for me. It's amazing how much we take for granted. For me, every day truly is a new day. So I try to cherish it and live it to the fullest with much gratitude in my heart.

> **My baseline is – do it scared. As soon as you take the plunge you will realise how courageous you are, and it will change your life."**

I share my story of MS widely and willingly because I know it makes a difference. I don't do this for myself alone. I've had people come up to me and tell me that they finished a 100km Oxfam Walk after seeing me walk and run even as I limp.

On down days, when I'm questioning if I've done enough, I remind myself of the fight I'm fighting and how far I've come.

As the former Global Co-Lead of the LSEG Accessibility Network, I worked passionately to create a more inclusive environment for all persons with disabilities, and to raise awareness and sensitise people about invisible illnesses such as MS. I got the company to see the need for a safe environment where people can talk about their disability and freely ask for support. I heard people out; even two individuals with the same disability can have entirely different needs. I made sure we aimed to fix the system, not the problem.

Irrespective of the organisation I am with or the title I have, I want to make it easier for people with disabilities to live and work in our society. When they share their story, I want them to feel safe and supported, not stigmatised. It is important to me that as long as I can, I have the opportunity to impact lives and influence people. And I will treat every single one of those opportunities with great respect and honour.

I'm committed to living my life with courage, passion, and purpose, and leave a legacy that inspires others to do the same.

Lessons for Building Courage

1 Show up for yourself

Take 100% responsibility for your life. The most courageous thing I have done is showing up for myself, even in the face of adversity. When I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, I could have let it define me, but instead, I chose to define my own path. I took the plunge of getting a divorce, even amidst a relapse, because I believed it was the right thing for both of us. I realised that being kind to myself, showing up for

myself, and listening to my inner voice were crucial steps in building courage.

2 Know your five pillars of life

Courage is not just about taking risks in your career; it's about strengthening all your pillars. I have always believed in gamifying life, setting goals, and ticking them off one by one. Whether it's in your career, health, relationships, well-being, or finances, ensure that each pillar is solid. Especially take care of your finances. Understand the magic of compounding and be aware of inflation. Also, surround yourself with high-valued mentors and coaches, and have conversations that add value to your life.

3 Be mindful of your words and thoughts

Our words and thoughts have immense power, and being mindful of them can make or break our courage. Be specific about what you want and talk about it positively. Instead of focusing on what you don't like, focus on what you want to attract into your life. As women, let's be each other's cheerleaders, not competitors. Let's be kind, patient, and supportive towards another’s journey of building and expressing courage.

CHAPTER 19

Shalini Sankarshana



Managing Director and
Country Manager, Planview

Shalini Sankarshana was raised in a family where education and career were esteemed values. Surrounded by academics and professionals, she absorbed the belief that pursuing a career was a natural path. Observing her mother effortlessly balance home and work life, Shalini gleaned early on that faith, grace, and optimism serve as effective tools for overcoming challenges. With a career spanning 24 years, intertwined with the responsibilities of family and motherhood, she exemplifies courage not merely as a choice but as an integral aspect of her daily existence.

I was born and raised in Bangalore, a city I hold dear to my heart. My upbringing was rooted in the values of hard work and education, instilled in me by my family. My parents, both professionals, taught me that ambition and perseverance were essential components of a fulfilling life. I grew up knowing that a career is an integral way of life. For me, there was never a question about whether I will work or not. I knew I would.

Education was paramount in our household, with a lineage of scholars and academics shaping our family history. My grandfather, a renowned Sanskrit scholar who was named one of the Navratna (nine gems) in the Wadiyar Dynasty, was a source of inspiration for generations to come. From an early age, I understood the importance of hard work and the pursuit of knowledge.

One of the defining moments of my life came at the age of 14 when I lost my father. It was a devastating blow that shook our family to its core. Yet, amidst the grief and uncertainty, my mother showed remarkable courage, guiding us through the darkest of times with grace and resilience. She beautifully integrated her career with our family life, refusing to let the loss of my father affect her professional trajectory.

