



Courageous Leadership in Action

Aligning Performance, People, and Purpose



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Courage in Practice



Introduction

Leadership in consumer retail has always demanded decisiveness. It also requires something harder to name than technical skill or experience: a willingness to act without certainty and continue forward as the path takes shape. That quality is courage, and it's less a personality trait than a discipline built through judgment, clarity, and consistent follow-through.

Courage in practice shows up as conviction in the face of uncertainty. It requires challenging long-held assumptions, making decisions before conditions are fully defined, and bringing others along through transparency and trust. Unlike situational confidence, courage is cumulative. Leaders build it through repeated decisions, often in moments when waiting or stepping back would have been more comfortable.

Against that backdrop, DHR Global spoke with seven senior executives who've led organizations through a range of opportunities and challenges, including sustained growth, transformation, and operational complexity. Their experience spans global brands and demanding operating environments. These courageous leaders include:

- **Shin Hwee Chua**, Regional CEO, APAC, Ralph Lauren
- **Mary Ellen Coyne**, CEO & President, J.Jill
- **Michael Marth**, COO International, URBN
- **Philip Mountford**, former CEO, Hunkemöller
- **Nicole Otto**, CEO, Ruggable
- **Allison Peterson**, Chief Retail & Digital Officer, Carter's
- **Hillary Super**, CEO, Victoria's Secret

Where Courage Shows Up

Retail leaders make decisions without full visibility, often balancing competing priorities as conditions continue to evolve. Customer expectations change, channel demands expand, and operational pressures evolve, leaving little space for extended deliberation.

In that context, courage becomes a daily discipline. It shows up in how leaders set direction, communicate tradeoffs, align teams, and maintain momentum amid ongoing uncertainty.

The executives we spoke with treat courage as a defining aspect of their role. They approach decisions with a clear understanding that each choice sets direction, signals priorities, and affects how teams respond. Over time, leaders build and reinforce courage through these moments, with a consistent willingness to decide, commit, and be accountable for outcomes.

What Courageous Leaders Do Differently

Across our conversations, five consistent behaviors emerged that reflect how leaders apply courage in practice:

1

Act without full alignment.

Courageous leaders make decisions in the absence of consensus or complete information, relying on judgment while actively bringing others along through communication, context, and shared purpose.

2

Challenge what others have stopped questioning.

They revisit long-held assumptions and push beyond what the organization has accepted as "the way things are."

3

Trust judgment when the path isn't obvious.

Courageous leaders recognize when they have enough information to act and when waiting for more input will only slow progress.

4

Create the conditions for others to lead.

They build trust, give ownership, and equip teams to take calculated risks.

5

Know when restraint is the harder call.

Sometimes the most courageous decision is to step back, refocus, or stop what isn't working.

COURAGEOUS LEADERS

DHR GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES



MATHEW DIXON

Managing Partner, European Consumer & Retail Practice

The leaders in this report show that sustained success depends on how they respond as conditions change. They expand how they lead, embracing ambiguity, inviting new perspectives, and adjusting their approach as conditions change. Adaptability remains essential as expectations rise and operating conditions become increasingly complex.



CHRISTINE GREYBE

President, Leadership Consulting

Courageous leadership is reflected in the signals leaders send every day. These executives prioritize trust, transparency, and ownership, especially when outcomes remain uncertain. In doing so, they sustain performance through change and improve decision-making across the organization.



TRICIA LOGAN

Managing Partner, Global Consumer & Retail Practice

Across these conversations, courageous leadership consistently reflects sound judgment under pressure. The strongest leaders maintain clarity on what matters and act without waiting for certainty. They combine decisiveness with vision and credibility to build trust at the top. This remains one of the most in-demand leadership capabilities we see today.

Shin Hwee Chua

Regional CEO, APAC, Ralph Lauren

Shin Hwee Chua leads with a clear principle: do the right thing. Across Asia-Pacific, she applies that principle with discipline, using it to guide decisions across diverse markets and operating conditions.

Her approach reflects that complexity calls for sharp judgment. Leaders must stay grounded in what the brand stands for while adapting how it shows up in each market. Guided by brand purpose, evolving consumer behavior, and long-term value creation, she sets direction with confidence – aligning teams around a clear, shared vision.

At L'Oréal, she expanded Kérastase beyond salons into direct-to-consumer channels through department store counters. The move required aligning partners and gaining support for a locally driven idea. It proved successful and later scaled globally. At Ralph Lauren, Chua has taken a similar approach. During COVID, she led the development of a localized data hub in China that now supports clienteling and the development of social commerce.



