

A high-angle photograph of a woman with curly brown hair climbing a rock face. She is wearing a grey tank top, black pants, and blue climbing shoes. A hand from the left is pulling her up by her right arm. The background is a dense green forest. The text 'How to build a FEARLESS CULTURE' is overlaid on the top half of the image.

How to build a
FEARLESS
CULTURE

By Corrinne Armour



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What is a Fearless Culture? When people come together; conversations are focussed, lively and creative. The things that matter are surfaced and resolved.

This environment promotes positive risk taking that comes from safety to try things and fail. People feel empowered in their roles and confident to speak out. This lifts the performance bar, promotes curiosity and leads to individual and team development and accountability. Fearless Cultures get results.

The challenges for leaders

- 1) Being a leader can feel like hard work.** The responsibility of having to 'know' everything keeps us stuck in the day to day and prevents us from being strategic. It's tough to run engaging meetings, and we put off crucial performance conversations.
- 2) Staff engagement is patchy.** Maybe your organisation is growing rapidly, and is experiencing risk and growing pains. Or maybe your organisation isn't growing and the legacy of history is slowing things down; staff engagement is low and people are stuck and lacking in purpose. Problems may be simmering, and it's hard to identify the real issues. When challenges arise, you're fighting fires rather than building culture.
- 3) Leadership bench-strength is lacking.** A key responsibility of

leadership is developing others. While we might have the right intentions, we get busy and development conversations don't happen. Regular feedback discussions don't seem to have much impact.

- 4) The results are questionable.** Performance across the organisation is inconsistent with some divisions not delivering on expectations, and there is a lack of accountability. Perhaps KPIs are being achieved, but you are concerned about the approaches being taken.
- 5) You see that more is possible.** The organisation is performing well; there is a healthy culture and targets being met—yet you believe more is possible.

Leaders who ask are brave enough and skilled enough to connect deeply, lead fearlessly and achieve transformational results. Leaders who ask create Fearless Cultures by telling less and asking more.

Building a Fearless Culture

A Fearless Culture is the result of a cumulative focus of leaders across the organisation, led and modelled by those at the top. Drawing on

questioning techniques and a coaching approach, leaders who ask build Fearless Cultures.

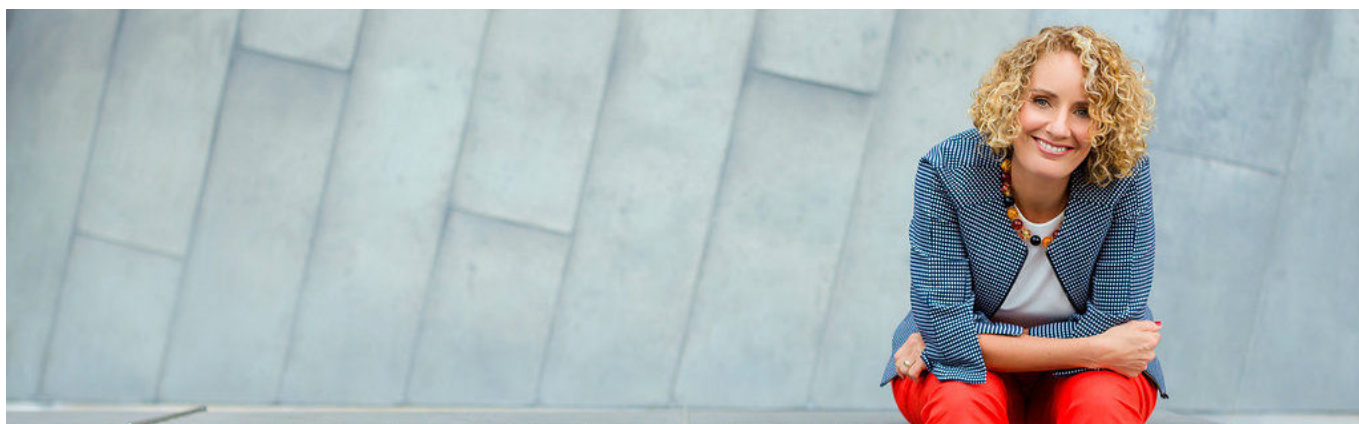
Three critical competencies leaders who ask utilise to build Fearless Cultures are:

- 1. Questions** – Ask more and tell less
- 2. Purpose** – Vision for what we want to achieve
- 3. Courage** – Leadership is not taking the easy way

Ask more questions

Leaders who ask leverage what they know about brain science by asking questions to build engagement and accountability. The 'generation effect'—replicated in a number of behavioural and neuroscience studies—shows that people are more likely to remember an idea they generate themselves.#

When you 'tell' people the answers, the rational brain may be listening but this won't help with recall or ownership. Conversely, when you 'ask' questions that lead people to a new understanding, 'insight' is involved. Insight is that light bulb moment where the brain pulls seemingly unrelated ideas together and connects them in new ways.



Insights are valuable; they engage the brain's reward system and trigger a release of dopamine: a neurotransmitter known as a 'happy chemical'. The simple act of searching for and finding our own answers is rewarding to the brain. ”

Insight also activates the hippocampus: the area of the brain responsible for long-term memories. Our memory is augmented by insight—we construct rich neural connections to things we already know and can then apply the solution more broadly in the future. So, one insight can address multiple challenges.

If you notice that your people repeatedly bring the same problems, or that your previous solutions aren't being implemented, it might be time for you to tell less and ask more.

Get clear on purpose

In a Fearless Culture, leaders understand the broad vision. They are clear on individual, team and organisational purpose.

The *leader who asks* has a clear purpose for every conversation and facilitates discussion in that direction. Having purpose gives form and leads to an outcome, whether it be a casual chat in the lift, a semi-formal fortnightly catch-up with a direct report, or a team meeting. Broad types of purpose in conversation might include building awareness, developing new behaviours, extending skills, correcting poor performance, challenging norms, problem solving, generating new ideas, leading a team meeting or connecting a group around a common cause.

Regardless of the location and occasion, we need to know why we are having a conversation. Questions are the best way to clarify the purpose, keeping in mind that shared ownership of, and commitment to, the conversational purpose is more likely to achieve outcomes.

Show courage

A coaching approach isn't for the faint hearted—the *leader who asks* needs courage.

It takes courage to consider your own stuff, put it aside and focus on another person. It takes courage not to have the answers, and ask the questions anyway. It takes courage to ask rather than tell and to abdicate from the role of '*leader with all the answers*'.

Perhaps we need the most courage when we challenge peers and senior leaders. Consider the situations uncovered by the Finance Sector

Royal Commission. I believe there were some senior leaders who were not comfortable with things that were happening but where were the dissenting voices? Did people speak up? Were they heard? These were not Fearless Cultures.

Courage is not the absence of fear. In fact, the only time you will ever feel a complete lack of fear is when you are dead or dead drunk. Neither are useful states for leadership. Courage is pushing through despite the fear, using the fear as data, fearing less.

Over to you

Governance leaders have the dual role of leading and building a Fearless Culture in their own teams as well as influencing the organisation.

Culture is the sum of everything we do, each day, and the leader who asks creates culture- change momentum through telling less and asking more, being clear on purpose, and showing courage.

What steps can you take today to move towards a Fearless Culture?

For more information visit: www.corrinnearmour.com or contact: hello@corrinnearmour.com

See 'Why insight matters' by Josh Davis, Christine Chesebrough, David Rock, and Christine Coxin Neuroleadership Journal Sep 2015.