Stop Playing Safe
by Margie Warrell

Find Your Courage
You have what it takes to succeed!

QUICK OVERVIEW
Our choices determine the course of our life. Too often though, fear, self-doubt and insecurity drive our choices. To get what we really want out of life, we must be driven instead by a clear sense of purpose, confidence and courage.

In her latest book, Stop Playing Safe, Margie Warrell challenges you to use your existing resources to create a fully satisfying life and career. By unlocking the power of courage, you can tap into unbridled potential and enjoy the feeling that “flows from working hard at work worth doing.”

APPLY AND ACHIEVE
In Stop Playing Safe, Margie Warrell asks this question: If you knew you could handle any failure or problem you might experience, how would that knowledge change the way you live? The truth is, humans are far more resilient than they give themselves credit for. Teenagers often think they’d “die” if they ever broke up with their high school sweetheart. And plenty of us have been in situations where it felt like we could “die of embarrassment.” But broken hearts, disgrace and even bankruptcy are survivable. After you’ve weathered a few storms, you begin to realize that you’re tough—perhaps tougher than you ever imagined. The key to getting to that courageous place of mental and emotional toughness is to put yourself at (measured and evaluated) risk more often. Read the sidebar “Moving from Fear to a Courage Mindset” and look for areas where you can improve your risk-readiness.
Life is the lump sum of our choices. Too often though, our choices are driven by fear, self-doubt and insecurity rather than a clear sense of purpose, confidence and courage. Fear drives us to avoid risk, play safe and settle for the status quo, however unrewarding or miserable it is. The digital age makes it easy to be inauthentic. Individuals now have the power to create a person in whatever image they choose, even if it doesn’t match reality. The person who sends inspirational tweets or smiles in pictures on Facebook doesn’t have to be the one who lives inside us. New media encourages us to be “on” all the time, and in such a setting, authenticity requires intentionality. Social media must be viewed not only as a way to connect but also an avenue for honesty about who we are.

Somber economic forecasts, corporate cutbacks, natural disasters, fundamentalist extremism, international conflict—look at what’s making news today and chances are at least one headline is fueling fear and feeding insecurity. While this may not have you racing to stock up your pantry on canned tomatoes and bottled water, there’s no escaping that we live in a culture that breeds fear and drives us to play safe, avoid change and settle for less than we want.

Research shows us that our brains are wired to overestimate risk, exaggerate its consequences and underestimate our ability to handle it. Confronted with ongoing economic instability and mounting global competition, fear in the workplace has grown so pervasive that playing safe and avoiding risk has become the norm. Yet history has shown that when fear runs most rampant, courageous action reaps the greatest rewards. And nowhere is courage more needed right now than in the work we do, and the way we do it.

What you do matters. How you do it matters even more. Sadly, global surveys on employee engagement tell us that many people don’t believe so. The cost to the bottom line runs into the billions. The cost to the human spirit is immeasurable. Underlying this disengagement is the fundamental fear of failing, of looking foolish, of not having enough and not being enough.

The fact is you have all the resources available to you for creating a life and a career that fulfill you so that your work not only enables you to make a good living, but also to enjoy a more rewarding everyday experience of life (rather than just weekends and holidays). Research has confirmed what my experience has shown me: when people connect to a deeper purpose in their work they’re not only more engaged and effective in their work, but also more inclined to take the risks essential for success.

By unlocking the power of courage in your life, you’ll tap into the unbridled potential within you and enjoy the genuine satisfaction that flows from working hard at work worth doing.

**RETHINK RISK, COMMIT TO COURAGE**

Fear is a primal emotion wired into your psychological DNA to protect you from harm and to alert you to danger. Its sole purpose is to steer you away from situations that could cause harm or pain and endanger your physical, mental or emotional wellbeing. Fear can be traced back to the Neanderthal cave-dwelling days when recognizing a potential threat to a person’s safety was the difference between life and death. Today the risks you’re confronted with on a daily basis are far less about loss of life or physical injury and more about emotional injury, whether it be social embarrassment or professional humiliation.

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Left unchecked, fear keeps people from taking action to generate opportunity, forge relationships, innovate and build a successful career. Fear limits people’s careers, relationships and lives far more than any external obstacle ever can. If you’re wondering where it might be limiting yours, take a moment to answer these questions.

- Do you get uncomfortable when faced with an uncertain future?
- Do you often try to avoid conflict or confrontation?
- Do you doubt whether you have what it takes to really succeed, and sometimes fear that you will be uncovered as a fraud?
- Do you loathe the idea of taking on a goal and failing miserably?
- Do you sometimes “catastrophize” about worst-case scenarios, particularly when you’re contemplating making a change or taking a chance on something new?