A foundational learning that I picked up watching my mother was not questioning why something happened to her or what she should do, and instead, getting down to solving it to the best of her capability. This has become second nature to me as well. This does not mean that I approach challenges with raw bravado, but with optimism and faith (in the higher power) which fuel my courage.

Courage, I believe, is a concept that evolves as we journey through life. As a child, we may perceive it as bravery in the face of physical danger, like fighting the big bad wolves. But as we grow older, courage takes on new dimensions, revealing itself in our ability to confront fear, especially the fear of the unknown, while moving forward with grace and kindness.

Stepping into the unknown became a recurring theme in my life. At the age of 20, after I completed engineering, I moved out of home for the first time in my life for a job in Hyderabad where I began my career in the field of technology. Little did I know that this would be the first of many adventures that awaited me.

My professional journey took me across borders and cultures, from the bustling streets of Bangalore to the vibrant cities of Australia, US and beyond. I have been travelling incessantly for the past 25 years! With each new opportunity came a chance to learn and grow, to embrace the unknown with enthusiasm. Every single thing was a revelation, an insight, a learning.

Early on in my career I realised that while my heart is that of a technologist, my mind and intellect drove me towards customer-facing and business-facing roles. I credit this also to some incredible mentors I had when I didn't even know what mentorship means. I simply veered towards the people I wanted to grow into, and gave me direction.

When I transitioned into customer facing and business facing roles, my career took a whole new turn. I travelled extensively in those roles, and opened myself up to learn from global colleagues and mentors who shaped my thinking and mindset beautifully.

When I reflect back, I realise that I faced biases as a woman, and as a young person who grew through the ranks very fast, but my naivety, I believe, didn't let those biases get to me. I was focused on my growth, and finding the next uncharted course to tread. There's enough in the world to make one cynical, but somewhere my courage stems from my optimism.

Courage, I've come to realise, is not confined to grand gestures or heroic acts. It's found in the everyday moments – the small decisions we make, the challenges we overcome, and the lessons we learn along the way. It's about facing life's uncertainties with a spirit of resilience and hopefulness, knowing that every obstacle is an opportunity in disguise.

> **Courage is a daily phenomenon, not a one-time occurrence.**

As soon as you accept this, courage becomes a way of life and a mental muscle you learn to build. There have been so many instances in my career where I had to be courageous. From leaving my home for the first time at 21, relocating to a city where pure vegetarian food was not always easy to find, moving countries in the first three months of my first job to later, during pregnancy, swiftly returning from my 90-day maternity leave and managing my baby's feeding and sleeping cycles to my late night America-facing role. I've dealt with big health scares, job upheavals, pushback at work and home, worrying about my child's path – I have gone through it all. These experiences are not singular acts of bravery but rather a testament to the courage required to navigate the complexities of everyday life.

As I continue on my journey, I carry with me the lessons of resilience, optimism, and kindness – the true hallmarks of courage in everyday life.

Lessons for Building Courage

1 Break it down

When faced with the unknown, break the situation or task into smaller steps and focus on taking just one step forward. Breaking things down reduces overwhelm and activates your ability to confront challenges head-on. Remember, even the smallest step counts towards progress.

2 Embrace it as a way of life

Recognise that courage is not reserved for extraordinary moments but is a constant presence in everyday life. Whether it's dealing with deadlines or confronting imposter syndrome, acknowledge that challenges are a natural part of the journey. Break down your fears and expectations, and develop a plan of action rooted in faith and optimism.

3 Find your sources of optimism

Identify the people and beliefs that inspire confidence and optimism in you. Whether it's family, mentors, or personal values, surround yourself with sources of strength that remind you of your resilience. Once you know these pillars, and you know you have them in your corner, you can overcome any challenge.

