

# **COLLABORATIVE COURAGE—THE FIRST VIRTUE**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

**So much is written about leadership, for good reasons. There was a time when smarts and hard work were the critical keys to success. Those characteristics still count but they largely advance individual rather than team performance. And it's becoming increasingly rare that success rests on the shoulders of one person. Whether it is in a law firm or corporate America, relying on the isolated work of individual contributors is not the recipe for success. Individuals must work together so the team becomes more powerful than the sum of its parts. And the critical aspect of "working together" implicates leadership skills. Think about the unifying aspect of a leader who gives credit rather than takes it, accepts accountability for things that do not work out well, commands executive presence, displays compassion for others on the team, is calm in crisis, and exudes a humility that belies his or her own abilities and accomplishments.**

**These things will bring people together into a cohesive and collaborative group. They will enjoy the work and each other. They will respect the leader. But the question is this—will these traits alone allow the team to perform at its highest level? I submit the answer to that question is "no." There is one thing missing. A leader who wants to inspire others to achieve heights that they think insurmountable needs to have something that is hard to come by. That is courage. It was Aristotle who many years ago characterized courage the "first virtue" because it is the foundational virtue that makes all others possible. In a similar vein, courage is the foundational virtue of leadership.**

## **WHAT IS COURAGE?**

**Courage comes in many forms. It is displayed in its most glorious form by our military heroes, our police and fire department personnel and our first**

responders, where it emerges when the situation calls for immediate action with uncertain, even deadly, outcomes. There is a courage that is summoned when one is faced with a personal challenge—an accident, a diagnosis—where one has to confront the unknowns of tomorrow with hope and resilience. Courage, in all of its forms, requires a person to approach a situation without an assurance of defeating the odds but with an abiding confidence that one must try.

And therein lurks the type of courage that organizational leaders must display. Many business challenges are not simple. They cannot often be solved by the safe route or the common denominator of consensus. They are driven by the leadership of someone who sees solutions beyond the obvious, who thinks and acts boldly. Failure is a possibility but the fear of failure is not an obstruction. Without stretching beyond the comfort zone, one languishes in the status quo and does not get better. Teams that are most successful are driven by a leader who is courageous, decisive and tough. A leader who has the ability not only to suggest novel solutions but also to bridge the chasm of doubt and uncertainty implicated by those solutions. One who has the courage to not only see the future, but also to seize it with gusto.

Courage, therefore, is certainly a laudatory trait, and few would doubt that truism. So, why don't more individuals display it? That is the burning question. The simple answer is that many people are risk-averse. Risk aversion may creep into our consciousness at an early age or due to an early failure. Instead of defaulting to daring, one may be programmed to ask the question: "What's in it for me and is the risk worth the reward?" As we wrestle with questions like that, we tend to look for reasons NOT to do something than to do it. There is a certain logic in being daring, but it's also emotional. One has to trust his or her "gut." Yet, when faced with a risky choice, people tend to ask questions--they delay, they discuss, they equivocate and they often talk themselves into doing nothing. Let's take a look at a few of the common questions.

**"WHAT IF I FAIL?"**

Humans by nature are overly-cautious. Many grow up with the notion that failure is a sign of weakness and the best way to avoid that outcome is to embrace the safest route. We must be powerful and strong, we say to ourselves. We must win. We fear something will go wrong. We fear regret. In his new book entitled *The Undoing Project—A Friendship that Changed Our Minds*, Michael Lewis explores the lives of two Israeli psychologists, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. These psychologists were intrigued with how people make decisions, and they made it their lives' work to answer that question. They developed different theories over time, and one dealt with the concept of "regret." The thesis was that one avoided making tough decisions that rattled the status quo because, if things didn't work out, the pain was greater than pain resulting from a less risky decision. As Kahneman said in a note to Tversky, "The pain that is experienced when the loss is caused by an act that modified the status quo is significantly greater than the pain that is experienced when the decision led to the retention of the status quo." So, why put yourself at risk by rattling cages and disrupting things as they are? Keep your head down. Play it safe. That is our innate default code.

By doing so, though, you will never achieve your full potential or that of the team. Timidity is not a leadership criterion. Sure, there is the risk of pain with failure, but there is also the upside of exhilaration with success. We live in a rapidly changing world where the status quo can become obsolete in the blink of an eye. Any organization that wants to be great must see far into the future and make course adjustments to adapt to expected changes. There are several examples of companies—Kodak and Blockbuster come to mind—that failed because they didn't do exactly that. Reasons that make sense at the time become untenable far too late for the company to do anything about them. The culture of a great company depends on leaders within the organization having the courage to raise their hands and challenge comfort zones. They may be wrong. The ideas may fail. But that should not defeat the spirit of leaders to continue to challenge things.

Nelson Mandela, who spent most of his life fighting apartheid, knows a lot about leadership and courage. He fought the odds, which were stacked against

him. His will was unbroken, even during his many years of imprisonment on Robben Island. His perseverance flows from a belief that he was in the right and that right would prevail. In other words, he had the conviction that things would change and his views would ultimately be adopted. Certainly he had many moments of trepidation. But he fought through them. As he put it:

I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.

