



Dynamic Leadership: Empowering Braver Angels to Lead Communities as Courageous Citizens

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This paper is part of a [collection](#) of papers commissioned by [Braver Angels' Citizen Scholars Council](#) for discussion at the inaugural Council Symposium, held in Philadelphia on June 25, 2026, before the Braver Angels Convention.

The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what “courageous citizenship” is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: “We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: “I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture.”

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Abstract

In an era characterized by political polarization and a "VUCA" (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) environment, American civic life faces the dual challenges of hostile disagreement and widespread "civic inertia". Grassroots leadership is the essential mechanism for converting abstract ideals of civility into sustainable community action. This paper proposes "Dynamic Leadership"—an evidence-based, versatile framework designed to empower volunteer leaders within the Braver Angels movement to navigate these destabilizing tensions.

Introduction

Braver Angels was born from the perspective and concern that Americans live in trying times during which citizens should come together across their divides, rather than isolate themselves in like-minded cohorts. It recognizes that the current social landscape is defined by "echo chambers" that do more than filter information—they distort beliefs and lead to hostile political disagreement. By treating these contrary viewpoints as a moral deficiency rather than differences in philosophy, our citizens risk a permanent fracturing of the national fabric. To counter this, [The Braver Angels Way](#) and its vision statement advocate for a "patriotic empathy" that goes beyond simple politeness. It isn't about compromising one's core convictions, but rather about:

- **Humanizing the "Other":** Moving past caricatures and stereotypes to understand the lived experiences behind someone's vote.
- **Strengthening Social Capital:** Rebuilding the trust necessary for a functioning democracy to solve collective problems.
- **Developing "Civic Muscles":** Practicing the difficult skills of listening and civil discourse in a world that increasingly incentivizes outrage.

Ultimately, the Braver Angels movement rests on the conviction that the future of the American experiment depends less on who wins the next election and more on how we treat one another in the aftermath.

In the context of this movement, grassroots leadership serves as the essential engine that converts the abstract ideals of civility into local, sustainable action. While national initiatives provide the framework, local leadership adapts these strategies to the unique social and political topographies of their own communities. It is in our cities and towns, where the opportunity lies for Braver Angels to employ clear, consistent and compelling models for inspiring and displaying human and civic involvement. The means to achieve it is "leadership muscle". This essay aims to inspire and be a call to action for catalyzing dialogue and actions towards acculturated, versatile leadership, development and practice that strengthens Braver Angels' grassroots. The intended result is flourishing Courageous Citizenship.

The Contemporary Context of Leadership

Leadership is never easy, and in turbulent times it's an everyday challenge. Today two destabilizing tensions coming to bear on individuals and organizations with critical roles in our democracy. The first involves the current state of the world. In 1997 Colonel John S. Richard wrote *[The Learning Army, Approaching the 21st Century as a Learning Organization](#)*. He wrote about the less predictable world and described its key components. The acronym VUCA describes the scope of circumstances that confronted leaders:

V = Volatility: unprecedented dynamics and speed of change, and change catalysts

U = Uncertainty: lack of predictability, likelihood of surprise, information gaps, and unanticipated issues and events

C = Complexity: complicated combinations of forces, contradictory information, a black box instead of cause and effect, and organizational confusion

A = Ambiguity: clouded reality, cues that may be misjudged, and mixed meanings of conditions

Leaders in every sector, elected officials, and most importantly the volunteer civic workforce, face a VUCA world. They find it difficult to operate with perspectives, roles, and relationships that were common in the past. Volatility, complexity, and accelerated change, as well as political, social and environmental disruptions disturb the communities where Americans pursue their livelihoods, raise families, and explore common interests. This is pertinent as government, business, media, and education intersect with Americans' everyday lives. Within those spheres, leadership was nurtured from stable institutional norms that guided performance and led to secure futures. The context has shifted abruptly into a constantly churning backdrop. Our ways of being and acting now take place within an environment of dynamic, unsettling realities and relationships. This new normal calls for more expansive and versatile leadership mindsets and behaviors that adapt to both the circumstance and the humanity within it.

The second stress, one that is especially germane to leaders committed to municipal concerns, is civic inertia. Multiple authors and researchers recently noted it as a national concern. The Gallup News released *["Free Time Does Not Predict Americans' Community Involvement"](#)*; the Pew Charitable Trusts' published *["As the U.S. Nears Its 250th Birthday, Dissatisfaction With Democracy Is Widespread"](#)*; the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation reported, *["The Civic Trust: New Study Finds Alarming Lack of Civic Literacy Among Americans"](#)*; the Brookings Institution issued, *["America's Civic Condition: A Glance at the Evidence"](#)*; and *["Citizen Participation and Deliberation,"](#)* the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development authored a chapter in the *["OECD Government at a Glance 2025" and its 2026 updates](#)*; and, finally, *["Public Participation Trends 2026"](#)* was released from GoVocal.