No one relishes the prospect of being rejected or criticized, or having their intelligence questioned. But unless you are willing to take risks such as these right throughout your life you’ll never be able to achieve the bigger—and yes, more risk-laden—goals that really light you up and align with your bigger why. You have to be willing to risk the familiarity and safety of where you are now to create a more rewarding future.
Stop Playing Safe

Lean Toward Risk

The word “risk” often conjures up images of people who engage in activities that involved physical risk such as mountain climbing, race-car driving and free-fall skydiving. Or of corporate mavericks and entrepreneurs—such as Richard Branson—ready to put everything out on the line for a high-risk venture. But risk is not only the domain of speed demons, mavericks and trailblazers. Risk is relevant to us all. Every day. Sometimes you have to assess risk in the big decisions of life, but most of the time the risks you’re confronted with are more mundane: whether to push back on the consensus thinking in a weekly team meeting, raise your hand to lead an important client presentation or project, or set a boundary with a colleague who has overstepped it. So, if avoiding risk has been your success strategy until now, I encourage you to rethink the nature of risk and how not taking risks may have kept you from achieving more of the success you want. Let me be clear though: being willing to take risks isn’t about being reckless or foolhardy. Neither is it about denying or discounting the real risks—political, financial, strategic, operational or otherwise. Rather, it’s about being willing to stick your neck out when the situation calls for it and exposing yourself to becoming vulnerable to the things that scare you. As Nelson Mandela once said, “The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.”

Committing to live your life with a Courage Mindset requires adopting an approach that accepts that all life is risky.

Did you catch that?

All life is risky.

When you can embrace the essential truth that all your life is risky—from your job, to your relationships, to the sport you play, to the car you drive—you are then free to stop worrying about what “bad things” you don’t want to happen, and to take the risks you need to take to experience more of the “good things.”

Cultivate Your Courage Mindset

The mindset you bring to your decisions at work every day and throughout the course of your life, impacts in subtle and profound ways on the results you produce. Cultivating a Courage Mindset is important if you want to rise above the instinctive drive to seek pleasure and avoid pain that fuels your aversion to fear. There are four steps for overcoming the fears that keep you from living with a Risk-Ready Courage Mindset:

1. **Acknowledge what you’re afraid of.** Self-awareness is the first essential step to changing behavior. If you don’t own your fears, they will own you. Take a moment to acknowledge that your fear is trying to keep you safe and spare you the humiliation and emotional bruising that you’re putting yourself at risk of experiencing. Doing so will enable you to unlock its grip and move forward.

2. **Tame catastrophism.** You can never completely “tame” your fears. Nor would you want to. But you can learn how to manage them rather than have them manage you. Important in taming fear is to notice when you’re letting your imagination get the better of you. Fear has a wonderful way of hijacking our imagination. Images of the worst possible outcomes often splash across the movie screen inside our heads. The only way to end the movie is to focus on the movie.
you want it to be; that is, visualizing yourself successfully doing whatever it is that’s causing your angst, and enjoying the outcome of your courageous actions.

3. **Harness fear in your favor.** The trick is to overturn what you’re afraid may happen if you take action into what you’re afraid may happen if you don’t take action. By doing this, you harness the power of fear to your benefit.

4. **Step through it: feel your fear and act anyway!** Action is the most potent antidote to fear. By doing the things you think you can’t do, you realize how much more you *can* do. Courage is far less about heroism on the battlefield or in the midst of a natural disaster and far more about the seemingly ordinary everyday choices you make as you navigate your way through life. It’s not about the absence of fear (or doubt or misgivings) about your ability to see your endeavor through to a successful completion. It’s action in the presence of fear. In the words of John Wayne, “It’s being scared to death but saddling up anyway.”

## SEIZE OPPORTUNITY FROM YOUR ADVERSITY

Mastery of life is not the absence of problems, but the mastery of problems. If you want to achieve greater success in your life, you have to be willing to take on bigger obstacles. The people who live the most rewarding lives are not those with the smallest problems, but those who dare to face the most difficult. Just think about the problems that people such as Gandhi, Mandela, Mother Teresa, Aung San Suu Kyi, Bill Gates and Bono chose to take on. Often you can judge the size of a person by the size of their challenges.

People who achieve greatly do so not because they know they’ll always succeed, but because they know that however things turn out, they’ll be able to deal with it. Their faith in their innate resilience and self-worth fuels their confidence and courage to pursue what many might see as risky or lofty goals. You unlock new reservoirs of courage when you trust that whatever happens, you can handle it.

Think about that for a moment: if you knew that whatever happened, however things turned out, you could handle it, how would it change how you approach your career and life? What goals would you take on that you’ve shied away from? Where might it fuel new ambition and embolden you to make changes and take chances you’ve steered timidly away from until now?

