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Courageous leadership isn't convenient, but it is crucial

BY NONA LEE
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When you think of courageous leadership, what comes to mind? What does it really look like in today's world, an era of division, uncertainty, and constant yet sometimes unexpected change?

Courageous leadership is embodied by individuals who take bold action in the face of great risk. Consider Billie Jean King, who has spent decades advocating for gender equality in sports and beyond, even at great personal cost. And take Colin Kaepernick, who took a knee in 2016 for racial injustices — an action that he knew could cost him everything, and it did — but he did it anyway because it was a moment bigger than himself. Or consider NASCAR's 2020 decision to remove the Confederate flag from its events in the face of losing a significant portion of its fan base, but did so anyway because it was the right thing to do.

Furthermore, how about Jason Collins, former NBA player who was the first openly gay player in North America's major men's professional leagues? In April 2025, Collins led a groundbreaking "Final Four Inclusion Clinic" in San Antonio, focusing on creating a supportive environment for LGBTQ youth and allies in basketball. The clinic, backed by the NBA, the San Antonio Spurs and media partners including CBS and TNT Sports, aimed to extend the unifying power of sports into a safe space for marginalized young athletes. The event was hailed as a critical effort at a time when discussions of diversity and inclusion face national resistance.

These are examples of courageous leadership in the face of tremendous costs. These moments of leadership were not easy and certainly weren't convenient. They were acts of conviction, choosing principle over popularity, progress over comfort. But courageous leadership doesn't always make national headlines. It shows up in the everyday decisions leaders make: listening with empathy when it's easier to ignore people or their issues; admitting mistakes when pride tempts us to deflect; or making space for

perspectives that challenge our own. Traits like empathy, curiosity, humility, vulnerability and confidence all play a role. At its core, courageous leadership is about choosing what is right, especially when it is hardest.

This idea is central to our Truth Retreats experience, which takes place in Montgomery and Selma, Alabama; two places that symbolize some of the most courageous acts of leadership in American history. Walking the Edmund Pettus Bridge or standing in the footsteps of civil rights leaders reminds us that courage is not theoretical. It is lived through sacrifice, resilience and an unshakable belief in justice and doing what is right.

The truth is, we need leaders to step into courage now more than ever. In workplaces, communities and society at large, we need people willing to lead with empathy, not just because it feels good, but because it is necessary for trust, growth and progress. Courageous leadership is not about having all the answers; it's about having the courage to take action, to listen deeply and to build a path forward where everyone belongs.

Nona Lee is founder and CEO of Truth Is, a consulting firm helping organizations focus on courageous leadership in their organizations in the context of equity, inclusion and belonging. She spent more than 22 years leading the legal department for the Arizona Diamondbacks, where she also led the organization's inaugural justice, equity and inclusion council. She is the author of "The Truth About Us: A Call to Confront Bias, Embrace Empathy, and Build a More Inclusive World" (Press 49, June 2025).



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