NOT JUST STRONG. REAL

BRAVE WITHOUT ARMOR

How High Achievers Drop the Armor
and Lead with Real Courage

PREVIEW EDITION

Triptta Neb

The Recalibrate Method™

www.therecalibratemethod.com/brave-without-armor

A Note to the Reader

Brave Without Armor
Preview Edition

Thank you for downloading this preview.

This Preview Edition contains the Preface and Chapter 1 in full, offering a glimpse into the ideas explored throughout Brave Without Armor.

My hope is that these pages help you recognize your own patterns with compassion and discover a steadier way of leading under pressure.

Warmly,

Triptta Neb

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Inside This Preview

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- The hidden cost of always being the strong one
- Why nervous system state shapes leadership performance
- Practical tools for building capacity under pressure
- A different definition of strength that does not require armor

Why I Wrote This Book

For most of my life, I believed strength meant holding it together.

As a leadership consultant, entrepreneur, mother, daughter, and high achiever, I learned how to perform capability even when I was exhausted. I became skilled at carrying pressure, solving problems, and being the steady one others could depend on.

Many of the leaders I worked with were doing the same.

They were successful by every visible measure, yet privately carrying the weight of constant responsibility, self-doubt, over-functioning, and the quiet belief that they could never afford to let their guard down.

Over time I came to realize that what many of us call strength is often a form of protection.

It helps us survive.

It helps us achieve.

It helps us belong.

But eventually it can begin to cost us our energy, our relationships, our health, and our connection to ourselves.

Brave Without Armor was written for leaders, founders, professionals, and doers who have spent years being strong and are ready to explore a different possibility.

Not less courage.

A deeper courage.

The courage to lead from clarity rather than bracing.

The courage to remain present when pressure rises.

The courage to return to yourself without abandoning your ambition.

My hope is that these pages help you recognize your own patterns with compassion, understand the hidden cost of armor, and discover a steadier way of leading in the moments that matter most.

Warmly,

Triptta Neb

PREFACE

The Cost of Being the Strong One

On September 1, 2008, I stood up in a packed auditorium of over three hundred people in Delhi for a Landmark program I thought would simply refine my leadership edge. At thirty-seven, I was the Managing Director of Ascent, a leadership consultancy I had built from the ground up. I was successful, I was driven, and I was armed with every credential I thought I needed to prove my place in a world that often measured my worth before I even opened my mouth. I was, by all external measures, at the top of my game.

Instead, that morning cracked my life wide open. The facilitator, standing on a stage that felt suddenly too bright and too close, asked a question that sounded deceptively simple: "Who are you?"

As a high achiever, I did what I had always been trained to do: I reached for my most polished armor. I stood up, squared my shoulders, and named my titles and my successes. "I am the Managing Director of Ascent," I said, naming the consultancy as if it were my true name. I waited for the nod of professional acknowledgment that usually followed such a statement, the currency of respect I had spent years accumulating. But it didn't come. Instead, I was faced with a flat, public "nope."

I felt the heat rush to my face, a deep crimson of embarrassment I couldn't hide under the fluorescent lights. The silence in the room felt deafening, almost predatory, as three hundred pairs of eyes watched my mask begin to slip. Desperate to gain some ground and find the "right" answer, I tried again, reaching for the roles I held most sacred. "I am a mother. I am a daughter," I said, my heart pounding against my ribs like a trapped bird. Again, I was cut off. By the time I tried one last time to find a layer of myself that was "enough," reaching for the basic fact of my gender, I was asked to sit down mid-sentence.

I sat down defeated, embarrassed, and very quiet. My brave, accomplished mask had been ripped off in front of my peers, and in that visceral silence, I realized a terrifying truth: I had spent my entire career answering with my armor rather than my self.

I wanted to understand what I was missing, but in that moment, all I could feel was the weight of the protection I had carried for so long, the staggering cumulative effort of having never once, in years of high performance and professional praise, simply answered from somewhere true.

I realized something else in that auditorium too: that many leaders don't burn out because they lack the skill to lead. They burn out because they are performing a version of themselves they trust will keep them safe, even when that performance is costing them everything.

Have you ever found yourself praised for your strength while privately wondering how much longer you can carry the weight of being the one who has it all together? If you are the "Strong One" in your world, the anchor your team leans on, the one people turn to when the situation is critical, you likely recognize that pounding heart. You know what it is to perform competence while your inner world is quietly bracing for impact. You know what it is to be called steady, reliable, unshakeable, and to feel, underneath all of that, something more like exhaustion than power.

This book begins here, with that gap. Not as a confession, but as a recognition.

Two weeks after that auditorium moment, on September 14, the bracing became a matter of survival. I had discovered my first husband's fourth affair, and I knew the life I had built with him was hollow and fake. I asked him to leave. Outwardly, I was the picture of calm, the kind of absolute stillness that only comes when the body has moved beyond discussion and into a state of high-functioning protection. I packed his bags before he returned from a trip to Germany and placed them at the door, choosing my dignity over a toxic peace. When he threatened me, I called the police, my voice level and my boundaries clear.