CHAPTER 20

Vishanthie Sewpaul



President, Association of Schools of Social Work in Africa

Professor Vishanthie Sewpaul (PhD), an awardee of three honorary doctoral degrees from Chile, Norway and Sweden, is a globally recognised social work and human rights scholar, international speaker and activist. She has held leadership positions at institutional, national, and global levels, and visiting professorship at numerous international Universities. Author of her memoir titled 'The Arc of Our Paths: Growing into Wholeness', for Vishanthie courage is believing in oneself, even when standing alone, and having unwavering faith in one's goals and dreams.

Growing up in apartheid South Africa, my childhood was marked by struggle and oppression. My father's suicide when I was just five months old left my mother, a domestic worker, to raise seven children on her own. We lived in poverty, and the apartheid system incessantly reinforced our sense of inferiority based on the colour of our skin.

Growing up I had to continuously learn to disarticulate my sense of shame, particularly from the horrendous act of my father's suicide, and claim who I am; it was not an easy journey by any means.

My mother was the hero of my story. She may not have been educated, but she never failed to give me the love, care and attention that I needed. She taught me to believe in myself and to never give up on my dreams.

One of my earliest lessons in courage came in high school when I was selected for the debating team. You would not imagine my anxiety. Given the circumstances I'd grown up in, my sense of self was so minimal that standing on stage made me sweat, made my hands shake and my heart pound – the fear would be written boldly in my eyes.

But my teacher saw potential in me and did not give up on me. With each debate, I learned to manage my fear and anxiety better, gaining confidence in myself and my abilities.

The lessons from this experience carried me through my academic and professional journey. You can imagine how well they served me in classrooms, faculty meetings, senate meetings, all the way to global stages – spaces that call for high levels of confidence, communication, competence, and all too often the ability to stand up for justice. Those lessons have also enabled me to advocate for and protect those in vulnerable and at-risk positions.

There was always the interconnectedness between the personal and the professional, and the personal and the political. I figured early on that I was passionate about social work. Maybe because I had seen the suffering of my mother and not been able to alleviate it, I wanted to do it for others.

When I graduated from high school, I did not know that you could go to university to learn to help others, until one of my teachers mentioned it!

Information is so important to being empowered. From that day on, the choice was made. Social work owned me. Despite financial obstacles, I applied for a student loan and enrolled in university to pursue a career in social work. It was a leap of faith, but I knew it was the right path for me.

As a social worker, I worked with marginalised and vulnerable groups, advocating for their rights and well-being. I faced challenges in male-dominated and authoritarian settings, but I learned to be assertive and stand my ground.

> **Courage, first and foremost, is putting oneself at stake for what one believes in. Some situational demands are such that they must be bigger than our fears.**

While odds have often been against me, given the context of apartheid, I made a conscious effort to take ownership of my thoughts and feelings, refusing to adopt a victim mentality. It meant learning to question, "is it them or is it me?", "Am I imputing to them intentions – racism and sexism – that may not be there?" This introspection helped me realise that sometimes it was my past and my sense of inferiority that was playing itself out. This realisation empowered me to confront discrimination in all its forms, especially in authoritarian and undemocratic environments.

One such instance was teaching a group of all-female students who, initially hesitant, eventually opened up about gender discrimination. Over three semesters of building trusting relationships, they tackled the topic of Child Sexual Abuse for a project, creating a powerful piece that raised awareness on a taboo subject of abuse within the context of the family. Despite facing repercussions as their educator and eventually resigning, I'm proud to have affirmed their courage. In my final six months as notice period, I taught human rights and child sexual abuse rights with even greater passion.

Another instance, which is by far one of the most courageous acts of my career, came in 2008 when I hosted an international conference in South Africa, unlike any that had been hosted before both in scale and reputation. At one point I was informed by the events coordinator that we would have to cancel or postpone the conference as it was financially unviable. I don't know where I got the courage from but I took a deep breath and said, "Under no circumstance will that happen. Somehow the conference will be hosted in time". We started with no funding, but I was determined to make it happen. I rallied a dedicated team, and together, we pulled off a successful event that put South Africa and Africa on the map.

