

Unleashing Courage in the Workplace by Sandra Ford Walston, The Courage Expert

When businesses experience organizational breakdowns, the underlying issues rarely involve a lack of “hard skills”—i.e., unskilled or under-trained employees. Why? Companies hire people based on their hard skills—their technical expertise, their management experience, etc. During the interview process, candidates can generally land a position if they can articulate the “gold star” hard skill accomplishments that glitter their resume. All is well until those gold star employees face situations that challenge their ethics—falsified marketing tests, accounting irregularities, or other forms of corruption. These potential dilemmas expose the other side of the coin—the “soft skills”—or what I call the “real skills.” Real-skilled employees can make the right choices, the tough choices that help build strong companies. Unfortunately, business leadership tends to ignore these real skills because they don’t know how to quantify them.

Case in point: While preparing to conduct a “Courage Leadership” symposium for a large association, I received a call from an administrator for a state school board association. He wanted to attend the program but was having difficulty persuading his boss that the expense would be worthwhile. After all, the symposium dealt with soft skills that provide no demonstrable return on investment; therefore, according to the man’s boss, the symposium offered nothing applicable to the work environment. I responded with this thought: “If bosses like yours have hired all the best employees, then why is organizational depravity so pervasive at Enron, WorldCom, Coca Cola, Tyco, the Red Cross, Disney, United Way, and so many other companies?”

The Smartest Guys in the Room

Hard skills do not determine business success; in fact, business failures can almost always be traced to lapses of courage by the company leadership. The empty shells of these once vibrant companies clutter the corporate landscape like rusting hulks in a naval boneyard. Why? Far too many companies keep courage on a leash in the workplace, allowing corruption (the opposite of courage) to run rampant.

How do businesses staffed with the “best and brightest” employees who all “did their jobs” end up as the latest example of corporate scandal and mismanagement? The origin of corruption lies in a broad spectrum of organizational hypocrisies that can stem from a dysfunctional management team, interpersonal animosity, or a core group of unconscious people whose questionable interpersonal skills interact to undermine an organization. The money that corrupt organizations spend on lawyers, public relations campaigns and damage control represents a huge waste of resources, dwarfing the negligible cost of implementing a courage leadership business model.

Unfortunately, corruption can undermine “ethical courage” all too quickly, as evidenced by an acquaintance’s experience.

Before committing to follow my dream into professional speaking in 1996, I spent a wonderful, 18-year career at Arthur Andersen. My biggest roadblock to following my dream was having to leave a firm and position that I loved. Still, it was heartbreaking to watch Andersen’s 90-year legacy implode in less than six weeks. It

was a stunning reminder of how the actions of a few can have such an unjust impact on thousands—85,000 professionals and their families in the case of Andersen. But it was only one of many stories in the past two years where the actions of a few created an enormous shrapnel impact on thousands, if not millions. And it was only one of many stories in the past two years that could zap your spirit: Enron, WorldCom, the Middle East, Iraq—even the Catholic Church.¹

A courageous business culture requires a model that permeates the organization and reflects its unique spirit. Without this courage-based leadership, corporate greed sets the example, smothering employees' "heart and spirit" values under a blanket of corruption. Alternately, a courageous work environment promotes the passion to be true to oneself.

History allows us to honor the memories of courageous figures, such as Katherine Graham, whose courage enabled her to surmount incredible obstacles to become CEO of the *Washington Post* at a time when women were seen in very few boardrooms. Drawing on the internal strength of her courage, she helped shape the course of our nation by publishing the *Pentagon Papers* in 1971. Exposing government lies about the War in Vietnam, she refused to bow to intense political and financial pressures and played a crucial role in the democratic process that ended Richard Nixon's reign of corruption.

Even though our culture promotes celebrity over courage, realize that, like Katherine Graham, you make a difference as you quietly go about your day-to-day life. Today, the power lies in the noble and courageous voice of the everyday person, the ordinary working person.

Courage Defined

What is your definition of courage? Do you know the origin of the word? Courage comes from the Old French *corage*, meaning "heart and spirit." In other words, *courage is an innate, internal quality that resides within the core of your being.*

Unfortunately, most people do not recognize their everyday courageous actions as significant; but if you look around, you will begin to notice the courageous people you encounter. At work, they are the people who take (or volunteer for) the tough assignments outside their comfort zone, the employees who are willing to speak the truth and then hold themselves completely accountable. Courageous people control their own destinies by standing up for their heart-felt values. Do you know what you stand for? Unless you have looked intently into your own heart and spirit, you cannot know your true self, and what you think you stand for may turn out to be nothing more than corporate greed masquerading as job security.

How can one working human being begin to learn to demonstrate courage? The process is no different from committing to physical exercise. To improve your body posture at work you might make inquiries into the benefits of yoga, only to learn that there are myriad types. Once you determine which technique fits your needs, you purchase the appropriate supplies. Finally, through devotion and commitment, you experience and internalize the benefits of yoga and share your experiences with others. Like yoga, learning to recognize and claim your courage requires a conscious effort applied consistently over time, and you must embrace the internal, "heart and spirit" concept of courage. Once you understand that courage emanates from your heart, you begin to realize acting courageously simply manifests your true self.

Surveying Your Courage

Exploring and understanding the internal terrain of your courage takes time and dedication. If you were to survey new territory in a low-flying airplane, it would look completely unfamiliar on the first pass. The second time around, you would recognize a few points of reference, and on the third pass, the landscape begins to make sense. Finally, you gain familiarity through simple exposure. Courage is no different, so begin to examine your personal courage by asking yourself these questions:

- Would you stay in a job you hate or don't believe in?
- Are you inclined to secure your physical safety despite great inconvenience?
- Are you tempted to cheat because no one will know?
- Would you hide a mistake because you "need" your job?
- Are you prone to selling your soul (and you know it)?

