

a love letter

modern

badass

TALES FROM THE
LEADERSHIP FRONT

parissa behnia

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Preface

This is my manifesto. My name is Parissa and I am a business whisperer.

I help leaders and businesses discover and unleash their superpowers, the stuff that defines *their* brilliance. My absolute favorite thing is to stand in front of whiteboards with my clients and ask, “What could the world look like if we created/explored/tested?”

I love creativity and ambiguity. I love pushing past what we believe our limits may be. I love disruption and pattern interrupts. I love change agents and being messy and edgy. Actually, I *really* love being messy and edgy.

I serve clients. I don't please them.

I don't care about how the donuts are made. I trust some soul whose Zone of Genius is donut-making will take care of that. I care about making new fantastic and tasty donut

recipes with my clients that amaze their clients. That's my Zone of Genius.

We're all brilliant diamonds. My brilliance is serving yours, and I'd like to help you channel yours.

How badly do you want to shine?

This book is my love letter to each and every modern badass out there.

Parissa Behnia
Chicago, 2022

IN PRAISE OF "TOO MUCH"

Have you ever been told that you are "too much"? I have.

This book is a love letter to modern badasses. They are high-performing senior leaders and startup founders going eighty miles per hour in a forty-five mile per hour zone who don't always check to see if their teams (or clients) are strapped in for the ride, let alone interested in going to that destination.

They are pattern interrupters, creative change agents, and innovators who usually ask, "Why not?" instead of asking, "Why?" They don't "make the donuts" so much as make new donut recipes. They have audacious goals in mind that make people look at them in both fear and awe, separately and simultaneously. They are of high value to any company, whether their own or someone else's.

They love creativity and ambiguity. They love pushing past what the rest of us believe our limits may be. They love disruption. They love being messy and edgy. They really love being messy and edgy. That's practically another food group.

They are like well-meaning bulls in a china shop. They are creators at heart and don't mean to break as many dishes as they do, but the fact is that they do break dishes. Frequently. But let's face it, a lot of that china was ugly and out of date anyway.

How are modern badasses typically described? These labels may seem familiar to you: bold, aggressive, colorful, creative, innovative, brash, loud, difficult to manage, disruptive, contrary, etc.

Most people think it's better to ignore or sideline this type of leader. It's tempting to treat them as if they were lepers rather than trying to connect or engage with them. The truth is, modern badasses can have an outsized impact on all of us when they create new ways to engage and enroll clients, peers, and teams instead of repelling them. They have the capacity to be seen, heard, understood, and respected for who they are as opposed to hiding themselves and playing a smaller game to suit someone else's taste.

No, this isn't putting all the responsibility on them—they aren't broken or need to change. There are three sides to every story: one, the other, and the truth. The blame game is easy to play by believing that the person on the other

side of the table needs to change to suit you. They don't. What is available to everyone, modern badass or not, is the ability to create new ways to be seen, heard, understood, and respected; this is a matter of choice.

Modern badasses include Sara Blakely, Ida B. Wells, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Steve Jobs, Thomas Edison, Shonda Rhimes, Harriet Tubman, Sunny Bonnell, Ashleigh Hansberger, Madame CJ Walker, Shirley Chisholm, John Lewis, Martin Luther King Jr., Banksy, Grant Achatz, Susan B. Anthony, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Muhammad Ali, Kasia Urbaniak, Alexander Hamilton, Lt. Gen. Russel Honoré (retired), Reshma Saujani, Ray Kroc, Sepideh Nasiri, Shannon Downey, Wangari Maathai, and many others.

Not attracting or enrolling others comes with a cost. In its ongoing "State of the American Workplace" report, Gallup shows us that employees leave leaders, not jobs or companies. And there are a number of great books and significant articles in the *Harvard Business Review* and other journals that talk about the hard and soft costs of bad and ineffectual leadership. Now is the time to have this conversation about creating strong leaders and stronger relationships.

Why me? Time for a confession: I'm one of you. I'm a modern badass.

What Makes Someone A Modern Badass?

There are fourteen traits I've uncovered in my work as a coach and advisor to modern badasses.

You know your bright side and embrace your dark side.

These days, we hear quite a bit about strengthening our strengths, also known as your bright side. Makes perfect sense. However, modern badasses are aware of and embrace their dark sides too. You understand *the dark side has value*, and can be tamed and leveraged to your advantage.

There's no crying in baseball. It's an awesome quote from an entertaining movie, *A League Of Their Own*. It applies to badass leaders too, because they face adversity head-on. You can get frustrated by unexpected outcomes (um, you are human), but you've never counted yourself out. You have a ton of courage and grit.

You sometimes feel lonely. You have super high standards for yourself and others. The problem is that you've never shared how much harder you are on yourself than on the people around you. You've never shared how often your negative highlight reel gets replayed in your head and the words you use to punish yourself for your failures. That means you've alienated yourself (unintentionally, of course).

You crave connection with people. You can leap tall business goals in a single bound and yet want to feel like you have your crew. You want a community with people who champion and challenge you because they think so

much of you but you don't always know how to create that community. The loneliness you may feel is like a leg shackle you would like to break.

You know how to FITFO. Modern badasses always figure it the flip out. If you can't solve something one way, you solve it another way. You live for challenges and puzzles—the more complex, the better. You have a love-hate relationship with being stumped by something.

You are super creative. There's nothing better than standing in front of a whiteboard and asking, "What is the opportunity for us here?" You see new possibilities and solutions better than many of your peers. The idea of possibility gets you excited every single time without fail.

You have Spidey sense. Your intuition is off the charts. Your "knowing" is a gift you leverage regularly. And when you remember to use it with your IQ, no one can stop you or anyone who works with you.

