

# LEADERS

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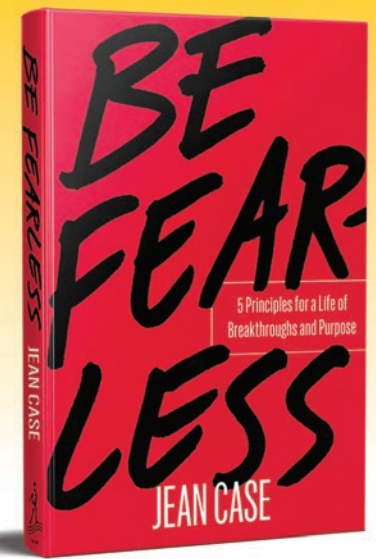
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# Be Fearless



An Interview with Jean Case,  
Chairman, National Geographic Society, and CEO, Case Foundation

**EDITORS' NOTE** Jean Case knows a thing or two about being fearless, making big bets, being bold and taking risks. Whether it is in her role as the first female Chairman of the National Geographic Society in its 130-year history of global exploration, as CEO of the Case Foundation, which invests in people and ideas that can change the world, or her extensive career in the private sector, including her leadership role at America Online, Inc. where she was a senior executive directing the marketing and branding as AOL brought the internet to the masses, fearlessness has always been a core tenet of Case's work.



Jean Case

As a philanthropist, investor and internet and impact investing pioneer, Case advocates for the importance of embracing a more fearless approach to innovation and bringing about transformational breakthroughs. In addition to the roles noted above, Case currently serves on the boards of Accelerate Brain Cancer Cure (ABC2) and the White House Historical Association, as well as on the advisory boards of the Brain Trust Accelerator Fund, Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society and Georgetown University's Beeck Center for Social Impact and Innovation. She was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2016 and has received honorary degrees from Indiana University and George Mason University. *Be Fearless: 5 Principles for a Life of Breakthroughs and Purpose*, is her first book.

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** The Case Foundation ([casefoundation.org](http://casefoundation.org)), created in 1997 by digital pioneers Jean and Steve Case, is a diverse and dynamic institution by design. It creates programs and invests in people and organizations that embrace the *Be Fearless* principles and harness the best impulses of entrepreneurship, innovation, technology and collaboration to drive exponential impact. In particular, it focuses on catalyzing movements and collaborating to bring forward ideas that have transformative potential and can lead to uncovering new, more impactful ways of addressing chronic social challenges.

Today, the Case Foundation is driving at two major movements—impact investing and inclusive entrepreneurship. As a movement catalyzer, it is taking a fearless approach to social innovation to tip individuals and organizations from good intentions to meaningful actions. Within both movements, the Case Foundation sees boundless potential to get all oars in the water to help solve the most pressing social problems.

**Will you discuss your involvement with National Geographic and how you define its mission?**

At National Geographic, we believe in the power of exploration, science, storytelling and education to change the world. We get to work with fearless men and women all over the world who are often on the frontlines of the unknown.

It has been a terrific experience to work with this 130-year-old organization that, in my view, is more relevant today than it has ever been before.

**Will you highlight the innovation that is taking place at National Geographic and how the organization has evolved in order to remain relevant?**

Although pictures of our founders show them all looking quite Victorian and serious, the truth is that they were some pretty radical change makers themselves. Innovation and risk taking has been in the DNA of National Geographic Society from its founding.

We continue to push that innovation envelope in a number of ways. Baked into our business model from its beginning, National Geographic Society is really a social enterprise. We had a joint venture with 21st Century Fox, which is now being acquired by Disney who will be our new partner, that has contributed to our commercial businesses.

From that, we have a sustainable revenue that comes from memberships and licensing every year to help fund the National Geographic Society.

It's a very sustainable and innovative business model, and I like to say that we were the first social enterprise, because our social model started 130 years ago.

**What was your vision and mission in creating the Case Foundation?**

Our mission is pretty straightforward— we invest in people and ideas that can change the world.

We just talked about National Geographic; it's clear that the continuity that applies to National Geographic is one that we want to apply to the Case Foundation as well and, at a broader level, it has been very consistent through the years.

However, every three to five years we will tilt our focus to new initiatives and new opportunities. We work to inspire, educate and activate people out there around two movements— impact investing and inclusive entrepreneurship.

Playing that catalyst role requires that we remain engaged with things for somewhere between three to five years. There have been a few exceptions where it goes longer than that.

Another element that we have believed in since our founding as a new organization is collaboration. As a foundation undertaking large initiatives, we require that we have a public sector partner and a business partner, be that corporate or start-ups, as well as a nonprofit partner. Hopefully, other philanthropies will also play a role with us to try to achieve impact at scale.

**Is multi-level collaboration and finding the right partners a key to creating impact?**

Yes, no question. When we build a table of different perspectives and skills and capacities, it's not surprising that we can go a lot further faster.

