



Writing a book is very much like going on a journey, and I was very fortunate to have had wonderful travel companions. My special thanks go to my colleague Marloes Brans. She originally came up with the idea for the Houthoff *Ladies Event*. We've been working together on this for over a decade now and, without realising it, laid the foundations for this book.

My colleague Els Houtman also played a key role during those years in developing the ideas that we will explore. Through her involvement in the Ladies Events, the Courage@Work survey and the many conversations that preceded this book, she consistently managed to find connections between individual experiences and broader patterns. Her analytical acumen and sense of what's happening in real terms have guided the creation of this book.

Nicole Gommers has been living in my head ever since my first book, *Don't Drown a Dead Duck: The Art of Gentle Effectiveness*, although she strongly denies it. She just asks a lot of questions, she says. Thank you for that.

Finally, I owe a great debt of gratitude to Houthoff for their confidence in this project.

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Introduction

THE ART OF SPEAKING UP COURAGEOUSLY

*What you need to know about courage
with a small 'c', the courage paradox,
and courage gaps*



Courage is a multifaceted concept. Stories about courage tend to centre on people who, through heroic acts, stand up against injustice, take risks involving personal consequences, and seek to change the course of history. It's entirely justified that the spotlight is usually focused on that sort of 'Courage with a capital C'. This book is about a very different kind of courage, courage that tends to escape notice: everyday acts in the workplace, the courage you encounter in meeting rooms, during difficult conversations, when unpopular decisions are made, in conflict situations and at those moments when you decide to speak your mind. In other words: courage with a small 'c'.

Anyone who has spent any time in the workplace knows that negotiations, interventions, conflicts and head-to-head situations – where you wonder if things will ever turn out all right – all come with the job. At other times, what's not right remains out of sight: no one puts into words what needs to be addressed. This therefore means that, in the workplace, both men and women need a decent dose of courage. Good decision-making requires the courage to speak freely and critically. This immediately makes plain why 'courage with a small c' shouldn't be underestimated. In times of rapid change, complex transitions and growing uncertainty, more

than anything else, it's this everyday courage that's of such great value.

Over the years, it's begun to strike me that courage tends to carry a specific connotation for women, and that women are expected to find extra courage to speak out. They mostly operate in an environment that has traditionally been dominated by men and where the norms and (un)written rules have likewise been shaped by men. These structures can create unintended barriers. In other words, the amount of courage you need to speak out is partly determined by the environment in which you operate. Unfortunately, a level playing field doesn't yet exist. Moreover, what women do and say is often interpreted, assessed and judged differently. In this book, we call this the *courage paradox*: a courageous step can open doors, but it can also provoke a reaction. Sometimes speaking up leads to recognition, progress or change. At others to discomfort, resistance or misinterpretation. The outcome is therefore unpredictable, and this is why the *courage gap* arises: the divide between what you feel needs to be said and what you ultimately dare to say. Not because you lack courage, but because you know that courage always provokes a reaction, whether positive or negative. And at times this can be exactly the opposite of what you expected.

Having learned the hard way, I can say that speaking up with courage and keeping your own course is truly an art. I became increasingly interested in exactly how you can master that art. All around me, I see many courageous women in action. When

they encounter a gap, they build bridges to reach their goal. There are so many wonderful stories of (pioneering) women who, step by step, are contributing to a courageous and therefore more equal world. So far, these untold stories haven't been viewed through a female lens, while it's in fact essential to foreground them. By looking at courage with a small 'c' through this specific lens, I want to offer an additional perspective while we're working towards equality, not create division.

It felt natural to give the stories of courageous women a platform. In doing so, I'm also expanding on my previous book *Don't Drown a Dead Duck: The Art of Gentle Effectiveness*, in which I shared my experiences as a woman in a male world.* How do you remain successful, decisive and innovative without losing touch with yourself and others? This book was already homing in on the theme of courage, a subject which, in my view, deserves to be explored further: speaking up courageously and staying on course, even when you face negative reactions, is just as much an art as gentle effectiveness. Not because courage is an issue exclusive to women, but because female professionals often have a keen sense of what's at stake when they speak out: their position, their authority, their relationships with others and the way their words are received.

* Marry de Gaay Fortman, *Don't Drown a Dead Duck: The Art of Gentle Effectiveness*, Amsterdam: Business Contact, 2019.

On International Women's Day 2026, hundreds of women responded to the Houthoff Courage@Work survey, which was launched across our extensive (international) network. This turned out to be rather overwhelming. It's wonderful to see how their responses aligned with the stories I gathered for this book. Taken together, all these anonymous and non-anonymous testimonies reveal where women experience reluctance, what tensions may arise in the process and what actually helps them to speak out. Many of these women's statements can be found, either verbatim or in adapted form, in the following chapters.

Based on the insights from the survey, the themes were fine-tuned, and I spoke to women who, drawing on their own experiences in various roles, discussed courage, leadership, influence and the price you sometimes have to pay for speaking out.

One of the most beautiful statements to emerge from those conversations is that courage isn't always loud. It can also play out in silence, for instance during the moment you decide to have a conversation that you'd actually rather avoid. Courage can also mean staying true to your own values, so that you can continue to look at yourself in the mirror. These are important lessons, but I'd like to add a personal observation: there are times when you have to stake your claim straight away. In meetings, being 'loud' and making your voice heard right from the start can most definitely be useful at times. I've noticed that this means you're 'a full participant' throughout the entire meeting: once people have heard you, it's as if they're more keenly aware that you belong there. And

yes, sometimes you have to rise above yourself to take up that space.