You suffer from self-doubt. You're objectively one of the most talented people around, but you frequently suffer from imposter syndrome. You keep asking yourself if you have what it takes to continue to propel forward.

You are a disruptor. You challenge norms. You don't make the donuts so much as you make new donut recipes. You're not afraid to tell it like it is, and you're not scared to interrupt patterns. You don't disrupt for disruption's sake though. You direct your energy toward helping your team and clients get to where they need to go.

You have a quick wit. Your humor is sharp, sometimes wicked. You have a keen sense of the absurd, which helps you overcome challenges as they may present to you. You can be working the hardest you have ever worked, and yet you can find something to laugh about too.

Your loyalty game is off the charts. You stick your neck out for things you believe in: your business, your team, your clients, and your values (especially your values). You know your people can fend for themselves, but you take leadership responsibility seriously. Their peaks and valleys are your peaks and valleys too.

It's hard for you to ask for help. Being independent is a double-edged sword. You get a lot of stuff done on your own, but it's really hard for you to receive help even though you know that pride comes before a fall.

You keep it real. You're easily bored. And it's patently obvious when you're bored. You can't phone it in as other people do. Your dissatisfaction is evident if you're reeled into work you're not passionate about. If you're not passionate about it, you want no part of it.

You sometimes go eighty miles per hour in a forty-five mile per hour zone. You're so passionate about the things that engage you that you press the pedal all the way down. You feel awesome when your team is with you, but often your engine is much stronger than the team's engine. They may not know the destination or may not be interested in it.

Consistency Is Key

A contradiction is one of the most frustrating things for these leaders to experience. On the one hand, they're looked to be that high-value, high-performing leader: that creator, that innovator, that visionary, that disruptor, etc. And yet on the other hand, it can sometimes feel like they're being told that while the powers that be want all of those things, the badasses have to change, have to conform, have to be other than who they are at their core. It can feel like rejection. It can feel like they are being sidelined. The temptation can be to just double down, consequences be damned. And sometimes the consequences are damning.

How damning? It makes many people think these leaders do not care about how they affect others and aren't interested in playing nice in the proverbial company sandbox. But what's true is that these leaders crave connection with others but don't always know how to co-create it. The more disconnecting, disruptive moments can live as a negative highlight reel on constant repeat in their minds.

The good news is that there's another way. You can be that badass leader *and* create a connection without compromising your values or fundamentals. Badass leaders can and do create ways to enroll and engage others on a shared, larger goal. It's not redemption as they've committed no crime. Instead, this is about a deeper and more meaningful understanding that becomes available to all of us.

The Elephant In The Room

There is a subset of modern badasses who are rather intense. Some people may call them jerks or use blue language to describe them. I call them “3D” leaders (difficult, dismissive, and divisive). They have a habit of turning everything into gold but leaving collateral damage behind. So they are still of high value but they tarnish their value the more their behavior goes unchecked.

Let’s be abundantly clear that 3D leaders do *not* include narcissists, toxic leaders, or predators. They aren’t people like Vishal Garg, the CEO of Better.com, who laid off nine hundred employees on Zoom right before Christmas 2021; he accused them of “stealing” from colleagues and customers by being unproductive and only working two hours a day. He apologized for the damage his action had done the next day but it was too late.

Adam Neumann, the former WeWork CEO, isn’t a 3D leader either. He could not crystallize a path to WeWork profitability despite millions of dollars worth of outside investments. Perhaps more egregious than wasting money, he demonstrated numerous instances of poor executive judgment, e.g., borrowing from the company while also charging rent for properties he owned, putting relatives in positions of power, etc.¹

The invitation to you is to see a 3D leader’s humanity and not sideline or dismiss them out of hand, particularly during the times when they are unable to articulate their

own humanity and vulnerability. These people have a lot to offer us once we choose to stop treating them in 2D.

Aesop's Fable Of Androcles And The Lion

Do you remember Aesop's story of Androcles and the Lion?

Once there was an escaped slave named Androcles who ran into the forest to get away from the guards chasing him. In his desperate search for a hiding place, he came upon what looked like a fearsome lion, which made him turn tail (pardon the pun) and head in the opposite direction. And yet, something about the lion made Androcles turn around and approach. As he got close, the lion extended his paw, which was swollen and bleeding. Androcles soon saw a thorn that was the cause of the lion's pain. He removed the thorn and wrapped the lion's paw so it would heal. Afterward, the lion took care of Androcles and brought him meat daily to live.

The story goes on about Androcles' and the lion's eventual capture and how Androcles' sentence for escaping was a public spectacle in an arena. His punishment was to be thrown to the very same lion he healed and befriended for the lion to kill. The lion was released into the arena, where it ran in and roared while hunting for its prey. The lion stopped in its tracks because it recognized Androcles. Instead of attacking, he fawned over him.

This book isn't about changing who you are, whether you are a modern badass or a 3D leader. You can't turn a mighty lion into a docile sheep. It's just not possible. What you can do is to remove the thorn, much like Androcles removed the lion's thorn. This book is about working on yourself and with others to remove the thorn together and channel your awesomeness.

If anyone has ever said working with you was like "hugging a cactus," I celebrate you. If anyone has told you that you were "too much," I applaud you. If you've felt less than because you believed you were "too much," I honor you. I celebrate you if you've ever chosen to play a smaller game because you were tired of hearing "too much" and being alienated.

It's not that modern badasses are "too much," but we have not created the conditions and the environments where we present in the best light. So instead of having our genius sidelined by being told we're too disruptive, bold, brash, etc., let's create hearing and knowing that we're "just what the doctor ordered."