But the moment the door closed and the police cruiser pulled away, the bill for that strength came due. My hands began to shake with a violence I couldn't control. I sat down on the floor, trembling, and felt my blood pressure drop, a biological echo of a system that had run out of room to hold the line. He did not get to see that shaking; to him, I was unbreakable. But in that moment, alone on the floor of a life I was dismantling with great competence, I understood something I hadn't had language for before: my armor was not

the same as my courage. It was a survival companion, and it was beginning to cost me my health.

There is a particular kind of loneliness that belongs to that moment. Not the loneliness of being alone, but the loneliness of being unseen in your breaking, of having performed so convincingly, for so long, that even your own nervous system doesn't fully believe you're allowed to fall apart. The police cruiser had barely cleared the corner before I was already reorganizing. Already making a plan. Already, in some corner of my mind, figuring out what came next. Because that is what the Strong One does. That is what we have always done.

A few days later, raw and wanting to be seen in my breaking, I reached out to a close friend. I told her I was exhausted, that I felt like I was falling apart. She looked at me with genuine love and handed me back my armor: "Come on, Triptta, you have balls of steel. You'll be fine."

Something went quiet inside me. Not anger, exactly. A cold, clarifying recognition: people often hand you back your armor precisely when you are trying to take it off. Praise can be its own kind of cage. We will return to what that moment revealed later in this book.

You may not have had this exact moment. But you may know what it is to reach toward someone and feel the armor handed back. To be told, in the kindest possible voice, that you're fine, when what you needed was for someone to sit down beside you in the unfineness of it and simply stay.

This armor wasn't only personal. It was systemic, forged across years as an Indian woman navigating authority in global markets, learning the rules of rooms I was not always meant to be in.

I remember my first interview with HSBC in Dubai in 1996. Another candidate, less qualified, had been offered double my salary. The explanation offered was not an apology but an accounting: where I came from, they could get two of me for the same money. I walked out. But the seed was already planted, deeper than indignation. I would outprepare, out-deliver, and carry myself with such concentrated force that I could never be made small again. The HSBC recruiter did not create my armor. He simply revealed the world that had been waiting to make use of it.

By 2000, I had poured that resolve into founding Ascent. I built it from nothing, from a dining table and a conviction that leaders could be developed differently, more humanly. But even as the founder, I hid behind the more conventional title of Managing Director. It felt safer. Founder carried the full weight of having staked something personal; Managing Director was professional, boundaried, harder to dismiss. It was, in hindsight, another layer of armor.

Success came quickly, and it was real. But it was also, in ways I didn't have words for then, lonely. The longer I lived inside the performance that Dubai's particular world required, the more I felt a quiet dishonesty accumulating, not in any single moment but in the aggregate. The version of myself I was presenting was technically accurate. It just wasn't complete. And the gap between the complete person and the presented one was widening in ways my body was registering even when my mind was not.

I was building a life based on what I did, hoping it would eventually make me feel like I was enough. The awareness was not verbal. It was behavioral. It lived in the relentlessness, in the inability to stop moving, in the way I could receive a compliment and feel nothing, and then reach immediately for the next achievement as if the last one had already expired. I was fluent in every language of high performance except the one that would have told me what I was actually afraid of.

By 2011, I had remarried, and on the surface, life seemed to be recalibrating. But by 2016, the gears were grinding to a halt again. My husband had lost his job, and I was reaching a state of profound burnout, my body and mind exhausted from decades of over-proving. We decided to move to Canada, believing that semi-retiring in the beautiful cottage country of Muskoka would finally let me exhale.

I was also running from my own performance. The constant staging of someone who was thriving. The years of dressing the part and saying the right things and appearing at the right events. I was exhausted not just by the workload but by the weight of the ongoing presentation. I craved something simpler, something that felt, in my bones, more true.

But beauty is not the same as belonging, and stillness is not the same as safety.

Identity travels with you. The same armor that had helped me survive Dubai, the over-proving and the fierce self-reliance, followed me across the Atlantic. In the isolation of the

north, that armor didn't create belonging; it only made me feel more alone inside it. The move didn't solve the issues; it exposed everything that was unintegrated.

There is a particular quality to that kind of disillusionment, the discovery that the thing you believed would save you has simply handed you a different backdrop for the same internal weather. The trails were beautiful. The lakes were real. The silence was exactly as advertised. And none of it could reach the place in me that needed reaching, because that place was not a geography. It was a nervous system. It was a lifetime of learned protection. It was the version of me that had never learned to simply rest without first earning the right to.

In the quiet of Muskoka, my husband's armor and mine began to clash daily. There was no longer the distraction of a busy social life or a demanding city to hide behind. My daughter was in distress, feeling the weight of our unsaid tensions, her body registering what our words were carefully avoiding. I realized that my "steadiness" was actually just a wall. The silence I had craved was now a mirror I didn't want to look into.