It doesn't matter to us whether we get any credit or branding around these objectives— what matters most is that we put together a rich and diverse collaboration that covers all the bases to move things to scale quickly.

**Are the philanthropic programs for the Case Foundation metric driven and is it difficult to put metrics in place for this type of work?**

When we make the decision to invest or make something a key focus of the foundation it starts with the question, "What does success look like?"

Sometimes, we know we're going to be able to measure our progress toward the objective with precision. Success is also not just measured by reaching those metrics, but also about the progress we're making in driving our objective toward becoming a reality.

It was easy to see the impact of our HIV/AIDS or malaria work in the early days because the numbers make the broader impact the movement has had quite clear. But then there are some areas where it is less clear, and we're still comfortable with that. We feel that if we are working to create conditions as a first step for a movement to take off, it will be harder sometimes to establish those metrics.

We also had to mature a little as an organization. We are 21 years old, but there have been some things in which we invested in the early days where I thought it really didn't work. It turns out that we just needed to give it some time and, 10 years later, we could see the dramatic effect of some of our earlier investments. It just took time for conditions to come together and for things to move.

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That is one reality that I have learned a lot about – you have to be careful not to just measure the here and now – if we're taking on big things, we have to evaluate them across the spectrum of time.

**When you evaluate taking on those big things, is it important to stay within certain key areas of focus to make sure you have the most impact?**

We begin by asking the question, “what can we uniquely bring to this objective?” If there are plenty of others that can go in and play the role, then we wouldn't necessarily be uniquely suited to jump in.

We are sector, cause and issue agnostic – we always look at the big picture of where we can uniquely play a role to catalyze and help drive a movement forward.

**What interested you to write your book, *Be Fearless*, and who is the target audience for it?**

The book is a call to action and a playbook for anyone looking to build a life of breakthroughs and purpose.

At some point in their lives, most people have a dream, but they can get stuck by a belief that they don't have what it takes to pursue it.

This book demystifies things a little bit through storytelling and proves the point that ordinary people, anyone from anywhere, can do extraordinary things.

I'm a great example of that. Anyone who looked at my early life would never have predicted that the opportunities would come along to try to make a difference in the ways that I have.

**Do you attribute that to finding the right mentors and what are some of the other factors that led to your success?**

I'm very careful to give the credit to many people who, through spirit and generosity of resources, have helped me find opportunities in life.

The book tries to demystify the idea that it takes genius, wealth, or a powerful network. I try to accomplish this through telling the stories of unlikely heroes.

Too often, when someone breaks through or finds success, the story about what happened between when they started out and when they found success gets sanitized.

I try to peel back the onion on some better-known success stories to make it clear that it was not a smooth ride from the start to finding

success. I also tell some stories of people that haven't been heard before. However, they're important stories because, on the surface, it might appear that these people didn't have anything working for them that would allow them to do something big, but I make it clear how they went about it and embraced many aspects of the Be Fearless ethos.

The framework of the book is based on five principles that we uncovered about six years ago at the Case Foundation. We have been sharing these principles across sectors for a number of years now. Many people told us that more people need to hear this message and it was because of this that we made the decision to write the book.

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**The book is a call to action and a playbook for anyone looking to build a life of breakthroughs and purpose.**

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I feel that now, more than ever before, people can be overcome with fear and discouragement. It's a clarion call to go out there and be bold and take risks and take a big bet on the future.

I find that most people have ideas – they just don't have a clue about how to get started.

**As you dove deeper into your research for the book, were you surprised at what you found?**

I totally was, but I love stories and I have been so privileged in this life I have. We invest in people and ideas that can change the world, so no matter where I am in the world and who I meet, I'm always interested in the stories of people.

When I wrote the book, I went back to the town I was born in and stayed by myself at an Airbnb for a few weeks. I got up every morning and wrote until I went to bed at night.

I was newly inspired each day as I would write these stories and, of course, I found that there were many more stories than those that could make it into the book.

I love each and every story and they're in the book for a reason.

**You mentioned five principles which were developed from the work you have done over a lifetime of experiences. Will you discuss those principles that are so key to your philosophy and thinking?**

Not surprisingly, the first is to make big bets and make history. The idea is not to settle for incremental change.

As I said earlier, a lot of people have big ideas but they lack a playbook or framework to guide them on how to take those forward.

The second principle is to be bold and take risks. Our brains are wired to avoid risk, but if people are trying to do something new and innovating on the front lines, they have to recognize that they're taking risks and they have to get comfortable with that risk. I encourage people to look at this almost as R&D. When we adopt this point of view, we naturally recognize that everything is not always going to work out, but we can always pick up, learn and move forward.

That leads to the third principle, which is to make failure matter. If you examine the life of anyone who has achieved something extraordinary, you'll find a story of failure somewhere along the path. Sometimes you really have to look for it, because too often as people advance through life they sanitize their stories, making it sound as if everything was carefully planned.

