

Vulnerability and Courage

Vulnerability and courage are two words not often considered related. But we make a case that they are. Once we understand that courage is about taking prudent and intelligent risks, it makes sense that vulnerability is a part of that. Vulnerable comes from the Latin *vulnerabilis*, meaning “to wound.” Vulnerability means we might be in a situation where we could get hurt. Cowardice, on the other hand, means to cover up, or to turn or back away. Vulnerability equals risk, uncertainty and exposure. This is why vulnerability is not an act of weaknesses; it is an act of strength.

Vulnerability is especially important when it comes to innovation. In fact, creativity is an act of courage precisely because we must put our neck out to try something new. Remember, courage isn't the absence of fear; courage means pushing through our fears to do the hard right rather than the easy wrong. We must remember this because our brains are wired with a negativity bias. We overstate failure and rejection. It isn't exactly life-threatening to have our ideas or work rejected. Yet brain scans show that experiencing rejection activates the same regions of the brain as those associated with physical pain.

When we fear failure more than we desire innovation, we play it safe—and thus the boldest and best ideas may never surface. How can you innovate without fear? You can't. While no one wants to fail, innovation cannot occur unless we are willing to take risks. Innovators who persevere understand that success often follows in the wake of painful mistakes. Their fear of failure is outweighed by their fear of not trying. Credit goes to those who are inside the arena trying, even if they fail.

Optimism Is the Greatest Act of Rebellion

Carmen Medina, retired CIA deputy director of intelligence, created an informal Rebel Alliance at the CIA. The group questioned assumptions and the status quo in response to the CIA's failure to share information it already possessed—information that could have prevented the September 11 terrorist attacks. Medina developed an innovative approach to intelligence-sharing that dramatically improved homeland security.

The core idea was encouraging people to become “good rebels” in pursuit of a noble goal. How is this relevant to innovators? No matter how noble your goal, prepare to be challenged by those who fear change, by those who treat the status quo as sacred. Even benevolent rebels calling out problems can expect to be misunderstood at best and shunned at worst. In Medina's view, “Optimism is the greatest act of rebellion.”

The central motive of the benevolent rebel is to make a difference for others. In contrast, bad rebels want change that will benefit them.