The weight became physical in ways I could no longer manage through sheer willpower. When my mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 2015, the grief began to accumulate in a form that had no clean resolution, no timeline, no moment of completion. Alzheimer's grief is its own particular cruelty: it takes someone slowly, in installments. You lose them a little at a time, and each loss arrives before you have finished mourning the previous one. By 2019, I knew her trip to Canada would be her last.

In the years that followed, I became a long-distance mediator and emotional anchor, present through flickering WhatsApp calls, watching my mother move from recognizably "Mom" into a world of silence, rage, and childlike confusion. I held a bright voice for her across the distance, performing steadiness on a phone screen while my heart was doing something far more complicated. This grief became part of the Invisible Emotional Backpack I carried everywhere: through the hotel operations I managed in Canada, through the household staffing I directed in India, through a marriage that was quietly fracturing under the weight of two people who had run out of room.

By 2020, as the pandemic laid the world's nervous system bare, mine was torn to shreds. My days began at 6:00 a.m. with my daughter's schooling, followed by the logistics of two continents, all while my second marriage was eroding beneath the surface of our daily life.

At night, I fell into bed with my limbs still vibrating, in a buzzy survival mode of over-functioning that I had long since stopped being able to distinguish from living. I tried to outthink the exhaustion until my health gave out from underneath me. Type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol, and a fatty liver became my reality.

I remember sitting with those diagnoses and feeling something that surprised me: not fear, exactly, but a kind of grim recognition. My body had been keeping score all along. It had been patient, far more patient than I had understood, while I overrode its signals, dismissed its warnings, and pushed through long after the reasonable stopping point. And now it was simply presenting the bill. The numbers in the doctor's report were not a punishment. They were an honest reckoning. They were my body saying, plainly and without drama: this is not a mindset issue. This is a capacity issue. This is what can happen when a body lives for too long in depletion, vigilance, and survival-mode functioning, with too little repair, too little rest, and too few moments of genuine safety.

I finally had to admit the truth I had been outrunning for years.

Out of that lived disorientation, The Recalibrate Method™ took shape, not as a concept designed in a quiet room, but as a realization that arrived the hard way. Until the body begins to find safety, very little truly shifts. You can read every leadership book, attend every workshop, master every framework, and still be hijacked by your own biology the moment the pressure rises. I know this not because I studied it in the abstract, but because I lived it with full awareness and still could not stop it. The missing piece was never more knowledge. It was capacity.

Many of us were taught to leave our emotions at the door, as though the self at work is somehow separate from the self who gets the diagnosis, makes the phone call, sits on the floor when the door finally closes. But we are one brain and one body. Our professional and personal stories travel in the same container, carried by the same nervous system, organized by the same survival intelligence that has been quietly running the show for decades.

The question is not whether your experiences look dramatic enough to count. They do not need to be dramatic. The question is what your body has been carrying, what it learned to protect, and what it has had to do to survive it. The question is whether the version of strength you trust most has been costing you something you have not yet named.

This book is an invitation into leadership that does not require that cost. It is for the ones who have been praised for being strong, but who are ready, or even just curious, about what it might mean to lead from somewhere more true. You are not weak because you get activated; you are human. And the most powerful leaders are not the ones who never get triggered, but the ones who have learned how to return.

I am not offering you a simpler life or a quick path to calm. I am offering you something harder and more valuable: a way to see yourself clearly, without shame. A way to recognize the armor for what it is, not a flaw, not a failure, but a brilliant strategy that served you well, and that you no longer have to live inside of permanently.

Before we look at how to lead others, we must first look at the version of strength you trust most, and ask, honestly, what it is actually costing you.

You do not need more armor to lead well.

Lead from there.

CHAPTER 1

Brave Without Armor

The meeting is over, and the boardroom is finally beginning to empty.

You are standing by the heavy oak table, one palm resting on its cool grain, though your hand is still uncomfortably warm from the CEO's appreciative, lingering handshake. "Unbreakable," he had said, looking you in the eye with the kind of intense respect that usually feels like a win. Your team filed out behind him, offering weary, grateful smiles as they moved into the hallway, because once again you were the steady anchor they all leaned on while the project's timeline was being torn apart. You were the one who stayed focused when the questions got sharp. You were the one who held the room together when the data didn't line up. You were, by every available measure, exactly what the situation required.

Now the room is empty, and the performance is over, and the physical cost of it is beginning to seep through the cracks of your composure.

There is a dull, throbbing ache in your temples, a slow-motion echo of a jaw you held in a tight professional lock for three hours. Your throat is dry and slightly raw, a physical record of how many times you swallowed the sharp reactive edge in your voice to keep your answers measured and controlled. As you reach for your laptop, your fingers feel clumsy, charged with a restless vibrating energy that you cannot quite name. On the outside you were the picture of authority. On the inside you were a body organizing for a fight you weren't even supposed to be having.

The drive home is a blur of red brake lights and a mind that will not stop replaying the moments where the room tightened. You find yourself litigating every sentence, checking for any leak in your credibility, any moment where you could have been sharper or faster or more certain. By the time you pull into the driveway, the silence of the car feels sudden and strange, a vacuum after the day's intensity. You reach for the door handle, and your hand stops.

