Courage Leadership

How to claim your courage and help others do the same.

By Sandra Ford Walston

Photo by Getty Images

This article is second in a two-part series “Collaborative Decision Making” (Development, July T-D).

Speaking up at a company meeting, Confronting gossip, Making the transition to a new position. Opportunities for courage leadership occur at work nearly every day, and are often the defining moments of a person’s career. Unfortunately, most people don’t consider courage to be a primary work value. They mistakenly believe that courage is relevant only during particularly perilous times, or that only executives can demonstrate courage leadership. In reality, courage is crucial in a wide range of work situations, and anyone in a company can demonstrate courage leadership. Whether your position is entry-level or executive, how...
you confront work issues and how you manage your professional development speak volumes about your courage quotient and set a leadership example for other people.

What courage is
The French word courage means “heart and spirit.” Great leaders throughout history have acted from their hearts, but the definition of courage has been narrowed to simple heroics. Courage, however, means a lot more, and it is key for each one of us. According to Aristotle, courage is the first human virtue because it makes all of the other virtues possible.

Here are a few ways in which courage can be applied at work:

**Revealing vulnerability.** Having to learn a new software program may generate feelings of anxiety or ineptness. But revealing vulnerability is a courage behavior. Courage leaders are able to say, “I’m in over my head and need assistance to guide me through this transition.”

**Voicing an unpopular opinion.** Courage leaders don’t give up easily on opinions and judgments they feel to be right, even when challenged. They’re not close-minded; rather, they leave conformity and safety behind to offer opinions and solutions that may be unpopular. Enron and WorldCom are examples of companies lacking courageous change agents.

**Making sacrifices for long-term goals.** It takes courage to attend evening classes for a degree or give up vacation time to focus on a sideline that’s one’s real passion. Courage leaders know career advancement is worth the necessary time and sacrifice.

People with courage state their goals and then work backwards to find ways to achieve them. They develop new models when old models don’t work. They move forward and upward, never quit, and take risks to reinvent themselves. Their drive for constant learning and improved performance builds their courage and helps them achieve success.

Stepping up with courage
Building your courage and advancing professionally are similar to climbing a 6-foot ladder. The first step is low and wide, and each consecutive step is higher and narrower. Near the top of the ladder, the ascent gets shakier as the steps taper.

As you climb each step of the ladder, your motivation intensifies to improve, to commit to the organization’s goals, and to seize opportunities. Unfortunately, 20 percent of people never make it past the first rung; they don’t identify goals. The other 80 percent set goals but, as the challenges increase, take a break to regroup and refuel. The majority of those people decide they’re content to stay where they are, so they settle in.

Only a few people reset their goals, commit to their original vision and purpose, and continue to climb. When they reach an obstacle, they ask themselves, Do I really want my goal? Then, after reevaluating their path, they decide whether the sacrifice is worth it. If they need to adjust their plan, they do. They refocus and continue their climb. For such courage leaders, settling isn’t an option. They reach the top rung.

**Which rung will satisfy you?**

Tips for applying courage at work
Courage leaders recognize defining moments and apply courage consciously. Here’s how to do it.

**Affirm your strengths constantly.** Realize that no one expects you to be perfect, only to do your best. Take time for daily reflection so you can evaluate your strengths and how to best use them. When you know how your talents can benefit your organization, you’ll act with determination.

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**Hurdle obstacles, take risks.** Every behavior you exhibit and every action you take are conscious choices. Give yourself permission to choose to be different so you can creatively navigate your way around, through, or over any obstacles in your path. When you feel fearful, ask yourself, What’s the worst that can happen if I do this? Usually, the worst never happens. So take the risk.

**Manifest vision.** There are no shortcuts in courage leadership. Develop a crystal clear vision of your goal, and become stubborn about attaining it. That will help you discard any nonproductive
Build Your CQ

Practice this exercise to enhance your courage quotient: Recall a specific moment in your work life when you were proud of yourself. Maybe you finally confronted the supervisor who always berated you in front of others, or perhaps you committed to learning a new skill that benefited your career. Relive that experience, and determine the specific behavior you used that made the difference. That was your courage at work!

Think of a recent time when courage wasn’t called upon, when you didn’t act decisively. That was a missed opportunity that can never be reclaimed. Think about how the outcome could’ve been different if you’d acted with courage.

State your intent to claim your courage. Write it down and post it prominently. Keep asking, Am I acting courageously?

Confront issues even when your own job is at stake. Be vulnerable, and admit a mistake. Reinvent yourself.

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