That is the definition of a leader. When others see you as one who believes in the cause and is willing to risk all to accomplish it, they will follow you. It will inflame them with the same spirit. Success, though not ensured, must be pursued because of the embodied belief that the chosen path is the right one.

#### **WHAT IF I GET PUNISHED OR EMBARRASSED?**

Failure can have consequences. When you extend yourself and take a chance, failure to accomplish the established goal may generate embarrassment. Yes, others may find out and perhaps hold it against you. Maybe there is a concern that a career might be derailed. These are the concerns that keep people in a cocoon: "Be cautious, don't take chances, stay invisible." But people who live in a cocoon can never become a leader of others. How do leaders manage these concerns?

First of all, find or create a culture where courage is rewarded and failure is not treated as catastrophic. Work for a leader who is innovative, courageous and has your back. Yes, there are places where the expectation is that one should not be daring. Such companies have fallen in love with the way things are. They will ultimately fail. True leaders thrive in a culture where innovative and courageous action is not just encouraged but required. These places exist. If that is not the culture where you work, either change the culture or go elsewhere. Do not be stifled by a workplace where people walk on eggshells and refuse to take necessary steps because they are paralyzed by the notion that the risk is not worth the reward.

Secondly, be prudent, calculate the odds and be "feisty." In her book, *Nimble, Focused and Feisty*, Sara Roberts explored what it takes for organizations to succeed. She concluded that the most successful organizations were faster, more agile, committed to a sense of purpose and played big and bold. Playing big and bold required courage. Roberts described the attributes of a courageous leader as follows: (1) anchors the organization to its purpose and values; (2) sets audacious but not unreasonable goals; (3) communicates honestly and humbly; and (4) is "stubborn on vision and flexible on details." But, being courageous is only half of the battle. To realize the audacious goals, one must also be a "connector," which is similar to being a collaborator. The connector, Roberts notes, will connect the team to a purpose, connect the team to drive results, connect people and efforts in the organization and connect ideas to resources.

By doing these things, you will build credibility. You will create and inspire a collaborative network where all things are possible. The risks you take are bold but calculated. Critically, because of proven results and a support from all layers of the organization, failure is cushioned. There is a recognition that all things do not work out, but the key thing is to keep trying. That is a culture that will keep the creative juices flowing. And that is a culture that will drive an organization, and the leaders within it, to heights they can only imagine.

**"WON'T MY TEAMMATES HOLD IT AGAINST ME?"**

To start with, the alternative isn't that great either—being fearful will not inspire confidence within your<sup>1</sup> team. Nor will they rally around you if they consider you brazen, rash or impulsive. There is a wide gap between these two ends of the spectrum. The goal is to be courageous AND collaborative. That requires you to involve the team in the whole process, end-to-end. The concept of "collaborative courage" involves several steps: (1) include others in early discussions about the course of action you are proposing; (2) build support for what you want to do—YOUR plan becomes OUR plan; (3) be honest and realistic in discussing the pros and cons; (4) be sure the team understands that you are willing to absorb the consequences; (5) create a work plan with timetables so

clarity is brought to its execution; (6) get as many teammates involved in the execution as efficiently possible; (7) if things go well, share the success; and (8) if things don't go well, accept responsibility and instill a spirit to try again.

There is an important point about all of this. Great companies move urgently and nimbly. You can't rule by committees and consensus. To be truly efficient, a few need to drive change for the many. Collaborative courage does not mean that everyone who may be potentially affected by the decision needs to be consulted and convinced. That would be impractical and is the opposite of "leadership." Bold moves require that a small group of people decide to chart a course and then work together to accomplish the goal. They must work fast and fearlessly. It's that small group of people who must work together collaboratively and feel supported.

One cannot think of collaborative courage without reflecting on the Founding Fathers. This was a small group of individuals representing the 13 colonies who had a lot to lose. They faced personal risks by doing something that would be considered treasonous. They also had the weighty responsibility of not letting down others who trusted them to do the right thing. The future of the republic rested on them. The 56 signatories to the Declaration of Independence in 1776, led by the likes of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, clearly took a courageous leap into the unknown. Setting aside their personal exposure, the signatories were not sure that the war would be won so the colonies could separate from England. They didn't know whether the colonies, so different in many ways, could even survive collectively. Yet, the leaders leapt into the abyss and declared the colonies independent of England.