You sit there with the engine off, not quite able to go inside.

Because the person who was just called “unbreakable” is currently shaking. Not dramatically. Not visibly. But shaking nonetheless, in the specific, private way of a body that has been holding itself together at great cost for a very long time and has just, finally, been given a moment in which there is no one left to hold itself together for. Your knuckles are white on the steering wheel. Your breath is shallow. And underneath the professionalism and the competence and the handshake that someone called currency, there is a tiredness so complete and so long-established that it has stopped feeling like tiredness and started feeling like the ground you live on.

You do not go inside. Not yet. You sit there in the particular loneliness of having just been called unbreakable, and feeling, in this moment, almost entirely the opposite.

This scene, or some version of it, is familiar to most of the leaders I have worked with over the past three decades. The specifics vary. Sometimes it is the steering wheel; sometimes it is the bathroom before the next meeting, or the hotel room at the end of a conference day, or the kitchen after the children are in bed. But the essential structure is always the same: a person who has just performed sustained, convincing competence, and who is now, in the first available moment of privacy, meeting the cost of that performance.

What I want to examine in this chapter is not the performance itself. Many of the leaders who come to me are genuinely excellent at what they do. The competence is real. The results are real. What I want to examine is what is running underneath the performance, the biological, psychological, and relational mechanism that makes the kind of sustained, high-functioning composure I just described both possible and quietly devastating.

Because there is a difference between leading from courage and leading from bracing. And most of the leaders I know have spent significant portions of their careers doing the latter while calling it the former, because from the outside the two things look almost identical, and from the inside the distinction is often invisible until something gives out.

Not all intensity is a problem. Not all pressure is a cost. There are meetings where the body is genuinely energized, where the urgency comes from something that matters and the engagement sharpens your thinking rather than narrowing it. In those moments, which some researchers call flow states, you remain connected to your judgment and your flexibility and the actual human beings in the room. You can hear a dissent without feeling

a threat. You can acknowledge uncertainty without feeling a collapse. The pressure is real, but it is not closing you down. It is opening you up, and there is a specific quality to this kind of engagement that most leaders recognize immediately when it arrives: a feeling of being fully present, fully yourself, equal to the moment without having to fight it.

Bracing is different, and the difference is felt in the body before it is understood in the mind.

Bracing is what happens when the urgency is not energizing but defending. When the sharpness in your focus comes not from genuine engagement with the problem but from a system that has registered the situation as a threat and is now running its most practiced protection. From the outside, bracing looks like effectiveness. The decisions still come. The composure holds. The results often arrive. But inside the body that is bracing, the experience is something quite different: a narrowing, a hardening, a quality of held breath that can last for hours without the person even noticing they have stopped breathing fully.

Your thinking narrows until you are only scanning for the safe or right move. Your tone takes on a clipped, defended edge that signals to everyone else that the perimeter is closed. The leadership range you have worked hard to develop, the ability to be both fierce and tender, decisive and curious, steady and flexible, quietly disappears. You may still look polished. Your decisions may still produce the results the board expects. But underneath, your body is no longer organizing around leadership. It is organizing around survival. And the room, however composed and professional the meeting looks in retrospect, has registered this distinction in ways that do not appear in any project report.

You may know this feeling: the specific quality of exhaustion that arrives not after hard work but after sustained performance. The tiredness that comes not from effort but from vigilance. The feeling of having been in a room where you were excellent, and leaving it somehow less than when you arrived.

That is bracing. And most of us have been taught to call it grit.

I know this pattern from the inside, and I want to say that clearly before I say anything else, because everything in this chapter is based on lived experience as much as it is based on research and practice. I know what it is to construct a version of professional strength so well-crafted and so consistently maintained that it begins to feel less like a strategy and more like a personality. I know what it is to receive praise for that construction and to

feel, underneath the praise, the particular loneliness of being seen for the professional mask rather than the person behind it.

A number of years into building my leadership consultancy, I was brought in to design and facilitate a three-day off-site strategic retreat for a group of thirteen company heads and their senior management. Almost all of them were men, from various nationalities, and they came from companies that had been operating entirely in silos. Bringing them under one overarching strategy, one that would allow them to leverage their collective strengths, shared customer base, systems, and scale, was my idea. I had worked independently with several of the companies for years and could see, clearly, what was possible if they aligned. When the group finally moved in that direction, they wanted it to be my work. They also wanted a male facilitator beside me. Preferably a white male.

I do not remember consciously objecting to this. It landed as a familiar condition of the work, the kind of requirement I had learned to absorb without naming, because naming it would have taken energy I did not want to spend on a battle I had not chosen. My thinking was commercially pragmatic: as long as my company was getting the business, it was my job to give the client what they wanted. I brought in my colleague Tom Young. He was skilled, grounded, and someone I genuinely respected. The retreat was three days of dense, consequential facilitation, and by the end of it we had achieved something real.