They delineate dimensions of ambivalence:

- **The "Willing but Waiting" Phenomenon:** population segments that express a desire to be involved but fail to take the step into active leadership.

- **Disengagement from Formal Leadership Channels:** a documented shift away from traditional "official" channels toward informal or hybrid forms of engagement, often driven by a lack of trust.
- **The Civic Literacy Crisis:** a lack of foundational knowledge, which creates a barrier to entry for leadership roles.
- **Voter Turnout vs. Deep Engagement:** "high-stakes" national elections see surges in participation, while local leadership and governance roles suffer from chronic neglect.

Ambivalence signals a quiet erosion of the social fabric and prevents collective progress. While not appearing as threatening as VUCA, it has implications for the future. Evidence of American tentativeness toward civic engagement and leadership is characterized by a "participation gap"—a discrepancy between the high value Americans theoretically place on civic duty and their involvement in leadership or governance roles. The net effect is that citizens are stuck in a state of stationary friction that needs a significant, targeted "nudge" to overcome. [Thaler and Sunstein](#) conceived that people tend to stick with their current situation or default choice simply because it is the path of least resistance.

These are forces, circumstances, and mindsets into which Braver Angels aspired to catalyze a heroic shift in ordinary people. It's an invitation and call to action. It avoids cowardice (staying silent or withdrawing from the public square) and recklessness (attacking or dehumanizing opponents). The ultimate outcome is a society of "Braver Citizens" who lead with both conviction and humility. The question is how to acculturate a collective leadership muscle in Braver Angels that is evidence-based, versatile, and practical that can be applied by members, Alliances, working groups, and contributors. What will fire up these people to face VUCA and civic malaise so they not only share desire for a flourishing future but work on it?

Dissecting Dynamic Leadership

Opportunity for motivation to courageous citizenship lies within a reinterpretation of leadership. The context previously described is the environment in which Americans live and work. The constructs that mental models and behavior illuminate are what we believe about leaders' self-concept, relationships to others, values, priorities, and critical behaviors. The authors of [*Dynamic Leadership & Coaching: A Handbook for Developing Exceptional Leaders in Turbulent Times*](#), edited by Bright, Pawlson, Walker, Donovan and Bajwa, explored applications of leadership, in individuals and groups, within elected or appointed, formal or informal roles. They investigated corporate, nonprofit, civic or other groups, at every level of participation. They concluded that the best leaders operate from a suite of frames which complement one another. As the context and the constituents changed, they instinctively adjusted or shifted frames. Leadership development coaches define them as:

- Conscious Leadership, encourages leaders to operate from greater mindfulness and personal responsibility.
- Authentic Leadership, emphasizes being real, consistent and true to oneself.

- Relational Leadership, fosters trust, interpersonal awareness, strong connections, ethical conduct, and emotional intelligence.
- Compassionate Leadership, prioritizes well-being, empathy, responsiveness, and accountability.
- Servant Leadership, is founded on uplifting others, cultivating humanity, service orientation, and humility.
- Positive Leadership, inspires human flourishing, strengths-based practice, collective engagement, and exceptional performance.
- Distributed Leadership, embraces shared ownership, empowerment, diverse perspectives, collaboration, and collective intelligence.
- Transformational Leadership, which leverages idealized influence, motivation, intellectual engagement, individuality, culture, and relationships.

Each frame is distinctive, yet their characteristics overlap. They are threads, woven and rewoven in patterns that support leadership purpose and performance meaningfully. The leadership frames are grounded in transecting competencies, inspiring both vertical and horizontal growth for aspirants. With increasing capacities for self-awareness, self-management, values and character, learning and cognitive development, communication, positive relationship, and inclusiveness, leaders' effectiveness expands towards assembling and inspiring populations to confidently take ownership and transform their worlds.