This reaffirmed my faith that we need to keep the dream – the big picture – even if we do not know all the hows. We begin the journey towards

our destination, allow processes to unfold and connect the dots as we go along.

In the end I just want to say that I wholeheartedly believe when we display courage in the face of threats and fears, we give permission to others to reach the heights of their greatness as well.

Lessons for Building Courage

1 Believe in yourself and operate from integrity

It is imperative when building courage to believe in yourself and operate with pro-social values. This involves reframing negative self-chatter into positive affirmations such as "I am bold" and "I am powerful beyond measure." Playing small does not benefit you or the world. When you believe in yourself, you summon the courage to take action and make a difference in the world.

2 Focus on action, not the outcome

One of my favourite quotes is from the Bhagavad Gita that says, "live not for the fruits of action, but for action alone." This means that you should focus on giving your 100% to the task at hand without getting bogged down by the outcome. By throwing yourself into the task and allowing things to unfold, success and rewards will naturally follow.

3 Act now and live with purpose

Here I draw inspiration from Nelson Mandela's quote, "the time is always ripe to do right." We live a life of finitude, so we must have a sense of urgency to prioritise what is important and take action in the present moment instead of procrastinating.

CHAPTER 21

Falguni Vasavada



Advertising Professor, MICA | Social Media Influencer

For nearly 25 years, Falguni Vasavada has been following her passion for teaching, specialising in Marketing, Advertising, and IMC. As a double gold medalist, she brings academic excellence and real-world experience to her classrooms at MICA and other esteemed institutions across India. Beyond teaching, she's deeply engaged in social media, advocating for women empowerment, gender equality, and body positivity. Her research delves into diverse aspects of advertising, from the portrayal of women to digital identity. Through speaking engagements and writing for marketing publications, she aims to challenge norms and inspire change in the industry. As a Body Positivity Champion, Falguni uses her platform on Instagram to spread awareness and offer fashion and styling tips. Her journey is a testament to the courage it takes to follow one's heart, and the power of it in making a meaningful impact in the world.

I was born and raised in Rajkot, Gujarat. My parents had the courage to defy familial norms by enrolling me in an English-medium school, instead of Gujarati-medium, providing me with a strong educational foundation.

Growing up, I excelled academically and actively participated in co-curricular activities – I was the head girl of my school which gave me the chance to understand leadership; I was a part of the debating society,

which taught me the power of connecting with my audience; and I was also a national-level Garba player, which kept me close to the folk art of my land.

After completing my master's degrees in management and commerce, I felt drawn to teaching. It was a profession that allowed me to connect with people and share my passion for learning. It brought me so much joy that I never looked back. Teaching became my calling, and I pursued it wholeheartedly. Eventually, I earned my Ph.D. in advertising, further deepening my knowledge in the field.

My journey of courage and self-discovery has been marked by continuous evolution. I've had to unlearn societal norms, biases and conditioning especially those related to body image. As a plus-size woman, I've faced societal pressures and stereotypes, but I've strived to overcome them through education, financial independence, and empowerment.

Travelling to different countries, experiencing different cultures, reading and networking have broadened my perspective, challenging ingrained beliefs and biases. They have taught me how gender is to be looked at, and how some roles must entirely be challenged. It's been a journey of unlearning, relearning, and challenging the status quo of my own mind. Each day presents an opportunity for growth and self-improvement.

> **Courage, to me, is the essence of being true to oneself. It's about embracing your individuality, making choices aligned with your values, and living life on your own terms.**

One of the most courageous endeavours in my life of nearly 50 years has been embracing social media as a platform for advocacy. Through content creation on Instagram, I've shared my opinions on issues such as body positivity, women empowerment, gender equality, identity, marriage, motherhood and feminism. This platform has amplified my voice and allowed me to reach a wider audience than I ever imagined.

My work on social media has led to four invitations to speak at TEDx events, a testament to the impact of my advocacy. It's through these experiences that I've found strength, courage, and a sense of purpose.