Courageous leadership comes down to doing the right thing, being innovative, and staying resilient.

Shin Hwee Chua

What gives you confidence to move forward despite resistance?

Courageous leadership comes down to doing the right thing, being innovative, and staying resilient. You respond to challenges and find a way forward, but the guiding principle stays the same. Once the direction is clear, resistance becomes something to work through rather than a reason to stop. I anchor decisions against the brand promise, consumer preferences, and the ability to drive sustainable growth. That focus helps me inspire teams to align around the vision and create shared commitment.

What role does curiosity play in strategy development?

You have to stay close to your people and stay curious. A conversation with our global head of sourcing revealed a mismatch between the wholesale supply model and the DTC Asia-Pacific business operations. That insight led to a new approach. Today, a meaningful percentage of our core products are supplied regionally at a shorter lead time and contribute to a significant share of our growth. Those insights come from relationships – not formal processes alone.

What skills will leaders need most in the near future?

Innovation, a willingness to test and learn, and the ability to prioritize when everything feels urgent. Energy management is also important. Leaders need to focus their time and attention deliberately. I also believe they need to get serious about AI. Leaders who are actively testing AI tools to understand how they create efficiencies – and more importantly, drive growth – will be the ones ready to integrate them effectively. The window to explore is open.

Mary Ellen Coyne

CEO & President, J.Jill

When Mary Ellen Coyne stepped into J.Jill, she focused on sharpening direction and narrowing priorities. She believes progress comes from choosing what to pursue and what to set aside, ensuring that effort translates into results.

Her perspective on courageous leadership has expanded with experience. Early in her career, it meant presenting well-informed points of view. Now, it includes galvanizing teams, making decisions that define the direction of the business, and creating a sense of accountability that builds momentum.



The best decisions come from preparation, clear perspective on the desired outcome, and a willingness to be challenged.

Mary Ellen Coyne

How do you support risk-taking or bold actions when outcomes are uncertain?

When you want people to take risks, you have to be fully behind them, whether it works or not. People need to know you'll support them and stand with them through the outcome. Clarity also matters. A clear vision, defined goals, and metrics give teams a structure for how to act. That allows people to move quickly, make decisions, and adjust when something doesn't work. You reinforce that through how you lead. If you expect people to act boldly, you have to create a culture that supports it, including learning from what doesn't work and continuing to move forward.

How do you navigate different and sometimes opposing perspectives at the leadership level?

I trust my instincts and have learned to rely on them more over time, while also knowing when to pick my battles. I rely on trusted voices – board members and peers who challenge my thinking. These connections are so important, and without that honest feedback, it's easy to lose perspective. The best decisions come from preparation, clear perspective on the desired outcome, and a willingness to be challenged.

What advice would you give leaders who want to build teams that act with courage?

Challenge yourself every day and surround yourself with people who bring strengths you don't have, while modeling the behavior you expect and providing consistent support. Do your homework and be prepared so you feel confident. What drives results is being able to bring people along through influence and shared conviction. Change happens when people see their voices reflected in outcomes.

Michael Marth

COO International, URBN

Michael Marth began his career in finance, a discipline built on precision and certainty, before moving into broader management. His belief is that courageous leadership comes from making decisions with clarity and communicating them in a way that establishes trust, encourages autonomy, and reduces friction.

He oversees all international operations at URBN across multiple retail facias, markets, and teams that each operate differently. He adapts his approach based on who he's leading and what the situation demands. The one constant is transparency, with clear, consistent direction that builds trust.



Courageous leadership isn't about being loud or bold, but about showing direction and making decisions despite never having 100% certainty.

Michael Marth

How do you define courageous leadership?

Courageous leadership isn't about being loud or bold, but about showing direction and making decisions despite never having 100% certainty. Today, with AI providing overwhelming data, leaders must be transparent about decisions and build a culture where teams are also empowered to make decisions. The focus should be on creating a growth culture, rather than a blame culture, emphasizing solutions over reasoning when mistakes happen. What matters is how quickly you adjust and move on.

How do you remove obstacles so teams can perform?

You eliminate the clutter. Internal politics and administrative roadblocks slow progress. Implementing a customs warehouse in our supply chain was one of the boldest decisions. With Brexit and 30-40% of business in Europe but main stock in the UK, this was essential despite significant costs and internal resistance. It required changing vendor management, supply chain processes, and systems. It created a lot of extra work and costs, but staying the course was crucial. The outcome has been extremely positive, saving millions versus not having it.