What I did not see clearly at the time, but what Tom could apparently see from where he was standing, was what was happening in my body throughout those three days.

After the retreat concluded, during the debrief, Tom looked at me with genuine care and said: “Triptta, the retreat went really well. But you don’t have to be a man in a man’s world.”

There was nothing unkind in his voice. He meant it as a seeing, the kind of observation a perceptive colleague offers when they want to give you permission to put something down. His intention was generous and clear.

My body did not receive it that way.

What arrived in my chest was a hot, precise sting of exposure. Not embarrassment exactly, but the specific feeling of having something named that I had believed was invisible, a spotlight turned on a part of me I had worked extremely hard to keep concealed behind

the competence. My jaw tightened. My breath rose. My mind moved very fast through a range of responses before settling on the one that maintained the most surface.

The conversation moved on. But I stayed with it.

What Tom had seen, and what I was not yet ready to fully hear, was that something in me had been proving for three days in a room that had required, before the work even began, a structural modification to my presence. I had not consciously experienced myself as diminished by that arrangement. I had processed it and moved on in the way you process and move on from things that are simply part of the landscape. But my nervous system had not moved on. My body had registered the implicit hierarchy of the request and had responded by turning up the volume on every credential I possessed. The force I brought into that room was real, and the work it produced was real, but underneath both of them was a quality of held breath, a guarded strength that was doing something more than facilitating. It was justifying my presence in a room that had told me, before I arrived, that my presence alone was not quite sufficient.

Over-proving was not a personality trait. It was the accumulated intelligence of years spent in rooms where the margin for error was smaller for me than for the people beside me. I had sat across from a recruiter who told me where I came from, they could get two of me for the same money. I had been the person whose ideas were received with polite skepticism and then repeated back by a male colleague twenty minutes later to general agreement. I had learned, through repetition and consequence, that the only reliable protection was to be so thoroughly, demonstrably prepared that there was simply no credible room to diminish what I brought. The force I carried into rooms was not vanity. It was a rational response to conditions that were real. And it had been so consistently reinforced, over so many years, that by the time Tom named it I could not quite see the difference anymore between the defended version of my competence and the unguarded one. They had merged. They felt like the same thing.

This is what Tom was trying to point toward. Not that my strength was false. But that the version of strength I was most relying on had a quality of holding in it, a vigilance that was costing me something he could see from outside and I could not see from within.

On the evening after the first day of the retreat, I sat at dinner beside the group's Managing Director. He was a Pakistani gentleman, measured and courteous, and in the

particular quiet of a shared meal after a long day he spoke about something I did not expect. He described being chased with swords as a young teenager during the Partition of 1947, the division of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan, and the way that memory had never fully left him. I told him, gently, that my own grandparents had come from Karachi and Quetta, and had also lost much when they crossed into what became India. That both sides had suffered deeply. That perhaps, after so many decades, there was more to be built in the space between those histories than continued by their division.

I have thought about that conversation many times since. Here was a man whose insistence on a particular kind of authority in the room, a male presence, a specific kind of credibility, may have had roots deeper than professional preference or corporate convention. His nervous system had been formed in conditions of rupture and inherited threat, with the specific, embodied understanding that certain kinds of legitimacy were the only reliable protection against certain kinds of loss. His guarded strength was not the same as mine. But it was a form of guarded strength. And both of us had arrived at that strategic retreat carrying protection strategies that predated the business problem we were there to solve.

I am not offering this as an excuse for arrangements that perpetuate inequity. I am offering it because it is true, and because it complicates the story in a way worth holding: most of the people in that room, including me, including the man requesting the modification to my presence, were responding to something older and more layered than the agenda item in front of us. The professional mask, in all its forms, is rarely only professional. It carries the weight of every room that taught the person wearing it what was required to stay safe.

The reason I could not hear Tom's observation at the time, and the reason most of us cannot hear the equivalent when it arrives in our own lives, is that the protection has by then become so thoroughly integrated into the sense of self that distinguishing between authentic strength and the defended version requires a kind of honest reckoning that most high-functioning environments actively discourage.

We have built a culture of leadership that treats sustained, high-functioning composure as a virtue in itself. We call it grit when it is actually white-knuckling. We call it resilience when it is actually the practiced performance of not falling apart. We call it emotional

regulation when it is actually the management of visibility. And because this performed composure produces results, at least for a while, at least on the metrics that get measured, we reward it. We promote it. We hold it up as the model for everyone else.

This is the competence myth: the idea that being a strong leader means having a face that never slips, a resolve that never wavers, and an apparent capacity to hold more than any situation could reasonably require without it costing you anything visible.

The myth is compelling in part because it is not entirely wrong. The leaders I work with who have built their reputations on this kind of sustained composure are, in many cases, genuinely excellent at what they do. The strategic thinking is real. The decision-making capability is real. The commitment to the work and the people is real. What is not real, or not quite real, is the implication that the defended self is free: that it can be sustained indefinitely, that the gap between the person inside and the performance outside is simply the cost of the role and not something that needs attending to.

