

Ten Enduring Lessons of Technology, Creativity and Moral Imagination

Charity Dean

In a moment marked by global instability and rapid technological change, Charity Dean calls for courageous, mission-driven leadership rooted in honesty and moral conviction. Drawing on the concept of “founder mode” and inspired by the example of America’s founding leaders, she explores what it means to take bold risks in service of the nation.

Lesson 1: America Needs “America-preneurs”

In her first lesson, Charity Dean introduces the term “America-preneur” to describe a new kind of builder — someone driven not by profit or status, but by moral urgency and a commitment to serve the country. Drawing from her own journey, she recounts how, as California’s second-ranking public health official during the early days of COVID-19, she became acutely aware of a glaring national weakness: the absence of a real-time, machine learning–driven, federated data platform capable of providing early warning for biological threats. Despite having no background in business or technology, she felt compelled to address the gap herself. The solution didn’t exist — and no one else seemed to be building it. So she did.

Dean frames this call to action within what she calls “founder mode,” a term popularized by Airbnb’s Brian Chesky to describe a raw, disruptive, hands-on style of leadership often necessary in moments of institutional paralysis. She argues that America itself is in founder mode — a moment like 1775, when the existing tools, systems, and assumptions no longer suffice. Just as George Washington once founded the Navy without prior experience, Dean insists that leadership today means stepping into risk and discomfort, even without credentials, if that’s what the mission demands.

Her transition from physician to defense tech CEO was not without struggle. When trying to raise venture capital in 2022, in the midst of a market freeze, she was repeatedly told she didn’t “fit” into any existing category — not health, not cybersecurity. But in that resistance, she recognized the deeper truth: she was building an entirely new category. She had to simultaneously invent the product, explain the vision, and reshape her own identity. At one critical moment, she was offered full funding on the condition that she abandon the software vision and pivot to consulting. With only days left before running out of money, she refused — choosing faithfulness to the mission over financial safety.

Dean closes this lesson with a powerful contrast between comfort and conviction. Founders — and by extension, America-preneurs — are often asked to choose between the known and the necessary. She chose the mission. And three days before payroll ran out, she secured \$35 million in funding to carry it forward. For her, lesson one is not just about starting companies. It’s about being willing to build what doesn’t exist — not for personal glory, but because the nation needs it, and no one else is doing it.

Lesson 2: Founder Mode Demands Radical Risk-Taking

In her second lesson, Charity Dean explores the nature of risk in founder mode, challenging the assumption that the boldest risks are the most dangerous. Instead, she flips the question: is it riskier to build something entirely new and potentially fail — or to not build it at all, and leave the nation vulnerable? She argues that the greater risk lies in inaction, particularly as America faces adversaries who are rapidly advancing in AI and emerging technologies. The stakes are not theoretical. In her words, the very world order that has governed the past 70 to 80 years could be reset if the U.S. fails to act decisively.

Dean lays out the full spectrum of risks that founders — and leaders — must be willing to absorb: political risk, career risk, reputational risk, cultural resistance, and technical failure. She describes herself as being willing to “commit career suicide” and disrupt ossified systems, even when it means becoming unpopular or looking foolish. What anchors her through these risks is a clear sense of purpose: the urgency of building a capability the nation needs, before someone else builds it for nefarious ends.

This isn't just a message for startup founders. Dean extends the challenge to everyone, regardless of their sector. Whether you're in government, education, science, or private industry, the AI revolution is already reshaping everything — and she believes its impact will exceed that of the Industrial Revolution. Her plea is simple but piercing: don't ignore what's in your soul to build, just because you're afraid. If you have the blueprint in your head or the vision on your whiteboard, don't hesitate. She did just that — sketching the early version of her product in colored markers and sending it to the Pentagon — and encourages others to do the same.