Honestly answering these questions allows you to assess your courage and the boundaries you have placed around it (perhaps unconsciously). By quieting your mind and allowing yourself to reflect, you will realize that you know your true self better than you let on. The problem is that most people want concrete answers, not self-reflection. They prefer a quick fix—a "courage pill." They simply don't want to dwell on the answers to probing questions. No wonder Americans' prescription drug usage is at an all-time high—our culture of instant gratification prefers a pharmaceutical fix to a true healing process. And when the sickness lies in your "heart and spirit," it produces suffering. If your job does not honor the convictions of your heart, your courage is on a very short leash.

Facets of Courage

To recognize courage, it helps to distinguish the various facets of courage. Some of us manifest certain types of courage well but come up short in other areas. Try to detect which elements you exhibit and which need to be unleashed in your life.

- **Spiritual courage.** The spiritual journey requires being in the present. It is a trust in faith that propels you to continue growing. You become a "witness" to your attachments to results and learn to self-correct. You surrender your ego to a higher level of courage consciousness, and you begin to exist in a place "where courage meets grace." As all this happens, humility steps in to replace arrogance and righteousness. The sacred within awakens.
- **Emotional courage.** Similar to spiritual courage, this involves "knowing thyself." A path committed to contemplation is required to release your false identity (i.e., "the self-image developed to cope with the emotional trauma of early childhood which seeks happiness in satisfying the instinctual needs of survival/security, affection/esteem, and power/control, and which bases its self-worth on cultural or group identification."²)
- **Leadership courage (individual and organization).** The courageous culture of an organization honors and uplifts the human spirit (the opposite of authoritarianism or coercion). The collective intent of a courageous organization is to join hearts and minds in order to achieve inspired results. It means the organization (and its people)

will “fall on their swords” to honor their collective personal courage. Courage leadership knows the difference between pride and arrogance versus humility and grace.

- **Individual leadership courage.** Rooted in truth, you know your own heart and speak it appropriately.
- **Ethical/Moral courage.** This courage is activated by the attitude of willingness to choose differently in spite of personal hardship. The objective is a higher level of integrity than required for the easy alternative. Moral courage is like a compass. Over a long period of time, a one-degree navigational error will take you hundreds of miles off course.
- **Physical courage.** Facing a physical limitation that challenges the human body, utilizing the body to achieve athletic challenges, facing physical dangers or overcoming at serious health problems—these are the best-understood forms of courage today. Practicing a contemplative life (stopping and “being”) or being centered in mind, body and spirit are other less-known physical examples of courage.
- **Personal courage.** The way of your heart might be the easiest way to understand this form of courage. It is a blending of heart and mind combined with the commitment to hold yourself one hundred percent accountable for your actions. You must recognize that your spirit is the author of your fate such as feeling safe during times of uncertainty, and feeling comfortable with the individuation of your spirit also contribute.
- **Political courage.** Unwillingness to sell your soul is the key feature, represented by whether you stand as a politician (self-serving) or a statesmen (serving others). In other words, is your intention to do what is right by placing future needs ahead of political aspiration? Political courage is characterized by humility, not ego. It is being willing to go out on a limb to express an unpopular thought that reveals your authenticity.
- **Social courage.** Social courage exhibits congenial behavior in public, regardless of the circumstance. With discipline and grace, you reveal a courage paradox: you do not insult others, nor do you suffer an offense in silence. Your image plays a key role, expressing the contradictory qualities of social grace with a rebellion against society’s limitations.

By inserting these aspects of courage into your daily life, you increasingly manifest true courage, setting an example to which others can look for affirmation.

Final Outcome

The keystone to long-term business success is the ability to design, implement and sustain a noble legacy that transcends generations. Once you realize that there is a direct correlation between your success quotient and your courage quotient, all you have to do is to declare your courageous intentions and then act on them! Are you willing to unleash your courage?

About the Author:

Sandra Ford Walston, The Courage Expert, innovator of STUCKThinking™, is an organizational effectiveness/learning consultant, speaker, corporate trainer and courage coach. Specializing in understanding courage behaviors, individual personalities and leadership styles that focus on the tricks and traps of the human condition, the author/trainer facilitates individuals and groups in discovering their hidden talents. She is the internationally published author of the regional bestseller, *Courage: The Heart and Spirit of Every Woman/Reclaiming the Forgotten Virtue* (Greece and Brazil). Her second book is currently agent represented. She is qualified to administer and interpret the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® and is a certified Enneagram teacher. Currently she is a candidate for an Honorary Doctorate Degree.

Sandra provides skill-based programs for public and private businesses, including Caterpillar, Inc., Auburn University, Procter & Gamble, Wyoming Department of Health Public Nurses, Farmers Insurance, Wide Open West and Hitachi Consulting. With over eleven years of experience with finance professionals, she instructs for the University of Denver Graduate Tax Program Continuing Professional Education courses and she formerly taught for the Colorado Society of CPAs. To learn more about how Sandra can help your business cultivate success or to purchase a copy of her first book, visit www.sandrawalston.com or contact her 303.696.1010 or Sandra@SandraWalston.com.

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¹ “Finding Joy in Unusual Places, *Professional Speaker*, July/August 2003, 15.

² Thomas Keating, *Open Mind Open Heart* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1986), 146.