In the end, I just want to say that courage isn't a one-time act; it's a continuous journey of self-discovery and empowerment. By embracing who we are, challenging societal norms, and advocating for change, we can create a world where everyone has the courage to live authentically.

Lessons for Building Courage

1 Be yourself

Embrace your roots, values, and body image proudly. Though it sounds simple, it's one of the bravest things you can do in life because it requires genuine self-acceptance and the courage to stand firm in your authenticity, regardless of societal expectations or pressures to conform.

2 Unlearn and relearn

Challenge outdated beliefs by opening your mind to new perspectives through travel, reading, and meeting diverse people. This continuous process of growth allows you to expand your understanding, break free from being a frog in the well, and approach life with a fresh, adaptable mindset.

3 Don't try to do it all

Prioritise tasks and delegate when needed. Mastering a few key areas instead of spreading yourself thin allows you to focus your energy effectively, achieve excellence, and maintain balance in your life. By planning, prioritising, and seeking support from loved ones, you can navigate challenges with confidence and resilience.

CHAPTER 22

Madhumitha Venkataraman



Leading DEI Strategist | Co-Founder of Diversity Dialogues | Mental Health Professional

Madhumitha Venkataraman is a pioneering voice in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in India, having led D&I at organisations like Netflix India, Hindustan Coca Cola Beverages, and Snapdeal. As a founder of Diversity Dialogues, she has partnered with over 100 organisations in their diversity and inclusion journey. With a background in HR and certification in therapy, she is also qualified in gender & sexuality, sign language, and counselling. Recognised by Women Economic Forum and World HRD Congress, she's rated one of the top 17 D&I Professionals in South Asia by Biz Divas Foundation. As a counsellor, she largely works with underrepresented communities and has authored a paper on making mental health accessible for the deaf community. She regularly speaks at conferences and corporations on diversity and inclusion, and has been featured in the media for her work in D&I and her personal journey as a woman with disability. For Madhumitha, courage is being true to oneself at all times.

Born with a disability, I was fortunate to have parents who believed in my abilities and encouraged me to pursue my dreams. Their faith in me has served as a guiding light through both my personal and professional life.

In my early years, I faced challenges, especially in school, where I encountered bullying. It was a difficult period, and I often felt like I

didn't belong. I began retreating into a shell and I felt like I was lesser than everyone else. Amidst the struggles, I found solace in the unwavering support of my family and friends, especially the indomitable spirit of my parents. Their belief in me strengthened me to persevere.

As I navigated school, I discovered my strength in academics. Despite the obstacles I faced, I excelled in my studies and had the opportunity to attend some of the country's best educational institutions. My journey eventually led me into the field of human resources, where I found fulfilment in helping others thrive.

It was during my time at General Electric (GE) that my career took a transformative turn. Participating in a hiring drive focused at hiring people with disabilities opened my eyes to the importance of diversity and inclusion in the workplace. From that moment on, I dedicated myself to championing diversity and inclusivity in both my personal and professional capacity.

My journey led me to pursue certifications in American Sign Language and to study gender, sexuality, and disability. I collaborated with various organisations to drive initiatives promoting inclusion across different spheres. One of my happiest moments was making the Pride march accessible to persons with disabilities in the year 2017, as a part of the pride organising committee – a significant step forward in India's LGBTQIA+ movement.

But life had more lessons in store for me. In 2018, the tragic loss of a friend to suicide prompted me to delve deeper into mental health issues. I made the courageous decision to leave my full-time job and embark on a journey to become a mental health counsellor. This new path has not only enriched my understanding of diversity and inclusion but has also taught me the importance of self-care and setting boundaries. It has helped me move a step forward in loving myself unconditionally, with my flaws, and believing wholeheartedly that I am both a masterpiece and a work in progress.