How do you challenge yourself and remain an innovative leader?

You need to stay up-to-date with developments in all aspects of the business – fashion, retail, DTC, e-commerce, and supply chain. Listen to your teams as subject matter experts and read extensively to know what's happening in the market. Then evaluate if new approaches can work in your environment and with other departments. Leaders need to see the big picture while subject matter experts provide insights on what's possible and how to make their jobs easier.

Philip Mountford

former CEO, Hunkemöller

Philip Mountford helped build Hunkemöller into one of Europe's leading retail brands, expanding from €100 million to €800 million in revenue and scaling its global footprint. Along the way, he learned as much from the decisions that required pulling back as from those that drove growth.

He also learned that the best ideas in an organization don't always come from where leadership expects them. That lesson influences how he works today as a board member and as an adviser. He stays close to the work, supporting leadership teams directly and connecting CEOs across his portfolio companies so they can learn from each other.



Leadership isn't about telling people what to do; it's about guiding them to reach conclusions themselves so they take ownership.

Why does pulling back require more courage than expansion?

Expansion is easier when momentum and investor pressure are behind you. Fast decisions often get rewarded. The harder call is knowing when to pull back and acting on it quickly. That decision has financial and personal weight, especially when you're invested in making it succeed.

What does it take to unlock ideas across an organization?

You have to listen at every level. For example, an intern's idea was instrumental in improving our loyalty program. Leadership isn't about telling people what to do; it's about guiding them to reach conclusions themselves so they take ownership. That only happens in an environment where people feel comfortable speaking up.

How do leaders adapt when past approaches no longer apply?

Leadership has evolved significantly over the past five to 10 years. New entrants are scaling quickly, and that pace demands a different approach. You need a clearly defined vision and the ability to make decisions faster, often with less data than you'd like. Some decisions are straightforward, while others require you to move forward without full certainty. In Sweden, we entered a market where the initial signals were unclear. We moved ahead, adjusted the offer, and subsequently built the business. That experience reinforced that you can't wait for perfect information.

Nicole Otto

CEO, Ruggable

Nicole Otto leads with a belief that strong leadership comes from clarity, transparency, and a willingness to keep learning. At Ruggable, she puts that belief into motion every day, drawing on an approach she developed by studying effective leaders and practicing those behaviors herself.

When Otto joined Ruggable, she saw an opportunity to bring greater alignment by grounding decisions more firmly in shared values and the consumer experience. She defines courageous leadership as standing by those values and prioritizing the consumer in every decision, even when it requires resetting expectations internally. Maintaining that external lens shapes how teams are built, priorities are set, and outcomes are delivered, enabling stronger execution across the organization.



Leadership comes down to modeling authenticity and flexibility, staying open to new ideas, and giving people the space to lead.

Nicole Otto

How did you develop your leadership voice?

Early in my career, a mentor taught me to become a student of leadership style. I paid attention to what made leaders effective and then practiced those behaviors myself. At Nike, that meant experimenting in a fast-paced environment where you couldn't rely on positional authority to get things done. When I'm practicing something, I will tell my colleagues what I am working on and what I am trying to do differently. That creates accountability and opens the door for feedback. Finding your voice takes practice.

How do you balance conviction with openness?

I have to show that I'm willing to change my point of view when new information comes forward. I love when my team challenges me. If they see value in something I don't, I respect when they say so. That dynamic keeps decisions grounded in merit and helps eliminate unnecessary work.

What does courageous leadership look like today?

Leaders have to cut through the noise and focus their teams on what deserves attention through the lens of the customer's needs. That requires making clear choices about where to spend time and energy, especially as responsibilities move away from day-to-day execution. The further you move from day-to-day execution, the more important it becomes to keep teams energized and aligned around work that matters. From there, leadership comes down to modeling authenticity and flexibility, staying open to new ideas, and giving people the space to lead.

Allison Peterson

Chief Retail & Digital Officer, Carter's

Allison Peterson approaches leadership with curiosity and a willingness to challenge assumptions, including her own. She sees courageous leadership as creating space for new ideas to take hold and for others to question what may no longer apply.

At Carter's, she focuses on this question: Are we relevant to the generation of parents who are having children today? Those answers continually guide how she builds teams and how she evaluates decisions.

When Peterson joined Carter's after a 19-year career at Best Buy, she took time to observe before acting. In order to shift context and fully understand the consumer she was serving, she documented what she saw, tested her assumptions, and invited others to challenge her thinking. That approach helped her build credibility while gaining a deep understanding of the business.