The fourth principle is to reach beyond your bubble and build unlikely partnerships. This is about building a diverse table and putting people around us who have different skills and perspectives. In an era when so many



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people are retreating to their corners, the fearless change makers have to walk out into the center of the arena and beckon all the others to join them.

Companies that are doing that today are outperforming those that are not diverse or bringing a diverse table. There is a lot of compelling evidence around this particular principle no matter which sector one is looking at. It happens to be true across time and across sectors.

The last, but not least, principle is to let urgency conquer fear. Today, many people feel a sense of urgency or a need for a change, and often this will become the difference between whether they can dig deep to do something difficult or not. We can look away and let complacency take hold, or we can use these moments and let urgency conquer fear to make a difference. I tell a number of different stories about people who, in a moment where they felt a sense of urgency, were able to break through.

As I talk to people in the U.S. and around the world, I hope that they will be able to use this book as a tool to help them get out and create the change they want to see.

### **Are these principles that can be taught or are you born with these abilities?**

There is a myth that entrepreneurs are born and can't be developed, and we tend to think of entrepreneurs as great risk-takers.

I literally put tips in the book for how to check yourself on many of these things. I've learned that one benefit of getting older is having the ability to step back and learn from your experiences.

For many years, I didn't realize the power of intentionality and of recognizing the level of one's risk tolerance. Once I did, I came to understand the value of putting an action plan in place to get more comfortable with risk or figuring out how to take a little more risk to move an idea forward. I've created some exercises in the book that refer to this.

These things most definitely can be taught – it's not just that I believe it; I have actually seen it.

In the six years we have been doing this work, I have had people come back to me to tell me how these principles have inspired and motivated them to make a difference.

### **How important is it for leading companies today to be purpose-driven and do you feel that companies have a responsibility to create a bigger purpose than just the bottom line?**

I do. Impact investing is an area we have been deeply engaged in. Last year, the number of assets going into impact investing nearly doubled.

We have a new generation of investors comprised of a diverse group of younger people and women who see capital as a powerful tool to change the world.

We have to require more than just financial returns from those we invest in to allow purpose to become the driving focus.

We are deeply engaged in this work and are big believers in the potential of a new way of looking at companies and capital more broadly and asking those companies how they can do more.

The best and the brightest of talent will be drawn to these companies and CEOs know that. They know that, in order to retain their talent, they have to be a good corporate actor and hopefully focus on more than just the bottom line.

I'm most excited about this new generation of companies, many of which I talk about in the book. Social impact is in the DNA behind these companies.

In the book, I share the story of Warby Parker, which is a great brand and a very successful impact company, and Greyston Bakery whose mission says, "We don't hire people to bake brownies; we bake brownies to hire people." Its open hiring policies have been transformative.

I use many examples of this new generation of companies and this new generation of investors, employees and consumers who are demanding more.

### **There is dialogue today around the opportunities for women in business and leveling the playing field. Do you feel this issue is being addressed effectively?**

I don't think enough focus has been put on it. We have really tried to shine a light on the jarring data. Last year, just 10 percent of investment capital went to women and only 1 percent of companies have an African-American founder.

I tell stories throughout the book of women entrepreneurs. The one I purposefully put right in the front of the book is Madam C.J. Walker, who lived 100 years ago and was born the daughter of slaves. She went on to build a great company and became what many recognize as the first female self-made millionaire in

the United States and a great philanthropist. In Indianapolis, there are buildings that honor her name.

I like to tell women that are thinking about taking a business forward, if Madam C.J. Walker could take what she had to deal with 100 years ago and make a phenomenal success, they can too.

We have all faced challenges and continue to, but the clarion call in the book is to face down your fears and not let failures get you down or cause you to stop. Instead, be inspired by great stories of people who faced many more challenges than many of us ever will and still found a way to break through.

### **What advice do you give young people about finding and following their passions and building sustainable careers?**

As the stories from my book illustrate time and again, great things don't come from comfort zones. People have to be willing to become a little uncomfortable and to take risk and overcome failure in pursuit of a big idea or even in taking the next step in pursuit of their careers. It's really important to recognize – and there is overwhelming compelling data on this – that failure is success in progress.

Almost anyone I've ever spoken to who had success will say the road to success was filled with potholes that they had to get past. If young people could embrace this reality, they're off to the races.

### **During the process of putting the book together, was there time for reflection and were you able to take some moments to appreciate all that you have accomplished?**

I share many personal vignettes and stories, even though the focus is on other people's stories. I do share quite a number of stories and critical moments in my own life including some disappointments and moments when I wasn't sure what the future would bring, both as a young person and into my adulthood.

I also remind the readers that although I'm writing a book called *Be Fearless*, I never thought of myself as a fearless person. What I have developed the skill to do is stare down fear and move past it.

That is the true spirit of being fearless. I tried to be super honest about that in the book and bring my own fears and failures into it and share with readers what I found helped me overcome them. ●