Self-Awareness, Carden et. al. in [*Defining Self-Awareness in the Context of Adult Development: A Systematic Literature Review*](#), propose “. . . [it]consists of capabilities, which can be developed through focus, evaluation and feedback, and provides individuals with awareness of their internal state (emotions, cognitions, physiological responses), that drives their behaviors (beliefs, values and motivations) and an awareness of how this impacts and influences others.” For leaders within Braver Angels, self-awareness is a vital tool for maintaining the Braver Angels Way in interactions or mediation with others, and especially in high-tension political discourse. Self-aware leaders examine personal values, motivators, intentions, and activators; track their own and others' emotions and physical reactions; see their personal strengths and limitations; observe the need to give and receive support; notice how their actions impact others; and look for self-concepts and conditioned beliefs.

Leaders' internal state directly influences the collaborative ability of everyone, countering adversity. Honing self-awareness involves a continuous cycle, similar to [Chris Argyris](#)' concept of Action Learning which espouses double-loops of performance and reflection, rather than single-loops of action and reaction. It is captured in Table 1.0.

Leadership Stage	Self-Awareness Action	Impact on the Group
Preparation	Checking your own biases before a workshop.	Sets a tone of neutrality.
Engagement	Noticing your own "triggers" during a debate.	Prevents defensive escalations.
Debrief	Reflecting on where you struggled to be empathetic.	Improves future facilitation skills.

Table 1.0 The Self-Awareness Feedback Loop

Self-Management is the facility to intentionally regulate one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors to drive success. Beyond mere discipline, it encompasses a suite of critical competencies—most notably emotional intelligence, adaptability, self-direction, and resilience. Patricia Hinton Walker in [Bright et. al.](#) indicates that, “Self-management is key to working effectively with individuals, groups, members of leadership teams, and the larger organizations and/or communities they serve. Leaders with a strongly developed capability for self-management and the organizations they lead enjoy many benefits . . .”: This is most effectively accomplished when:

- The organization provides an environment of psychological safety, trust, and credibility.
- [People] see their leaders as trustworthy, reliable, and dependable.
- There is a fully empowered [environment] with a culture of accountability.
- Actions are taken proactively, and team members are highly engaged – an adaptive rather than a reactive culture.
- Organizational priorities are aligned with values.
- Clarity about future direction/goals for the team and the organization, and rapid adaptation to making changes that are best for the team/organization.

By developing initiative, goal-focus, motivation, time management, stress management, adaptability, and decision-making leaders increase their capacity for self-management.

Values and Character are the internal compass and moral fiber that determine how a leader exercises power and influences others. They represent distinct psychological and ethical dimensions of a leader's identity. In [Developing Leadership Character](#), Crossan and her co-authors write that while values are the beliefs that motivate us, character is what provides the strength to live those values. To any organization, this means that displaying a "Values Statement" is useless unless leaders possess the character to uphold those values when the stakes are high.

Values are enduring beliefs and principles that guide leaders' inclinations, decisions, and actions. They act as the "why" behind leadership behavior, form a framework for prioritizing and

decision making, and are a means to alignment of personal and organizational congruence. They provide day-to-day modes of high-quality task performance, like honesty and bravery, as well as cultural pillars such as equality and wisdom.

Character is the consistent use of values, no matter the circumstances. Developing character and values in leaders is less about traditional training and more about intentional practice, critical reflection, and systemic reinforcement. Unlike technical skills, acquired through study, character is "forged" through experience. Ways to effectively embed deeper levels of character and values include: simulations or actual experiences that are crucibles which force leaders to examine their decision-making constructs; reflective routines, like After Action Review that evaluate actual incidents; role modeling by mentors which demonstrates traits for proteges; and reward systems that recognize integrity.

Learning and Cognitive Development are linked in the leader's internal growth. Learning, the acquisition of knowledge and skills through study and lived experience, is connected closely to cognitive development, the growth and evolution of the ability to think and reason. Together they create the foundation for high-impact leadership. Because, as previously established, leadership is a dynamic capability and not a static one, it expands as mental complexity grows. By focusing on cognitive growth, leaders don't just "do" leadership tasks; they evolve their internal operating system to handle the increasing volatility and complexity of the modern world.

For this internal growth to manifest as influence, it must be paired with behaviors. [Jack Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory](#) serves as the "engine" for the cognitive shifts that manifest in high-level leadership performance. Although typical learning often focuses on adding new skills to an existing toolkit, transformative learning focuses on changing the "operating system" itself. It elucidates development through a specific process of shifting one's worldview. Mezirow's work clarifies that leadership development isn't just about what a leader knows, but how a leader knows. It transforms leadership from a technical performance into an ongoing process of psychological growth and perspective expansion.