The subsequent years brought both professional growth and personal challenges. I was one of the founders of Diversity Dialogues in 2019 and transformed it into a consulting firm. In 2020, I experienced the

profound loss of my father, a pivotal moment that reshaped my perspective on life and work. His passing underscored the interconnectedness of our personal and professional lives and reinforced the importance of empathy and support in the workplace and beyond.

My disability since birth, and the monumental grief I've experienced in recent years, have taught me the courage to ask for what I need. There are four parts to this specific kind of courage – being clear about what I want, believing what I want is valid, asking for it, and being open to hear a "no".

> **I've come to redefine courage on my own terms. It's about staying true to oneself, even in the face of fear and uncertainty.**

My journey has been shaped by the courage to speak my truth. I don't undermine my voice, its relevance, significance, or importance.

At this point, I want to take a moment to talk about privilege. This ability to speak your truth comes with privilege, to a certain extent. Either the privilege one is born with and/or the privilege one builds over time. In my case, I had the privilege of education, of not having to provide for my parents, and of reaching a point in my career where I have financial stability. Not everyone is in a position where they have the choice to be courageous.

And that is the job, really. My work is in the hope that in the future, all genders are empowered with education, finance, access and opportunities so that they have the privilege of choice.

For me, courage isn't the absence of fear; it's about facing it head-on and pushing forward regardless of it. I've been scared of every step I've taken. Culturally, I also come from a background where stability is highly valued. Yet, I started a business and got certification in mental health – rare occurrences in my family. Courage is walking with fear. It helps to be passionate because passion often wins over fear.

In absence of a fairly safe space, I suddenly find myself withdrawing and isolating. This is what happens when someone is from underrepresented communities – the only woman in a room, or the only

person with disability. It is far harder when you are the only one in the room and the stakes are high. So I truly think courage is about acknowledging the fear, but speaking and acting in favour of your truth anyway.

Lessons for Building Courage

1 Recognise that everyone is inherently imperfect

Recognise and appreciate that all of us are inherently flawed. For me, courage stems from the willingness to take risks despite knowing that mistakes might happen. Accepting your own flaws and acknowledging that others are flawed too can help alleviate the pressure of having to always be right or perfect, thereby giving you more strength and courage.

2 Calculate risks

Courage isn't in blindly taking risks but rather in making informed and calculated decisions. Before making any bold moves, whether in your career or personal life, take the time to assess the potential risks and rewards. Do the maths, plan and strategise your actions to ensure that you're taking calculated risks that align with your goals and values. Remember that courage is not about recklessness but about thoughtful planning and determination.

3 Practise courage

Like any skill, courage requires practice to become more natural and comfortable. In my experience, seeking out safe spaces where you can practise expressing yourself boldly and making choices you might otherwise hesitate to make has helped. Start with small risks, such as doing something you would have not done otherwise like speaking up in a meeting, to gradually build your confidence in being courageous.

CHAPTER 23

Rebecca Vijay



Founder and CEO,
Fount of Grace Creatives

A mother who lost her newborn son three days after the birth of her twins, Rebecca Vijay found the strength and the spirit to show up for her infant daughter amidst deep personal mourning. Eight years later, she wrote her first book about her loss, which became a #1 bestseller on Amazon in the US, UK, India and Australia. Courage, to Rebecca, is the choice you make to put one foot in front of the other, even when it feels impossible. It is the conviction to swim against the tide when necessary, and daring to speak and act with confidence in what one believes.

My journey towards building and expressing courage has been intertwined with my personal and professional endeavours. From my early days as a copywriter in an ad agency to my tenure at prestigious organisations like the Oberoi Hotels and Oxford University Press, each experience has shaped my resilience and fortitude. However, it was the profound loss of my son that truly tested my courage to its core.

I had premature twins in April 2009 – a boy and a girl. My son's organs were not fully developed, and a few hours after the delivery, he was taken away from me to a super speciality children's hospital. I was with my newborn daughter. Everybody kept telling me that my son is getting better, so I never doubted him surviving.

