

# Courage Is Caged in the Workplace

Sandra Ford Walston, The Courage Expert

Breakdowns and disruptions that hinder an organization's advancement rarely have to do with unskilled employees or employees missing "hard skills." Why? Most people are hired based on their technical, theoretical and strategic hard skills. During the interview process, candidates can generally land a position if they can articulate the "gold star" accomplishments that glitter their resume. Conversely, the interviewer hopes there are no hidden cards in the deck that they did not flush out.

All is well until that employee is faced with serious or subtle situations that challenge a breach in their duties, such as falsifying marketing tests, accounting irregularities, speaking false rhetoric or choosing to "hear no evil, speak no evil," thereby not questioning authority. These potential dilemmas expose the buried cards that the employer did not ferret out. They are the other side of the coin—the "soft skills."

Case in point: While preparing to conduct an all-day "Courage Leadership" symposium for a large association, the deputy director of legal services for a state school board association wanted to attend the program, but was having difficulty persuading his boss that the expense would be worthwhile. After all, it was soft skills, with no demonstrable return on investment (ROI), and therefore not applicable to the work environment. He requested additional benefits not featured in the program outline. I sent back this thought: If his boss had hired all the best hard-skilled employees, then why was organizational depravity so pervasive at Enron, WorldCom, Coca Cola, Tyco, the Red Cross, Disney and United Way, to name a few biggies? Businesses are destroyed by the courageous lapses of their leaders, and their remains clutter in our corporate landscape. Why? Courage is caged in the workplace.

How does this happen to well-trained employees who say, "I was just doing my job," or "Everyone else was doing it"? The origin of corruption is uncovered in a broad spectrum of organizational hypocrisies. These examples range from a management team in disarray, a history of underlying animosity or a handful of people with tentative interpersonal skills that implode an organization. The money these organizations spend on lawyers, revamped image and PR, and extensive management meetings to strategize damage control (or start the closing-down process) far outreach the benefits and costs of a courage leadership business model. No one stops to think about the price attached to starting fresh.

Courage is a big word! When was the last time you uttered the word or said, "Now, that's courage," when someone was unwilling to falsify evidence or stand up for a peer who was being wrongfully treated?

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## Redemption Is in Your Courage

History allows us to honor the memories of recognized courageous figures, such as Abraham Lincoln, Walt Disney and Katherine Graham. Today, the power lies in the noble and courageous voice of the everyday person, the ordinary working person, the mere citizen. Even though our culture does not pay tribute to those who have never been national or even local celebrities, and though the workplace does not take the time to celebrate your daily courage, as you quietly go about your day-to-day life, realize that you make a difference.

What is your definition of courage? Do you know the origin of the word?

Courage is neither Greek nor Latin; it's Medieval Old French *corage*, meaning "heart and spirit" or *cuer*, meaning "heart." Courage is a forgotten virtue, because people do not recognize their everyday actions as significant. Awakening people to the original definition and guiding them to claim, integrate and apply this virtue at work (and in their personal lives) is my intention.

Look around and you will observe in your midst a courageous person. It is the leader who guides his or her team members to move from their strengths to embrace their "challenged" leadership areas. Working outside their comfort zone clips the potential for complacency—a courage killer. Another example is reflected in personal courage. It is the employees who are willing to be the voice above the crowd to speak the truth and then hold themselves 100 percent accountable. These people control their own destinies. Why is it important to know what you stand for? Your redemption is in your courage.

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. There's traditional Hatha yoga, Karma yoga, Mantra yoga, Bhakti yoga, Juana yoga and Raja yoga. Each practice touches a different level of yoga, such as physical postures, selfless service to others, centering the consciousness or a path of wisdom. Once you determine which technique fits your needs, you can purchase the appropriate supplies—mat, towel and other items. Finally, through devotion and commitment, you experience and internalize the benefits of yoga and spread the word.

Like all learning curves, a conscious effort is required to claim your courage. To awaken your courage you may choose to read an autobiography of a well-known person, observe from a distance someone you admire, watch "Seabiscuit" or "The Last Samurai," or attend a class in direct speaking, contemplative lifestyle methods or courage leadership. After accepting this choice, the first step is mandatory—you must embrace the original definition. Virtue in Latin means "energy," so the second step is to become alert to the facets of courage that make up your personal reservoir. Then, study the values of the undetected categories so you become "fluid courage."