This behavioral dimension is a vital bridge between growing internal complexity and external results; a disciplined application of new mental models through consistent action, communication, and habit formation. Without this shift, a leader may possess a sophisticated "operating system" but remain unable to execute effectively. True development occurs when a leader's outward conduct—their decision-making, emotional regulation, and relational agility—synchronizes with their expanding cognitive capacity, as shown in Table 2.0.

Domain	Skill Developed
Cognitive	Critical thinking, pattern recognition, and strategic visioning.
Learning	Adaptability, "learning agility," and the ability to coach others.
Behavioral	Conflict resolution, active listening, and inclusive communication.

Table 2.0 The Triad of Leader Growth: Cognitive, Learning, and Behavioral

Communication is the primary mechanism through which a leader's internal cognitive growth is visible and actionable. It is the sensory organ of leader development. If cognitive development is the internal "operating system," communication is the bandwidth that determines how much of that intelligence can actually be transmitted to others and the organization. As a leader's cognitive complexity grows, their communication must evolve to match it. Their communication moves from simple information sharing to the creation of a compelling narrative that aligns the organization's "internal operating system" with its external goals.

A leader with the fresh ability to see systems and paradoxes must translate that complexity into clarity for others and serve as "meaning-makers," helping them to understand why certain shifts occur during VUCA. Signaling willingness to exchange messages and listen deeply to others, known as active listening, is an indicator of a leader's readiness to grow and tap lived experiences to fuel further learning. It allows the leader to ingest diverse perspectives, communicate openness and vulnerability, and create the psychological safety necessary for everyone to be free to speak openly. This is proof that the leader has reached a critical level of development.

Positive Relationship is a dynamic of mutual trust, respect, and influence that enhances the capacity of both the leader and the follower to achieve a shared purpose. In [*Leadership as a Relational Phenomenon*](#), Branson and Marra explain that, "... leadership is best understood as a transrelational phenomenon as its essence is to move others, the organisation and the leader to another level of functioning by means of relationships." It is not merely "being liked" or maintaining a pleasant atmosphere; rather, it is a bond that serves as the "conductive wire" for leadership to flow through the group. A positive relationship ensures that team members feel safe to take risks, admit mistakes, and voice dissenting opinions without fear of retribution. Trust is built through the alignment of a leader's words and their behavioral consistency. Cameron in [*Positively Energizing Relationships*](#) submits that honest and appreciative communication is crucial for building positive relationships and fostering well-being.

In positive relationships, the leaders provide direction and also remain open to being influenced by the expertise and insights of followers. This creates a sense of shared ownership. By being empathetic and meeting people where they are, leaders can tailor their interaction to fit the specific needs of each individual. Such relationships are strong enough to withstand—and actually require—candid feedback characterized by "radical candor," in which leaders care personally while challenging others to grow and perform at higher levels. This is not a hostile

stance. It is one that calls for the harmonized state of “presence”, being emotionally, mentally, and physically available, rather than just occupying the same space. It is when leaders’ external signals (how they look and sound) match their internal state (values and expertise), so that others perceive them as a leader worth following.

Positive relationship grows out of a shift from viewing leadership as a series of transactions to viewing it as a chain of connections. Since leadership is dynamic, relational skills must be practiced as intentional behaviors that evolve into a natural part of every leader’s “operating system.” The path to relationship capacity involves skills anchored in internal development that produce behavioral transformation as shown in Table 3.0:

Skill	Internal Growth (Cognitive)	External Result (Behavioral)
Active Listening	Expands mental models via new data.	Team feels heard and valued.
Individualized Support	Develops empathy and complexity	Higher engagement and retention.
Radical Candor	Normalizes paradox and truth-seeking.	Clearer expectations and faster growth.
Presence	Increases emotional regulation.	Builds psychological safety.

Table 3.0 Relational Impact

Inclusiveness is the active commitment to creating an environment in which everyone feels valued, is respected, and is empowered to contribute fully. Leaders who demonstrate inclusiveness cross traditionally accepted organizational boundaries, including position level, education, race and ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexual orientation, not out of necessity but because they truly embrace all people as allies in the organization’s mission.

Bourke and Dillon in their study for Deloitte University Press, [*The Six Signature Traits of Inclusive Leadership*](#), noted that these traits directly correlate with a leader’s ability to drive innovation and manage diverse markets. They argue that inclusive leadership is not just a moral imperative but a core competency for the modern era. They have found it is comprised of six traits: cognizance, curiosity, cultural intelligence, collaboration, commitment, and courage.