The myth is also self-reinforcing, which is what makes it so durable. The leaders who rise fastest inside most organisations tend to be the ones best at projecting sustained certainty. They get the promotions and the stretch assignments and they become the models. And then, inevitably, the people watching them conclude that this is what leadership looks like, that this quality of uninterrupted, cost-free composure is the goal rather than the performance, and they start trying to replicate it. The culture produces more of what it rewards, and what most cultures reward is the appearance of invulnerability. What most cultures produce, as a result, is a significant number of leaders carrying significant invisible loads while maintaining significant visible composure, with very little room in their working environment to do anything with the gap except manage it privately.

The body does not agree with this accounting. It keeps its own records, and they are thorough.

Many leaders do not burn out because they lack the skill to lead. They burn out because they are leading while carrying what I think of as an invisible emotional backpack: the accumulated weight of sustained vigilance, unprocessed stress, the effort of managing how they are perceived, and the specific loneliness of being the one who holds it together

for everyone else without anyone holding it together for them. The backpack is real, and it is heavy, and it does not get lighter simply because it is not visible.

The math of that load is invisible until the body forces a stop. And by the time it forces a stop, the person is usually genuinely shocked, because from the inside the bracing has felt, for so long, like simply the necessary posture of a serious professional. Not a warning sign. Not a cost. Just the standard conditions of someone doing important work at a high level.

You may know this: the moment when someone says “you seem tired,” and you register genuine surprise, because from the inside you were not tired. You were managing. You were functional. The tiredness had been so thoroughly incorporated into the baseline that it had stopped registering as tiredness and started registering as simply how things are. That normalisation of load is one of the most reliable early signs that the protection strategy has been doing significant work for longer than it should have been doing it alone.

The deeper truth that the competence myth obscures is this: leadership is not only a skill set. It is a state.

The skill set matters enormously. Strategy, influence, communication, judgment, the ability to read a room and make decisions under pressure, all of these are real and learnable and consequential. But the skill set does not operate independently of the state of the nervous system that is trying to access it. And when that nervous system is running sustained threat responses, the skills become harder to reach, not because they have disappeared, but because the biology of the threat state is doing its own narrowing, its own prioritising, its own overriding of the more nuanced capacities in favour of the faster, more reactive ones.

This is not abstract. Most leaders have experienced it directly, in the moments when the version of themselves they know themselves to be simply could not get through. The meeting where the intention to stay curious evaporated the moment the challenge arrived. The conversation where genuine care for the person in front of them got overridden by the need to be right. The decision that felt, in the moment, like the only available option, and that looked, in retrospect, like a significant narrowing of something that had more choices in it than the activated state could see. These are not failures of character. They are failures of access. The capacity was there. The state was not.

Leadership under pressure is less about intention and more about available capacity. You may intend to be curious and flexible and genuinely open to challenge. You may have read every book on psychological safety and genuinely believe in it. You may have made sincere commitments, in reflective moments, to the kind of leader you want to be. But when the body reads a moment as a social threat, the part of you that could stay curious is functionally less available than the part that knows how to protect.

The capacity for perspective-taking narrows. The tolerance for ambiguity drops. The ability to hear a difficult piece of feedback as information rather than verdict becomes genuinely, biologically harder.

A leader under sufficient threat will abandon values they genuinely hold. Not because the values were never real, but because the nervous system is prioritising a more immediate concern: survival. The values are still there. They are simply, in that moment, less accessible than the protection response that has been running longer and is wired more deeply into the system.

This is important because it reframes the conversation about leadership development in a way that I think is both more honest and more useful. If the limiting factor is not knowledge or intention but available capacity, then the most consequential investment a leader can make is not in learning more frameworks or developing more self-awareness in the abstract, but in building the physiological conditions under which the knowledge and awareness they already have can actually reach their behaviour. The work, in other words, is not primarily cognitive. It involves the body. And that is a genuinely different project from the one most leadership development has been offering.

The nervous system does not respond to intention. It responds to state. And state, it turns out, is something that can be worked with, built, and gradually expanded. Not through effort or willpower, which are themselves a form of bracing, but through the patient, incremental work of building a more regulated nervous system: one that has enough capacity to hold difficulty without narrowing, enough room to stay present with complexity, enough recovery that the accumulated load does not tip the system into threat before the first agenda item is called.

I worked with a leader I will call Sarah. She was the kind of person that organisations build their stability on: respected, composed, known for being able to steady a room in

the specific way that makes everyone around her feel that the situation, however difficult, is manageable. People trusted her because she looked like certainty under pressure, and she had delivered on that appearance, reliably, for many years.

Underneath the reliability was a survival rule she had never examined, because it had never needed to be examined. The rule was this: I cannot afford to lose credibility here. For Sarah, being questioned did not feel like part of a healthy collaboration. Her system had learned, in experiences that predated this job and this organisation, that being challenged meant something more dangerous than a simple disagreement. It meant exposure. It meant the kind of visibility that could cost her the standing she had worked extremely hard to build.