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**Build Your Inner Toughness**

Research into brain plasticity has proven that human beings have an innate ability to build “emotional toughness” right up to the end of their lives. This means that no matter how well (or abysmally) you may have responded to your past challenges, you can learn to respond better in the future. What’s even better is that unlike most things that atrophy with age, your ability to build resilience only strengthens with every extra candle on your cake.

By expanding your capacity to cope with the pressures and problems in your life, you’ll be able to find opportunity in your adversity, which you can leverage into more success in your career and life. I have developed The SOAR² Approach. The SOAR² Approach is a simple, easy-to-remember model to help you short-circuit your stress response and rise above your challenges rather than head into an emotional nosedive that diminishes your capacity to respond well and may only worsen your situation.

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Drawing from a combination of neuroscientific research, age-old spiritual wisdom, positive psychology and emotional intelligence, the SOARR acronym (which I've shortened to SOAR²) encapsulates the ultimate goal of the approach: to “soar” above the stressors, setbacks and adversities that might otherwise pull you down and sabotage both your happiness and success. It comprises the following five steps:

1. **Stop and step back.** The simple act of stopping what you’re doing and taking at least a few seconds to take a few deep breaths can make all the difference in your life. Of course, this sounds ridiculously simple. But consciously deciding to stop what you’re doing when you’re mid-flight spinning plates can be the most productive exercise you’ll do in your entire day (and week and life!).

2. **Observe.** Visualize yourself soaring up to skyscraper level and look down on the situation you’re currently struggling with. When you actively try to see things from a bird’s-eye perspective, it expands your choices available to you for responding.

3. **Ask bigger questions.** When you give up arguing against your problems and using your smartest answers to work them out, you

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Committing each of the five steps of The SOAR² Approach to memory will enable you to intervene in your instinctive response to threats, ward off “neural hijack” and respond to your situation more confidently, calmly and constructively.

TRUST YOURSELF—TAKE ACTION!

Action is the most potent antidote to fear: it breeds confidence and nurtures courage in ways nothing else can. The more you step out of your comfort zone into your courage zone, the more you build your tolerance for risk and confidence to handle its consequences. Don’t wait for your fears to fade to take action. Don’t wait to feel brave to act bravely. Courage begets courage. As Theologian Mary Daly writes, “Courage is a habit, a virtue. You get it by courage acts. It’s like learning to swim by swimming. You learn courage by couraging.” So trust yourself, holding firm to the knowledge that the more you act with the courage you aspire to have, the more courageous you will become. As Nike puts it in one of the world’s most well-known slogans, Just do it!

### Moving from Fear to a Courage Mindset

Courage is ultimately a mindset. So is fear. The following is a list of 10 core attributes of a Courage Mindset along with the corresponding attitudes of a Fear Mindset.

Think of a current challenge or opportunity you’re facing. As you read through the list below, consider how you would approach your situation differently if you were to embrace a Courage Mindset.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk-Averse Fear Mindset</th>
<th>Move toward</th>
<th>Risk-Ready Courage Mindset</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Resist change</td>
<td>➔</td>
<td>Embrace change</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Narrow-minded</td>
<td>➔</td>
<td>Open-minded</td>
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<td>3. Critical</td>
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<td>Curious</td>
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<td>4. Pessimistic</td>
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<td>5. Rigid</td>
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<td>6. Self-doubt</td>
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<td>7. What’s probable</td>
<td>➔</td>
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<td>8. Left brain analysis</td>
<td>➔</td>
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<td>9. What people think</td>
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<td>What do you think</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. What you give up</td>
<td>➔</td>
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About the Author

Margie Warrell has a background in business, psychology and executive coaching. She is the author of Finding Your Courage and Stop Playing Safe. She is a Forbes columnist and has shared her advice on The Today Show, Fox News and CNBC, and in The New York Times, Washington Post and USA Today. Additionally, she has co-authored other books with Stephen Covey, Ken Blanchard, John Gray and Jack Canfield.

Action Steps

Get more out of this SUCCESS Book Summary by applying what you’ve learned. Here are a few questions, thoughts and activities to get you started.

1. How could fear be limiting your life or success?
2. Do you get uncomfortable when faced with an uncertain future?
3. Do you let your imagination focus on worst-case scenarios?
4. How do you define risk?
5. Are you risk-ready, or do you habitually avoid taking risks?
6. If you knew that whatever happened, however things turned out, you could handle it, how would it change how you approach your career and life?
7. Think about a challenge you’re currently facing. How can you reframe your perspective of the problem and cut it down to a more manageable size?

Recommended Reading

If you enjoyed the summary of Stop Playing Safe, you may also want to check out:

The Power of Habit by Charles Duhigg
Taking Smart Risks by Doug Sundheim
Your Survival Instinct Is Killing You by Marc Schoen