
Reviews of Books

Becky Blalock. *Dare. Straight Talk on Confidence, Courage, and Career for Women in Charge.* Jossey-Bass, 2014. ISBN 978-1-118-56264-2. 226 pp.

Dare is a key word and the leitmotiv of the book under review. Women need to dare to achieve what they want in their life – this is the main message that Becky Blalock tries to convey in her book aspiring to mentor the next generation of women leaders in business. Being a veteran in the corporate world, she rose to become senior vice president and chief information officer in one of the largest American multibillion corporations and she has brought the wealth of her experience to the “leadership book by women, for women.” She herself learned early how to dare, and now wishes to inspire thousands of women in middle management to dare to make a challenging climb to the top executive leadership positions, which currently see only a trifle minority of women. Thus, the book is for a very specific segment of population, it is for those women who are “determined to become part of that select upper echelon of corporate leadership and share the job of determining the direction and success of the largest economic engines of our time” (p. 5).

In the introduction called *Follow Me*, the author outlines her objective – to help women develop the character, skills, and relationships to swallow their fear and take the leap, in other words, “to dare boldly and unapologetically when those career-defining moments arise” (p. 9). In the following nine chapters, she deals in detail with various imperative issues women need to dare, provides examples from her own career and those of other outstanding women, complete with the clear-cut guidance on what to do in each specific area.

Thus, in the first chapter Blalock urges women to set their targets high, be it education or later career pursuits. For this, a written personal vision statement is a must, where one’s vision should be harmonized with ones core values; the latter serve as visionary GPS, as visions tend to change over time, but values stay. The author offers her set of six core values, which include integrity, growth, love, giving, fun and faith.

The next thing women need to dare is to know themselves, to develop self-assurance by identifying one’s weaknesses. Basically, the author’s advice is that to get strong one needs to admit that she is weak. All women interviewed for the book were very well aware of their weakness but could clearly articulate how they were dealing with them. Getting feedback is one of the ways to identify your weaknesses, and any source of feedback is instrumental, especially from people who don’t like you, since from them you can get the most uncompromising criticism. The suggestion, which seems a bit unrealistic to me, is the advice to start collecting feedback from spouses and children: in real life, don’t you hear that criticism on a regular basis? The problem is whether we agree with this criticism or not. The most important, however, is to remember that we need to understand that others’ perceptions of us is their reality, and if we want to change it we need to respond to what others perceive as our weaknesses.

One more advice from Blalock, brought out in chapter three, is about daring to stand out, differentiate yourself from others and become your own advocate to be noticed. This chapter is about how to cultivate

one's formidable personal brand around integrity, excellence, and results. And consider this: "If you dare to stand out, decide to be a star" (p. 48). But as challenging as it sounds, in the author's opinion, it is basically about being the very best one can be – health, appearance, professional and communication skills, and also about taking on tasks nobody else wants to touch. One quote about a personal brand is worth remembering: "A brand is not a value. It is a promise to deliver value" (p. 54).

Chapter four deals with daring to project a confident attitude, embracing the behaviors and mind-sets of powerful leadership. All interviewed powerful women unanimously cited confidence as the quality most instrumental to their rise to the top. The author emphasizes that it is important to remember about three pillars of confidence: attitude, knowledge, and experience. In this chapter, she concentrates on the first one, attitude. The basics of this trait are as follows: get over the need to be liked, be assertive without being pushy, don't be too apologetic or too grateful, never accept *NO* at face value and some others. Two quotes which stand out in this chapter are: "Fake it till you make it!" and "Leadership is taken, not given."

Another issue indispensable for leadership is learning, thus in the next chapter, Blalock addresses the need for women to dare to learn at every age. The pace of modern life makes the challenge of keeping on the cutting edge of knowledge very difficult, even impossible for an individual. But this can be managed through a team effort; therefore women should create and maintain their knowledge network, knowing people and organizations capable of providing required information.

The next thing women need to learn to dare is, surprisingly, to fail. Lack of failure in your career development "suggests first and foremost that you've resisted acting with bold daring that characterizes the most successful leaders. Instead you've spent your career avoiding risk" (p. 111). Failure can teach different lessons, but one of them is the understanding that we can survive and even thrive in the aftermath of a risky decision gone wrong. An interesting piece of advice from Blalock is to keep one's "secret résumé," a private and extensive accounting of mistakes one has made, but most importantly is to remember that the first failure is to become afraid to err. As risk aversion is more typical of women than men, the former need to develop a positive approach to risk, to accept the need to make diversions and endure defeats before finally achieving their goals.

Chapter seven is about daring to reach out, specifically about building one's support network of allies, mentors and sponsors. This is one of very common directives for women mentioned in many books on female leadership (see, for instance, recently reviewed J. E. Hamerstone & L. Musser Hough, *A Woman's Framework for a Successful Career and Life*, 2013). Advice worth remembering in *Dare* is "put your family first without putting your job last" (p. 133). Next comes a network of peers in the company and other companies as well; no less important, if not crucial, for a woman is to have a mentor, especially in the male-dominated business culture. The author points out that mentorship comes in different forms and, in fact, mentors could be found all around us and are easy to recruit (think, for instance, of the *LinkedIn* as a source of possible mentors). Sponsors are also indispensable, as while mentors push you forward with advice and counseling, sponsors reach out to the world and actively advocate for you.

One more skills to learn to be successful is to "dare to be more than the boss," which is about nurturing productive relationships with others all across the company, outside your own team. The author calls it "friendraising," which can be done by following the principle that every employee has an invisible sign hanging from his neck "Make me feel important." A piece of advice to be remembered is to "become the boss you'd like to have," at the same time also being able to have a tough conversation and end official relationship with an employee who is not living up to the responsibilities of his or her role. Another hint is to do more listening than speaking: "It takes *ears* to build relationships." One more useful recommendation is not to rely on e-mail communication too much, as some conversations in the business world are better held in person or on the phone.

The final chapter nine is one more "dare" advice: "Dare to Be There – for Others," and this one is for

women who learned and practiced all other “dare” skills and who have reached the position of leadership. Now, it is time for them to give back and invite others to join them on the top: “once you are a leader ... the single greatest thing you will do is grow other leaders” (p. 177). The reasons for this necessity are many. First, corporate culture needs to be changed as women are still facing numerous institutional barriers, and the change should start from within. Second, women on top are still very few; we need many more to transform gender-biased mind-sets and perceptions with increased presence of women in leadership positions. Also, women need more role models and women are doing a better job than men in mentoring, coaching and developing talent of others.

The author also provides reasons why it is worth investing time in developing others. Like a good teacher learns from her students, mentoring makes you a better leader by expanding your expertise, broadening your perspectives or introducing you to a new background. It helps you to look beyond your experience. The chapter ends with a succinct summary – in one sentence – of the whole book: in order to be able to swim against the current women need “to dare to pursue your vision with integrity, take smart risks, learn from failures, achieve with others, be gracious, and give back all along the way, enjoying every minute” (p. 193). The final phrase is the utmost “dare” – “Go ahead, change life for us all” (ibid.).

The appendix comprises short bios of all 29 powerful women who contributed to the book with their advice and expertise, all “mentors,” as the author calls them, who were featured in *Dare*. Thanks to them, sharing their experiences and telling stories of their victories and failures, the book *Dare* has come out a very engaging reading, devoid of scholarly didactics or conceited schooling. Even if you are not a woman, or do not aspire for leadership, or do not require advice on how to get to the top, the book is still worth reading – if only for all great quotes it includes.

Irina Averianova