Cultivating inclusiveness in leaders involves a transition from unconscious bias to conscious action. It is not a destination but a developmental process of shifting a leader’s internal inner logic to value diversity as a strategic advantage rather than a compliance requirement. Inclusiveness begins with the cognitive ability to function effectively across national, ethnic, and organizational cultures. In the process leaders move beyond mere “awareness” to active cultural intelligence. Developing inclusiveness requires shifting toward a “coaching” stance where the leader prioritizes curiosity over certainty. The most effective way to develop inclusive behavior is to change the decision-making environment. This involves “choice architecture”—designing processes that force leaders to slow down and think more deliberately. Leaders working on

inclusiveness must model vulnerability by assuming they don't have all the answers, admitting their own mistakes, and actively rewarding dissenting opinions.

Forging Ahead via Constructive Development

To integrate the significant imperatives of Braver Angels within the contemporary American context, and effectively apply the eight leadership frameworks, it is useful to comprehend how adults form mental models and adapt in relation to their circumstances. McCauley and her colleagues wrote about the use of Kegan's constructive-developmental theory as described in [*The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development*](#) to advance the understanding of leadership. They explain:

, “. . .[the] theory concerns itself with two primary aspects of development: (a) the organizing principles that regulate how people make sense of themselves and the world (orders of development) and (b) how these regulative principles are constructed and re-constructed over time (developmental movement). An organizing principle itself is subjective, because the person is subject to its capacity to make meaning; it cannot be reflected on itself, since it is the regulative means by which the person engages in reflection.”

Translating theory into practical ways for adults to adapt and grow has been the work of [Kegan and Leahy](#). In [*Overcoming Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization*](#), they help leaders (and, really, everyone) understand why "willpower" hasn't been enough to bring about success in the past. Their process allows leaders to move from blaming external factors as the cause to investigating internal blockers. And they inspire lasting change by rewiring the leaders' underlying belief system rather than just modifying their habits. For Braver Angel's leaders, old and new, to grow with the organization and adopt ways of leading that are compelling and versatile, it is critically important for them to undergo such an exploration of their inner workings.

Courageous Citizenship

The necessity for a well-defined and acculturated model of volunteer leadership that meets Braver Angels' prerequisites and supports the movement, it is essential to view it in terms of its key strategic initiative, courageous citizenship. CEO Maury Giles in the [*Together Now Substack*](#) explains, “Courageous Citizenship is the choice to step out of the outrage cycle, actively connect with people across differences, and work locally to find constructive ways to heal division and build together. . . This can include working with others at the local level through [citizen-led solutions](#) which help communities break free from polarization and gridlock by building trust, forging common-ground solutions, and following through to real results. This process is designed to be accessible and led by citizens themselves.”

Key aspects of courageous citizenship are found in [Braver Angels, n.d.](#) It has recognized that its initial goal of lessening acrimony needed to go beyond respectful dialogue and expand to encourage proactive and productive engagement by citizens to resolve problems at the grassroots. Current BA programs are built on the foundation of:

- Active Engagement: Choosing to connect with those with whom we disagree, rather than retreating to ideological, "tribal" corners.

- The "Braver Angels Way": Treating people with dignity, honesty, and respect while engaging in difficult conversations.
- Constructive Disagreement: Stating views fully while seeking to understand the other side's perspective without labeling them as evil.
- Action Over Reaction: Moving away from outrage and toward practical solutions, taking personal responsibility for bridging divides in local communities.

Translating these ideas for the vast national membership and making them do-able is vested in Braver Angels leaders at the regional and local level. Not unlike other volunteer efforts and movements, motivation may be strong but understanding the path to performance is likely to be uneven. Clarity in defining the organization's mission and vision has begun. The opportunity lies in developing the instinct, capacity and abilities of men and women in these critical roles.

Conclusion

In *Leading in Chaos*, Janni and Fox tell us, "The leadership tasks at hand demand not just a better version of our current selves, but a different level of being. We are being called to bridge the gap between our inner life and our outer responsibilities, moving from a reactive mode of survival to a creative mode of service."

This paper has promoted the idea that leadership is more than strategy, programs, and initiatives. It extends beyond promoting a particular approach to leading. It clarifies multiple ways to lead depending on circumstances, constituents and alliances. Braver Angels is at an inflection point in its organizational trajectory. Pointing its direction are strong and noble principles. Building the muscles to maintain that direction for the long haul to achieve the mission can and must entail a recommitment to leading and a system of leadership development shared across all stakeholders, practiced with consistency, and rewarded conscientiously. Dynamic Leadership holds that promise for Braver Angels.

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