In one critical project review, a junior analyst pointed out a small discrepancy in Sarah's budget projection. On the surface it was a minor correction, the kind of thing a leader can acknowledge and move past in under a minute. But Sarah's nervous system did not register a data point. It registered an identity threat.

The moment the analyst spoke, something shifted. Sarah's peripheral vision narrowed until the analyst's face was the only thing in focus. A surge of heat moved up through her chest into her throat. Her jaw locked into a hard, professional line. Her hands, resting on the table, felt charged with a force she had to actively contain. This is what a body under social threat feels like: fast, physical, already in motion before the conscious mind has formed a sentence about what is happening. By the time the thinking catches up, the biology has already taken the wheel.

Her mind moved quickly to make the reaction sound reasonable. She should have checked with me first. This is not the right forum. I need to maintain control of the room. Her voice dropped into a cold, clipped precision. "I'm aware of the numbers," she said. "Perhaps you should spend more time on your own reporting before auditing mine."

The room went silent. Not a respectful silence. A guarded, weighted one that said: noted. Sarah won the moment. She lost the room.

Her team did not see a strong leader. They saw a wall of tension. The air left the space. Curiosity vacated. What remained was a particular quality of careful, managed compliance that is one of the most expensive things an organisation can produce, because it looks like alignment but is actually survival. People stopped bringing early, incomplete,

risky ideas. They started bringing finished, polished, managed versions of reality, because the cost of bringing the raw material had just been made very clear.

The silence did not end when the meeting ended. It became, over the following weeks, a quiet and consistent policy. The team began preparing for Sarah's reactions rather than thinking about the problems they were supposed to be solving together. The junior members started consulting each other before meetings to align on what was safe to raise and what was better managed privately. The analyst who had spoken up did not stop doing good work. She stopped offering it in rooms where Sarah was present.

The intelligence of the organisation began, gradually, to route around her. Not as an act of defiance. As a form of self-preservation. The adaptation was so natural, so unremarkable from inside the culture, that nobody named it as a problem. People simply got better at managing upward, and the organisation got a little less honest as a result.

Sarah had no idea. She believed the meetings were going well. She had maintained control. She had not lost her temper. She had enforced a standard. These were the metrics she had available, and by those metrics she was doing her job. What she did not have access to was the other metric, the one that measures what a room is willing to bring before someone decides it is too expensive to try, and how that willingness changes over time when the cost of honesty is consistently higher than the cost of compliance.

This is the particular cost of a guarded leadership style at this level: it does not only affect the person carrying it. It transmits. The nervous systems of everyone in the room are continuously, automatically reading the state of the person at the front of it, a process so fast and so thorough that it operates well below conscious awareness. When the person at the front of the room is braced, the room braces. When that person is defended, the room becomes strategic about what to offer. The protection that felt, from the inside, like a private management tool turns out to be the most powerful signal in the shared space.

This is what researchers mean when they talk about co-regulation: the nervous system is not a closed system. It reads and is read by the systems around it, constantly and automatically, adjusting its own state accordingly. A leader who is genuinely settled, not performing settledness but actually present, transmits that quality to the room, and the room gradually opens. A braced leader transmits that too. The room does not consciously decide to close. It simply responds to what the most influential nervous system in the

space is communicating: that this is not a safe enough place to be the unfinished, uncertain, genuinely thinking version of yourself.

We need to name what Sarah was using, because most leaders use some version of it every day, and most of us have spent our careers watching it be rewarded.

Defended competence is not a character flaw. It is not the sign of a damaged or inadequate person. It is the sign of an intelligent nervous system that learned, in real conditions, what it needed to do to stay safe in environments where safety was not guaranteed. In professional life, this kind of protection wears excellent tailoring. It looks like perfectionism and hyper-preparation and the kind of relentless, polished reliability that earns reputations and fills reference letters. It looks like certainty when certainty is what the room is asking for. It looks like composure when composure is what the culture calls professional. It looks like the tight, controlled precision of someone who has decided that the cost of being wrong in front of others is simply too high to risk.

It looks, in other words, like a lot of things that organisations actively select for.

This guarded strength is often rewarded before it is ever questioned. It gets people the promotions and the respect and the title of the one who can carry more than everyone else. The over-preparer gets praised for her thoroughness. The person who never shows uncertainty gets promoted for his decisiveness. The one who manages every room gets celebrated for her composure. And because the rewards are real and consistent and the protection is real and effective, it tends to become more elaborate and more defended over time, not less. The person who was once using it as a strategy begins, eventually, to mistake it for a self.

The cost of this is not always obvious from the outside, and it is not always obvious from the inside. But it tends to arrive in a particular set of experiences that most leaders in my practice recognise when they hear them named. The quality of exhaustion not quite accounted for by the actual workload. The difficulty receiving genuine praise without immediately moving to the next performance. The specific loneliness of being the one everyone relies on, combined with the profound difficulty of letting anyone be relied on by you in return. The slightly jarring sensation, in the rare moments of genuine quiet, of not quite knowing who you are when there is nothing to perform toward.