That was the first step. What remained to be done, other than actually winning the war, was the creation of a constitutional government based on principles of federalism. Think about how hard that was. Thirteen independent colonies were to join together and be governed by a central democratic government, while preserving many rights to themselves. No one had ever done such an audacious thing. There was no recipe. There were the Articles of Confederation but, after America won its independence in 1783, the colonists began to believe

**that the Articles were inadequate for their purposes. What was required was a stronger, but not too strong, federal government to mold together a rather loose confederation of states. How in the world could they agree to something like that, especially after they just fought a war to achieve greater independence from an autocratic authority?**

**The answer was a group of daring leaders who came together to solve this problem by compromise, flexibility and collaboration. Between May and September of 1787, the 55 delegates to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia proposed, debated, worked through frustration, compromised and came up with something extraordinary—a document that would serve this country for centuries. The United States Constitution created the three branches of government, provided citizens the guarantees in the Bill of Rights and carefully allocated roles and responsibilities between the states and the federal government. Imagine the collaborative courage that permeated that room. That's how success is achieved. Think greatly as a team and work together to clear all of the impediments. Those 55 delegates surely left Philadelphia in a collegial state of mind and a mutual sense of a "job well-done."**

**"WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?"**

**Being courageous is certainly in your best interests. It is well-established that advancement in successful organizations is tethered to one's leadership abilities, and one's leadership abilities are largely dependent on courage and collaboration. By displaying these characteristics, you distinguish yourself and move up the ladder more quickly. Worthwhile places to work both recognize and reward bold innovation. You will also enjoy a higher degree of self-satisfaction. It is exhilarating to take a risky course and deliver great rewards. You will have more confidence as you create or confront new challenges. Within your team, you will have more influence and respect. All of these things will make you a better and more effective leader.**

**You will also achieve greater outcomes, for yourself and your organization. It is certainly true that meaningful innovation trumps status quo every time. As Will**

**Rogers wisely said, "Why not go out on a limb? That's where the fruit is." Companies that take risks are more innovative and perform better than those that don't. This was recognized by Howard Schultz, the Chief Executive Officer at Starbucks, in a letter to all employees last year:**

**Recently, our senior leadership team and the Starbucks Board of Directors approved a long-term strategic plan that will further elevate the company. Our plan does not embrace the status quo. In fact, the plan will require a higher level of thoughtfulness, creativity and discipline than at any other time in our history. To be among the world's most respected and enduring companies, we must constantly look around corners and let our curiosity and courage drive innovation. With this mindset and purpose, I have no doubt we can continue to grow the company sustainably, and in ways that will continue to make us all proud.**

**A company is only as courageous and innovative as its employees. It is in the best interests of a company to find and retain leaders who think big and do not wilt under pressure. Be one of those leaders.**

**HOW DO I DO IT?**

**Well, just do it. When faced with a new opportunity that carries risk, and most good ones do, don't wither or dismiss it out of hand. Weigh carefully the advantages and disadvantages. Make the decision that seems a little edgy. Don't be deterred if you take a chance and fail. Being bold requires practice. Make it a habit.. Build that muscle. And do not feel that you have to do it alone. Discuss with others you trust, but don't do so with the hope that they will talk you out of what you want to do. Drive action, not inaction. And be balanced. As you discuss the risks of seizing the opportunity, also talk about the risks of standing pat. Often that part of the equation gets ignored. Think—"What if our competitor does that?"**

**On April 23, 1910, Theodore Roosevelt gave a speech in Paris, France. He addressed the concept of taking risks:**

**It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly . . . .**

**If you are going to fail, do it while "daring greatly." This passage caught the attention of Brené Brown, a researcher who explores human vulnerability. Brown wrote a book called *Daring Greatly*, where she talked about how vulnerability keeps us from achieving our full potential. She points out that vulnerable feelings about ourselves may tempt us to wait for a better moment, when we are more ready. However, that would be a mistake, Brown notes:**

**When we spend our lives waiting until we're perfect or bulletproof before we walk into the arena, we ultimately sacrifice relationships and opportunities that may not be recoverable, we squander our precious time, and we turn our backs on our gifts, those unique contributions that only we can make. Perfect and bulletproof are seductive, but they don't exist in the human experience. We must walk into the arena, whatever it may be—a new relationship, an important meeting, our creative process, or a difficult family conversation—with courage and the willingness to engage. Rather than sitting on the sidelines and hurling judgment and advice, we must dare to show up and let ourselves be seen. This is vulnerability. This is daring greatly.**

**In other words, the more we confront vulnerability, uncertain risks and emotional exposure, the more courage we will have. And the opposite is also**

true. Despite what happened to Icarus, don't be afraid of flying too close to the sun. Dare great, but don't be stupid!

## CONCLUSION

There is no silver bullet here. The ideas here are lofted for your consideration. Words alone will not make you courageous. For that, you need to dig deeper. In his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Profiles in Courage*, John Kennedy told several stories about political courage. He started the book on an auspicious note: "This is a book about that most admirable of human virtues—courage." And he ended the book in this way:

To be courageous, these stories make clear, requires no exceptional qualifications, no magic formula, no special combination of time, place and circumstances. It is an opportunity that sooner or later is presented to all of us. . . . In whatever arena of life one may meet the challenge of courage, whatever may be the sacrifices he faces if he follows his conscience—the loss of his friends, his fortune, his contentment, even the esteem of his fellow man—each man for himself must decide for himself the course he will follow. The stories of past courage can define that ingredient—they can teach, they can offer hope, they can provide inspiration. But they cannot supply courage itself. For this each man must look into his own soul.

For every man and woman who wants to be more, do more and succeed more, gaze into your soul and eradicate timidity, fear of failure and an abiding affinity for playing things safe. Be bold. Be smart. Conquer the world.