But on the third day, we lost our son. His passing plunged me into a whirlwind of grief and uncertainty. Yet, I had to find the strength to be a pillar of support for my surviving daughter.

> **The journey of navigating loss while being hopeful for my family taught me the essence of courage – rising above despair and forging ahead, one step at a time.**

My daughter too, being a preemie herself, was in and out of hospitals for the first five years of her life. Yet, after my maternity leave, I decided to go back to work. Slowly, life began to get back to the new normal. When my daughter was five, my husband and I had a baby boy, and I decided to take a break from corporate life. I was at the peak of my career at the Oxford University Press, heading a commissioning team, when I decided to quit and give my full attention to my family.

Two years later, I began to explore ways to make a difference. Quite out of the blue, I got invited to a conference in Delhi where I met some incredible, inspiring women who opened my eyes to diverse opportunities, the kind of which I had not known before – from blogging, which was only starting back then, to Amazon self publishing!

In the process of exploring these avenues, I began writing my book. This was pivotal both at a personal and professional level. I lost my son in 2009 and in 2017, I wrote about my journey through my son's death, the grief that followed and how I found comfort and hope in God, in my memoir titled ‘My Angel in Heaven’.

Many bereaved parents reached out to me. Infant loss and child loss are taboo subjects, no matter where you are from, and you are expected to forget about the loss almost instantly. People wonder why you are grieving when you barely had any time with the child or created any memories. My book gave a platform and a voice to parents who had lost their children, and it went on to become a number one bestseller on Amazon US, UK, India and Australia.

The response to my book drove me to become a publisher and help women from around the world share their experiences, challenges, and triumphs. I started my brand of transformational anthologies titled ‘Fired Up’. It was a bold move, venturing into uncharted international territory,

but it was fuelled by a deep-seated belief in the power of women's stories to help fire up and expand the vision of others.

As I reflect on my journey, I realise that courage is not just a personal attribute; it's a force that has the power to inspire and uplift others.

By sharing my story and creating platforms for others to do the same, I've witnessed the transformative impact of courage. From bereaved parents finding solace in my book, 'My Angel in Heaven', to women entrepreneurs from three different continents finding their voice through 'Fired Up', each story has illuminated the path for others to follow.

I've been in the publishing industry for over two decades now. I've been a 6x #1 Amazon Bestselling Author, #4 Wall Street Journal Bestselling Author, #1 Barnes and Noble Bestselling Author, and 2x bestselling publisher of the 'Fired Up' Series. I have also been featured in 600+ media outlets, podcasts and summits. Still, there is a tiny voice in my head that questions if my work is good enough.

I wonder if I'm overcharging, what people will think about me, and how they might judge me. It leads me to sometimes play small and limit myself.

But I've come to recognise all of this as Imposter Syndrome, and I'm learning to accept that the tiny voices in my head may never go away despite all my experience, knowledge and expertise. I remind myself that true courage lies not just in the absence of fear, but in the audacity to embrace it and forge ahead, one courageous step at a time.

Lessons for Building Courage

1 Embrace your purpose

Recognise that each of us is uniquely equipped with the tools and resources to fulfil our purpose. Trust in divine guidance and lean into your inherent strengths and passions.

2 Draw strength from faith

Find solace in the knowledge that a higher power is a constant source of strength and resilience. By relinquishing the need for external validation, you can cultivate unwavering courage rooted in faith.

3 Stand firm in your convictions

Dare to stand out in a crowd and advocate for what you believe in, even in the face of scepticism or opposition. Take decisive action and let your actions speak louder than words.

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Tapshi Dhanda

The Editor and Curator of this book

Tapshi Dhanda is the editor and curator of this book, and has with great skill and care brought these stories to life. She has built into the e-book a cohesiveness which allows each independent story to shine, while simultaneously being an indispensable part of the collective arc of the book.

Tapshi is a freelance writer and editor with over 10 years of experience spanning print and digital publications, as well as content strategy, design and curation.