

It was nearly midnight. Two of us representing KY and two representing TKY. After long and difficult negotiations, the four of us shook hands in agreement and poured ourselves well-earned drinks. Across the street at Dipoli, both boards were celebrating Lakinlaskiaiset, and when the news reached them, they rejoiced together — an agreement had finally been reached.

This was September 30th, 2008. For over a year, the student unions of the Helsinki School of Economics and the Helsinki University of Technology had prepared and negotiated how to merge in the formation of the new Aalto University.

Unfortunately a few weeks later TKY withdrew from the agreement. At KY, we chose to uphold it anyway. We established the KY Foundation to secure continuity, equality of services, and a strong start for the new student union. That decision was contested by TKY activists. What could have been resolved in dialogue was fought in the courts for eight long years.

It was one of the most intense periods of my professional life.

What allowed me to endure was three assets that KY had shaped during my decade here: inner stability, a sense of belonging, and an experience of agency. I realized later that those three elements form the basis for courage.

Today's world feels even more volatile: geopolitical instability, economic stagnation, technological disruption, and the growing anxiety about the future among young people.

In a world without certainty, courage is essential. KY builds courage in individuals, in communities, and across generations.

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During the Aalto merger, as a twentysomething year old Secretary General, I was entrusted with safeguarding a century of identity and culture. There was public scrutiny, media attention, and the awareness that our decisions would echo long beyond us.

The pressure was immense.

In moments like that, the three assets were invaluable: inner stability, belonging, and agency.

Inner stability helps because a clear sense of who you are prevents pressure from turning into panic. KY builds that steadiness by placing students in real situations where decisions matter and values are tested.

What also held me steady was a strong sense of belonging and connection. Belonging is often described as something soft. In reality, it is the architecture of resilience. In the presence of solidarity, pressure loses its power to break you. KY strengthens belonging by giving people something meaningful to carry together. My wife and my closest friends are bonds from those years.

Courage grows from stability and belonging, and it becomes real through agency. In volatile times, what erodes first is not competence, but the sense that one can influence outcomes. When agency weakens, hope weakens. Hope is the belief that tomorrow can be shaped by today's actions. At KY, you debate budgets, redefine rules, and negotiate real consequences. You learn that institutions are human constructions — and what people build, people can reshape. That's agency.

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Communities endure when courage becomes collective. When capable, committed people stand beside you, uncertainty becomes less threatening. Trust reduces fear. Reduced fear expands initiative.

Collective courage requires relationships that can withstand tension. At KY, you can disagree deeply and yet remain committed to the shared institution. That is not accidental. It is culture. During the merger, we learned this the hard way. All parties focused intensely on structure and legal design. We all underestimated the need to build trust early across the many stakeholders whose identities were tied to the student unions. Boards, representative councils, honorary councils, alumni communities, university leadership and the ministry of education — each had legitimate concerns and emotional investments in the outcome.

When trust is not built early, alignment weakens. Dialogue turns into arguments and conflict escalates. In our case, the cost was measured not only in millions of euros, but also in strained relationships and years of wasted energy.

That experience reshaped my understanding of leadership. Structure matters. Strategy matters. But without connection, neither holds.

Teams do not fail because they lack intelligence. They fail because trust fractures. Organizations do not stagnate because they lack plans. They stagnate because fear replaces agency.

The habits learned here are leadership skills. And in a polarized society, the ability to disagree without dissolving into distrust is a civic skill that upholds democracy.

Finland has struggled to generate economic growth for nearly two decades. We often turn to structural explanations, but growth requires courage. The courage to invest, to innovate and to take initiative. Institutions that cultivate that courage strengthen the fabric of society.

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KY expands not only the scale of your ambition, but also the depth of your responsibility. When you inherit a strong institution built over 115 years, you are not only shaped by it — you are entrusted with strengthening it for future generations. KY has endured through wars, economic crises, and institutional transformations because each generation courageously chose responsibility over retreat.

Every generation inherits its own uncertainty. Ours was the merger and institutional conflict. The tension of preserving identity while building something new. Yours faces geopolitical volatility, technological disruption, and long-term economic stagnation. The circumstances differ. The responsibility does not.

For 115 years, KY has renewed courage in each generation. The courage to shape the world together. That is its legacy. And that is worth celebrating.