

A FREE GUIDE FROM TRACY RYAN

Five Lessons for Leading When the Path Isn't Clear

What 14 years of fighting for my daughter's life taught me about courage, clarity and leading through the unthinkable.

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The day the map burned

On June 23, 2013, my daughter Sophie was 8½ months old when she was diagnosed with an optic pathway glioma, a brain tumor. Her doctors were honest with us: “The only treatment we have is chemotherapy, and it’s not a cure.” The goal was to one day stop the tumor from growing.

Sophie had a 90–95% chance of survival and an 85% chance the tumor would keep coming back. In a single afternoon, the life I had planned stopped existing. No map. No playbook.

It took seven years of treatment to get her tumor to stop growing. We were given seven precious years off. This year, it began growing again. Along the way, I learned that the treatment protocols for children like Sophie had barely advanced in 40 years.

That has been the hardest, most clarifying education of my life. I’ve led companies, raised millions, stood at the White House and spoken on stages around the world. But everything I know about leadership, I learned in hospital hallways, at our kitchen table and in the moments I had to choose to keep going.

You may be facing a diagnosis, a layoff, a failing launch, a team in crisis or a future that suddenly looks blank. Whatever your burned map looks like, these five lessons are for you.

With love and grit, Tracy

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Draw the next mile, not the whole map

01

THE MOMENT

When Sophie was diagnosed, I wanted a ten-year plan. What I had was a phone, a stack of medical reports and a baby starting chemotherapy. I couldn't see the whole road. I could only see the next mile, so that's what I planned for.

Clarity doesn't come before action. It comes because of it.

THE LESSON

Uncertainty paralyzes leaders who wait for the full picture. You don't need the whole map to move. You need the next right step, the courage to take it, and the humility to adjust once you can see a little further.

TRY THIS

- Write down the one decision that would move you forward this week.
- Ask: "What do I know for sure today?" Lead from that, not from fear of what you don't know.
- Set a 30-day horizon. Plan it in detail, then let the rest stay blurry.

Question “the way it’s always been done”

02

THE MOMENT

Chemotherapy was keeping Sophie alive, but it wasn’t a cure. Then I learned that the treatment protocols for children like her had barely advanced in 40 years. I started asking who was working on something better. A mom with a marketing background ended up in research labs, partnering with scientists and becoming a co-inventor on a patent.

“The way it’s always been done” is not the same as the best that can be done.

THE LESSON

Respecting experts and accepting the status quo are not the same thing. Great leaders honor what works today and still ask: Why is it done this way? Who is trying something new? What would it take to do better? Progress starts when someone refuses to treat “how it’s always been” as the final answer.

TRY THIS

- Name one process, belief or rule in your world that hasn’t changed in years.
- Ask three people outside your usual circle how they would approach it.
- Reframe the question from “Can we?” to “What would it take?”

Your story is your strategy

03

THE MOMENT

Within a month of Sophie's diagnosis, a documentary began following our family. I had a choice: hide the hard parts or let people see them. I chose to tell the truth, without polish. That honesty opened doors to Netflix, National Geographic, Capitol Hill and the White House. Strangers became supporters, and supporters became a movement.

The truth, told well, moves people further than any pitch.

THE LESSON

People don't follow plans. They follow people. Your honesty about what's hard is not a liability; it's what makes others trust you and want to help. Vulnerability, shared with purpose, is one of the most powerful leadership tools you have.

TRY THIS

- Write your story in three sentences: where you were, what broke, what you're fighting for.
- Share one honest moment with your team, investors or community this month.
- Notice who leans in. That's your audience.

Build the team you can lean on

04

THE MOMENT

No one survives a crisis alone, and I didn't. In 2019 my husband, Josh, stepped home full-time so Sophie would never have to fight without one of us beside her. Brilliant scientists, friends and a community of thousands carried us when we couldn't carry ourselves.

Leadership isn't carrying everything. It's knowing who to hand things to.

THE LESSON

Strong leaders don't do everything. They build a circle they can trust, ask for help early and let others carry part of the load. Asking for help isn't a sign that you're failing. It's how you keep going long enough to win.

TRY THIS

- Map your circle: who supports you at work, at home and in your heart?
- Name one task you'll hand off this week, and to whom.
- Tell one person exactly what you need. Be specific.

Protect the spark

05

THE MOMENT

Through 11 recurrences, Sophie has never lost her sense of humor. She'll tell you a dad joke in a hospital waiting room and wear her honorary Trader Joe's Crew Manager pin like a medal. Her joy isn't a distraction from the fight. It's the fuel for it.

Joy isn't the reward for getting through it. It's how you get through it.

THE LESSON

You can't lead well from empty. In long seasons of pressure, joy, rest and connection aren't luxuries; they're strategy. Protect the things that refill you, and protect them for your team, too. People who feel human do their bravest work.

TRY THIS

- Name three small things that reliably lift you. Put one on your calendar this week.
- Celebrate one win, however small, with your team or family.
- Ask your people: "What's one thing that would make this season easier?"

YOUR TURN

Draw your next mile

Type your answers in the boxes, or print this page and write them in. Come back to it whenever the path gets foggy.

1. What does my burned map look like right now?

2. What is the one decision that moves me forward this week?

3. Which “no” am I ready to challenge, and who else could I ask?

4. What is my story in three sentences?

5. Who is on my team, and what will I hand off?

6. What protects my spark, and when will I make time for it?



ABOUT TRACY

Tracy Ryan

Tracy Ryan is a keynote speaker, brand strategist, four-time founder and pediatric cancer advocate. She has spoken on 200+ stages worldwide, raised \$11M+ for her companies and science, and been a five-time invited guest of the White House. Her family's story has been featured by Netflix, National Geographic and VICE.

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Help us fund research for children who need better options.

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