## **Aerial Portrait of Your Courage**

How can you uncover your courage? Taking an aerial photograph of your courage, like learning yoga, requires time and dedication. If you were to survey new terrain in a low-flying airplane, on first pass the new area looks unfamiliar. The second time around, you spot some points of reference. The third time, the terrain starts to make sense. Finally, you gain familiarity through simple exposure. It's the same with courage. Ask yourself these tough 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 boundaries. You know your true self better than you let on. The problem is that most people want answers, not self-reflection. They prefer a courage pill for quick relief rather than asking probing questions. That's why this country is going through the biggest prescription drug usage in history. Our culture is more apt to take a drug to deal with conditions in hopes of getting better, but instead, we become bitter. Suffering lies in an unfulfilled heart. Are you a product of courage, or are you so far removed from this virtue that it has lost its human quality?

## **What Creates a Courageous Work Culture?**

Now you've started to awaken your individual courage. What can you affect when corporate corruption seems to be so pervasive in our culture? Unfortunately, corruption severs the company's spirits as well as those of the individual—the opposite of a symbiotic relationship. A true story from a colleague's painful work experience reveals how quickly "ethical courage" can vanish:

*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 in having to leave a firm and position that I loved. The years since then didn't soften the heartbreak of watching 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 and even a crisis in the Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup>*

The foundation of a courageous culture requires a model that permeates the organization and reflects the organization's spirit. Empowering employees to be "courage change agents" is simple. After implementing courage leadership standards, employees will no longer feel ambivalent about selling their souls—this option is not acceptable. In a courageous work environment, there's a passion to be true to oneself.

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## Facets of Courage

Now you're ready to discover and distinguish the facets of courage. There is spiritual courage, emotional courage, leadership courage, ethical courage, physical courage, political courage and personal courage. With courageous intention, try to detect which elements you exhibit and which need to be free.

- **Spiritual Courage:** The spiritual journey requires being present to presence. 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 consciousness where courage meets grace. As this happens, humility steps in to replace arrogance and righteousness.
- **Emotional Courage:** Similar to spiritual courage, this involves "knowing thy Self." It is a declared intent, requiring a path committed to contemplation (meditation, prayer or just taking time to stop and be) to release the "false self" (the opposite of your true self).
- **Leadership Courage (individual and organizational):** The courageous culture of an organization honors and uplifts the human spirit (the opposite of authoritarianism or coercion). The collective intent of an organization is to lock hearts and minds to inspire. There's a heightened sensitivity to purpose with increased discernment for human beings. It means the organization (and its people) will fall on their sword to honor their collective personal courage. Courage leadership knows the difference between pride and arrogance, and humility and grace. Individual leadership courage: Rooted in truth, you know your own mind and speak it. You are willing to break the mold.
- **Ethical/Moral Courage:** This is activated by the attitude of willingness to choose differently (this time), regardless of the personal hardship. The objective is to desire a higher level of integrity rather than a lower alternative. No one is happy when they fake it.
- **Physical Courage:** Facing a physical limitation that challenges the human body, confronting physical dangers or difficulties, or overcoming health problems (the most understood form of courage). Practicing a contemplative life (stopping and "being") or seeking to be centered in mind, body and spirit are less appreciated physical examples.
- **Personal courage:** The way of your heart might be the easiest way to understand this form. It's a blending of heart and mind, with a desire to hold yourself 100 percent accountable for your actions. With the courage to act independently, you acknowledge your spirit as the author of your fate. Feeling safe during times of uncertainty and being comfortable with the individuation of your spirit also contribute to personal courage.
- **Political Courage:** Unwillingness to sell your soul is the key feature, represented by whether you stand as a politician (self-serving exploitation employing persuasion and force) or a statesman (serving others through inspiration and teaching by example). In other words, is your intention to vote your conscience, thereby placing future

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needs ahead of political aspiration, such as going out on a limb to express an unpopular thought that reveals your authenticity (and we are shocked when this happens). Political courage is characterized by humility, not egotism.

By inserting these aspects of courage into your daily life, you will become naturally self-corrective and a model of the original definition. Now the dimensions of courage are detectable in you. Claiming your own path eliminates regret. A symbiotic relationship merges your courage and your organization's intention. Witness courage at its best—a contagious antidote!

### **Final Outcome**

The keystone to business success requires the ability to design, implement and sustain a noble legacy that transcends generations. This is easily linked when you realize that there is a direct correlation between your success quotient and your courage quotient. All you have to do is to create a statement called the “Declaration of Courageous Intention” (DCI) and take action — now! Are you willing to give yourself permission to open your courage cage door?

### **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](http://www.sandrawalston.com) or contact her 303.696.1010 or [Sandra@SandraWalston.com](mailto:Sandra@SandraWalston.com).

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<sup>i</sup> “Finding Joy in Unusual Places, *Professional Speaker*, July/August 2003, 15.

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