Leaders who invite dialogue and challenge constructively build confidence in their teams.

Allison Peterson

How do you stay ahead of consumer trends?

It starts with staying deeply connected to employees and consumers, creating feedback loops that not only listen to but anticipate their evolving needs. Understanding how your consumer needs will change over time requires empathy to the context of which they are operating within. Being a student of the consumer, paying attention to signals in their behaviors, and having teams that reflect those we serve makes our ability to anticipate their needs that much more effective.

How have other leaders or mentors influenced your leadership approach?

The kind of leader someone becomes often reflects the leaders they've worked for. By experiencing multiple leadership styles, I've learned who I do and don't want to emulate. Some leaders closed off input entirely, while others actively sought different perspectives and pushed back constructively. Leaders who invite dialogue and challenge constructively build confidence in their teams. I try to create that same environment by being transparent, vulnerable, humble about what I don't know, inviting feedback, and questioning my own assumptions. I have found this ultimately builds trust and enhances outcomes.

How do diverse teams improve decision-making?

It ties directly to understanding the consumer. If we want to stay relevant, our teams need to understand the people we serve in experience and perspective. No single point of view leads to the right answer. Diversity of thought is what closes the gap between assumptions and what customers need. When teams reflect their consumers, they make stronger decisions and stay connected to what matters.

Hillary Super

CEO, Victoria's Secret

Victoria's Secret is one of the most recognizable brands in global retail, but by the time Hillary Super took the helm, the organization had drifted away from its customer amid years of operational and structural complexity. The work of becoming a standalone company demanded efficiency and rigor, but it also pulled attention away from what mattered most.

Super's leadership has centered on restoring focus. She believes courage shows up in discipline and clear direction: aligning the organization around customer-centric strategies; empowering leaders to exercise judgment in execution; and making deliberate choices about priorities. For her, leading through change means returning relentlessly to the brand promise and building the framework that enables her team to deliver on it.



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You won't get every decision right, but most things are fixable. When you let go of that pressure, you create the space to lead with clarity and conviction.

Hillary Super

What does it mean to lead through change?

The only constant in this industry is change, but leading through it isn't about reacting to everything. It's about being clear on where you're going and helping your team understand why it matters.

There's always the temptation to chase every opportunity and optimize everything, but that's where you can lose focus. The real discipline is staying anchored to a few, key priorities that will truly move the brand forward and being very intentional about what you're not going to do. When you're clear on that, and your team understands the "why," change becomes something you can lead through with confidence.

How do you create a culture where teams can take bold action?

It starts with trust, and that comes from how you show up. For me, that means being real, honest, and not over-scripted. When people see that, they feel it, and it gives them the confidence to step in and take ownership.

I also believe you have to reframe how teams think about risk. Breakthrough results don't come from playing it safe. They come from trying things, learning quickly, and building on what works. Mistakes are part of that process. What matters is how quickly you learn, how you respond, and how you apply those learnings to make better decisions going forward.

How do you make sound decisions when the stakes are high?

Decisions made from fear are rarely the right ones. When the stakes are high, I step back and ground myself in a few simple things: what does the customer need from us, what does the business need, and what does the team need to move forward. I try to stay focused on the quality of the decision, making sure it's grounded in our strategy and where we're going, rather than getting overly attached to a specific outcome. You won't get every decision right, but most things are fixable. When you let go of that pressure, you create the space to lead with clarity and conviction.



Courage in Practice

These leaders describe courage as a practice, one built through decisions, reinforced over time, and expressed differently depending on the moment.

Their experiences point to a consistent set of behaviors. They act before they have complete information, revisit assumptions others no longer question, and hold themselves accountable for the risks they ask others to take. They also recognize when stepping back or stopping what no longer works requires as much discipline as pushing ahead.

These behaviors become clear in defining moments, including when leaders eliminate initiatives that no longer deliver value, identify opportunities that others overlook, or reset priorities to restore focus and momentum. In each case, courage is practical, timely, and grounded in judgment rather than being performative.

Retail continues to place new demands on leadership as consumer expectations evolve and technology expands possibilities and introduces complexity. Leaders must decide where to focus, what to let go of, and how to move forward as those pressures intensify.

In that environment, those who stand out build organizations where courage becomes part of how work gets done. Teams challenge ideas and take ownership of outcomes because they trust the direction and the intent behind them. When modeled consistently, courage creates permission for others to lead.

Courageous leaders build believers, and believers move organizations forward.