These are not signs of something wrong with the person. They are signs of a protection strategy that has been doing more of the work than it was ever meant to do permanently.

A leader without range, the ability to be fierce when the situation calls for it and soft when it calls for that, curious when the conversation needs curiosity and direct when directness will actually serve, becomes brittle and, eventually, unreachable. The people around them learn what they can bring and what they cannot, and they stop trying to bring the rest. The relationship narrows. The team narrows. And the leader, increasingly surrounded by carefully managed versions of the people they are working with, loses access to the actual human intelligence that is the only real advantage any organisation has.

The question this raises is not whether you should put the protection down. That question is too simple, and the answer is not a decision. The professional mask does not respond to decisions. It responds to the conditions that made it necessary in the first place, and those conditions are usually still, in some form or another, present. The world has not necessarily become safer. The rooms have not necessarily become more equitable. The guarded strength, in many cases, is still doing useful work.

The more useful question is this: can you begin to notice when it has taken the wheel?

Not to shame the noticing. Not to make a performance of the awareness. But simply to create a little more space between what activates and what responds. To notice, in the moment before the voice sharpens or the jaw locks or the email sends itself with a quality that everyone on the other end will feel, that something has shifted. That the bracing has arrived. That the next thing you do will come from that, unless you do something first.

The something is small. This is important to say, because the gap between the kind of leader you want to be and the kind the moment is currently producing can feel very large, and the impulse is often to address large gaps with large responses: a coaching programme, a mindset commitment, a significant behavioural overhaul. These are not without value. But they also tend to happen at a distance from the moment of activation, which is where the actual choice lives. And what happens in the moment is not primarily a cognitive event. It is a physiological one.

In the moment, the available lever is the body.

One breath that is slightly longer than the breath you were about to take. The specific, brief act of noticing your feet on the floor. A single loosening of the jaw that signals to the nervous system: the threat has not fully arrived yet, and there is slightly more room here than the current state is suggesting. The peripheral vision softening from the narrow, threat-focused point back to something a little wider. These are not soft gestures. They are the fastest available route back to the version of you that has access to more than the protection response.

That fraction of space is not a solution. It is a beginning. And a beginning is not nothing. In that fraction, something other than the automatic response becomes available. A question, perhaps: which version of this is about to leave the room? Or simply a pause long enough for the most practiced part of you to step back slightly from the wheel.

You may not be able to do this consistently. You may try it once and find it unavailable the next time the pressure is higher or the backpack is heavier. That is not failure. That is an accurate reading of available capacity. The practice is not about achieving perfect consistency. It is about increasing the frequency with which the gap appears, and gradually, over time, the gap between stimulus and response begins to widen on its own. And in the widening, the version of leadership you actually want to offer begins to have a little more room to arrive.

The courage this book is about is not the absence of fear or pressure or the full, lived cost of trying to lead well in genuinely difficult conditions. It is the willingness, having begun to see what the protection is and what it costs, to ask whether there might be something more complete available. Not to perform openness as a new kind of defended position. Not to make vulnerability a new brand. But to have, accessible to you, a version of yourself that is not organized entirely around protection, and to lead, sometimes, from that.

The protection held because it worked. Or it has worked. It got you the respect and the role and the reputation for being the one who can handle this. It carried you through the moments when nothing else was available. It kept you standing in rooms that were not built with you in mind. I am not asking you to regret it. I am asking you to consider whether it is still the tool the situation requires, or whether it has become, over time, the only tool you know how to reach for.

Brave without armor does not mean unprotected. It does not mean naive or exposed or stripped of the hard-won intelligence your history has given you. It means that the protection is no longer doing all the leading. It means there is, available to you, a version of steadiness that does not require holding your breath to maintain it.

In the next chapter, we will look at what the protection is made of: the specific patterns that survival has learned to wear in professional settings, and what happens to a team, a culture, and a leader's own capacity when those patterns run the room long enough to become the norm. We will see how the fight response and the flight response, the freeze and the fawn, dressed in business clothing and rewarded with performance reviews, create the particular kind of exhaustion and disconnection that most high-functioning leaders are carrying quietly right now.

The protection has a structure. And once you can see the structure, you can begin to understand what is running it, and what it would mean to have access to something else.

About the Author

Triptta Neb is the creator of The Recalibrate Method™ and has spent more than two decades helping leaders, teams, and organizations navigate pressure, change, and complexity.

Her work blends leadership development, organizational consulting, neuroscience-informed practices, somatic awareness, breathwork, and lived experience.

Over the course of her career she has worked with senior leaders, executive teams, and organizations across North America, the Middle East, Europe, and Asia.

Brave Without Armor brings together decades of leadership work and a deeply personal exploration of what it means to lead with courage rather than protection.

She lives in Toronto, Canada, where she continues to develop leadership and nervous system regulation programs through The Recalibrate Method™.

Learn more at:
www.therecalibratemethod.com

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You do not need more armor to lead well.

You need enough steadiness to hear yourself again.

Triptta Neb

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