While writing this book, a pattern began to emerge. The people speaking here – a historian and bestselling author, a business coach, a Church minister and philosopher, women from the world of football, and many other women and men from a wide variety of backgrounds – unintentionally and effortlessly complement one another with their different perspectives on courage. Nancy McKinstry, a former CEO and one of the interviewees, adds a crucial angle: courage lies not only with the person who speaks, but also with the person who truly listens. Leadership means you have to create a space in which others dare to speak their minds. This doesn't mean constantly having the last word, but instead sensing when it is necessary to speak, when listening turns out to be the more courageous act, and when taking action can make a meaningful difference. In the intergenerational conversation – between 'next gen' Femke Lückerath and her mother, Professor Mijntje Lückerath-Rovers – it becomes clear just how difficult it can be to claim your space (and also that it becomes easier with age). For years, Mijntje has been forcing the business world to face the facts with her Female Board Index, an annual overview of female corporate directors and supervisory board members at Dutch listed companies: women are still severely under-represented in the Netherlands, and even today the majority of companies

don't have a single woman on their board. Former CEO Feike Sijbesma notes that vulnerability is linked to courage: 'Insecurity and determination are not always mutually exclusive. There is a paradox here too.' This notion recurred in virtually every conversation. To paraphrase: I hesitated, I didn't know how it would turn out, but I went ahead and did it anyway. Often, they were glad they did. With hindsight, a courageous step that wasn't taken is often seen as a missed opportunity.

Courage tends to set something in motion and can even be the start of necessary change. That's why raising awareness of different forms of courage is essential – for both men and women. In *The Art of Speaking Up Courageously*, these different aspects of courage with a small 'c' have been assembled and clarified. The findings aren't scientific; they're based on oral history supplemented by responses from the survey – with the aim of examining and promoting the importance of courage through a female lens. Our survey shows that the call to 'just do it' (or 'speak up') doesn't mean the same thing to everyone. Those at the start of their careers often have to go the extra mile to take that step forward. As people become more senior, they discover that real impact lies not only in speaking up, but in changing the circumstances so that others can also make their voices heard – by influencing systems, creating space and listening attentively. Because sometimes the greatest courage lies not in taking the floor, but in enabling others to do so.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Courage doesn't always work out as you had presumed, and that's precisely what this book is about. A courageous step can lead to recognition, progress, change. Yet that same step can also provoke discomfort, resistance or misinterpretation. We call this the 'courage paradox'. And because the outcome's never certain, there's often a gap between what you feel needs to be said and what you ultimately dare to say – the 'courage gap'. This book is about that gap and about the women and men who nonetheless bridge it. Along the way, you'll encounter various dialogues covering all facets of courage in a professional context. Here's what to expect:

CHAPTER 1 – **Navigating a man's world**

Choosing a role in the world of football is choosing a 'next-level' man's world. How do women function here? 'Football women' Femke Brenninkmeijer (HERA United) and Lilian de Leeuw (Feyenoord) share their views on cutting through archetypes.

CHAPTER 2 – **Courage through a female lens**

The theme of 'courage through a female lens' is explored with business coach Esther Kerstholt.

CHAPTER 3 – **The courage to be**

Church Minister and philosopher Ad van Nieuwpoort has a

unique perspective on courage and explains why you should be courageous.

CHAPTER 4 – **The courage paradox**

Courageous steps don't always work out well. How many women come up against negative labels and are being misinterpreted; and what are the differences for the next generation, women in mid-level positions and senior executives? Leading women Gina van der Werf, Serpil Tascioglu and Jet Stolk offer their viewpoints.

CHAPTER 5 – **The courage to listen**

Nancy McKinstry discusses the most important leadership lesson she learned during the 23 (!) years she was CEO of Wolters Kluwer: listening takes courage.

CHAPTER 6 – **The power of speaking up courageously**

As a woman, you're in a powerful position. You have more to gain than to lose! Plus: what you say (and what you don't say) matters.

CHAPTER 7 – **Courage changes the rules of the game**

Naturally, we're also curious about the male perspective. We asked Feike Sijbesma (founder of and adviser at Darwin International) for his views on courage, standing your ground in the face of fierce opposition, and on determination versus insecurity. Courage redefines what is regarded as success.

CHAPTER 8 – **A historical perspective on female courage**

Historian and bestselling author Russell Shorto shares his thoughts on female courage through the ages.

CHAPTER 9 – **How courage transfers from generation to generation**

Next-gen Femke Lückerath and her mother Mijntje Lückerrath-Rovers (professor at Tilburg University) give their views on the perspectives of younger generations and on how courage trickles down from one generation to the next.

CHAPTER 10 – **Courage enablers**

What helps you to take that courageous step, and what holds you back?

CHAPTER 11 – **Courage in action**

This book offers plenty of tips and advice. How do you put them into practice? Seven lessons to put into action.

In the survey mentioned earlier, we asked ambitious women for some advice to their younger selves. In a nutshell, the responses revealed: just do it! Ultimately, taking a courageous step more often than not turns out to be the right way forward, if only because you know deep down that you've done the right thing.

MARRY DE GAAY FORTMAN