She closes this lesson by describing a moment that crystallized her conviction. At a national security gathering in D.C., the U.S. Secretary of the Navy — a former tech leader — publicly declared that he was taking his organization into “founder mode.” The room erupted in applause. For Dean, it was confirmation that radical risk-taking in service of the mission is not only necessary — it's contagious. In founder mode, the moral weight of *not* building can outweigh the fear of failure, and in this moment of global instability, she argues, that risk calculus must shape how we lead.

Lesson 3: You Can Only Build Boldly Within a Team of Teams

In her third lesson, Charity Dean emphasizes that bold innovation is only possible within the right team structure—what she calls a “team of teams.” Referencing General Stanley McChrystal's *Team of Teams*, she explains that high-stakes missions in uncertain environments can't be led through traditional hierarchies or lone-hero leadership. The kind of agility and courage required to create new categories or shift national capabilities demands collaborative, decentralized networks of deeply skilled people who trust each other and move quickly.

Dean describes her own experience leading a company full of people much more technically capable than she is—PhDs in math and machine learning engineers—despite failing calculus twice herself. Her job wasn't to be the expert but to recognize the mission, take the risk, and earn the right to bring in the experts by leading with conviction. When she first wrote the product requirements document for a platform now being scaled across the Indo-Pacific, it began not with code or specs but with colored markers on a whiteboard, driven by intuition and a deep sense of purpose.

The importance of team structure, she argues, becomes even clearer when looking at how warfare has evolved. Dean draws from McChrystal's experience leading U.S. forces against al Qaeda in Iraq, where traditional top-down command structures were losing against decentralized terrorist networks that were faster, more adaptive, and fully mission-owned by the individuals on the ground. Translating this to today's AI revolution, Dean argues that many American institutions—like the military and government—are still operating like World War II organizations, while adversaries have already adopted more agile, networked models.

She closes the lesson with a sobering reminder: the same technologies that promise breakthroughs in AI and biotech have also birthed a darker realm of tools that can be used maliciously. As warfare increasingly includes biology and information systems, America must not only innovate quickly but build teams that can outlearn and out-adapt the threats we face. To do that, she insists, requires humility, collaboration, and a shared commitment to the mission—led not by lone geniuses, but by fearless, purpose-driven teams.

Lesson 4: We Do Not Build for Ourselves

In her fourth and final lesson, Charity Dean emphasizes that the mission must always be bigger than the individual. The work she is doing—building new technology for national security—is not for personal recognition, financial gain, or even for the success of her company. It's about serving a greater purpose. She makes it clear that her efforts, and the risks she has taken, are on behalf of the nation. Drawing on a quote from John Adams—*"If good men decline it, others will not"*—she frames her leadership as a form of public service, motivated by duty rather than ambition.

Dean recounts the moment five years earlier when she resigned from a prestigious and stable government role to follow the quiet but persistent call she felt in her soul. She was a single mother with three sons, no financial cushion, and no prior experience in technology or business. Still, she walked away from a secure career path—even turning down a lucrative offer from a major tech company—because she knew the vision in her heart needed to be built independently, in a way that would best serve national security. That choice, she says, wasn't logical. It was faithful.

The risks have been real. From scraping together rent money to wiring \$22 million during the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank with trembling hands, Dean paints a vivid picture of the emotional and practical cost of radical obedience to a mission. And yet, these raw moments are, in her view, the necessary price of building something that has never existed—and that the country desperately needs. Her vision has since been validated: her company has been selected as a Defense Innovation Unit "prime," developing capabilities for the Indo-Pacific region that were previously unavailable to the U.S. military.

Ultimately, this lesson is not just about her own story, but a call to others. Dean urges her audience to listen to the ideas tugging at their sleeves—the quiet directives planted in their hearts—and to be courageous enough to act, even when they feel completely unqualified. The path forward may be unclear, but if undertaken with humility and resolve, it can lead to outcomes far beyond what we imagine. "We don't do this alone," she reminds us. "We do it with a team of teams, with mentors and allies, and with a calling that makes the risk worth it."