Courageous Leadership

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It's time to work on YOU. So, sit back and listen to practical, actionable advice to accelerate your progress.

In this lesson, we will look at:

- what makes a courageous leader
- the impact one can have on those they lead
- and specific areas to work on to achieve courage in your own leadership.

On Friday afternoon, Anna received a difficult call from her superior, explaining that the organisation was shifting its priorities. This meant Anna and her team's work over the past three months would be scrapped moving forward.

Anna knew just how hard all her team had been working. She'd seen the long hours, the striving to make this new service as good as possible, and the customer focus groups. She decided not to spoil their weekends by passing on the news late Friday.

However, after two days of repeatedly replaying the conversation in her head, it's now Monday. Anna is going to have to explain the unfortunate situation to her team.

She knows this will be hard for her five-person team to take. But she's also aware of how important their commitment will be in making a success of this new direction the organization is heading in.

This means she needs to carefully navigate their emotions while still being completely honest with her team members to keep them motivated for the challenges ahead. Anna must show the organisation's appreciation for their previous efforts while keeping them engaged in the new tasks they've been set.

It's going to take courage. [1]

Being a courageous leader demands facing challenging situations with honesty and compassion. Being willing to seek out the perspectives of others to inform your own decision-making. And being just as open to receiving feedback as you are to giving it out. Courageous leaders must be willing to be authentic and vulnerable while also maintaining an open and curious mindset and acting with high emotional intelligence.

But remember, as Aristotle pointed out over 2,000 years ago, there is a big difference between courage and recklessness [2]. Leading everyone off a cliff edge because you were too stubborn to ask for help isn't courage.

A large part of being a courageous leader is admitting when you don't know something, when you need help, or when someone has a better idea than you. This confidence makes you look stronger, not weaker.

Let's run through some more key strengths that make a courageous leader.

Putting your principles first.

Although you need a good relationship with those you lead and require them to trust you, it can't be a popularity contest.

Former Mayor of New York, Michael Bloomberg, understood this concept when he reflected:
"If I finish my term in office... and have high approval ratings, I wasted my last years in office. You want to tackle the unpopular issues that nobody else will go after."

You must be able to defend your decisions, but what is most important is that in your heart you know you made them for the right reasons and feel content to be judged by them.

It may cause you some issues in the short term, but in the long run, this is how you will become a trusted, respected leader who puts the greater good ahead of their own popularity.

Courageous leaders also do all they can to ensure a safe working environment. You want your employees to feel empowered that they can try new things and express themselves without the danger of punishment if it doesn't work out. Innovation will generally come from an environment where people feel they can take well thought out risks without putting their job on the line.

As well as this, courageous leaders want everyone they work with to feel they can be themselves and respectfully express their personalities and cultures without the risk of harassment. As a courageous leader, you do this by role-modelling the type of behaviour you wish to see others follow. Express an interest in the lives and cultures of your employees, shut down any bullying, and share your own personality with those you work with.

You must demonstrate rather than demand the actions you wish to see.

Courageous leaders will also always confront reality, even if it's hard [3].

Hiding the challenges your organisation faces from those you lead will not help them in the long term. You don't want to create a fearful atmosphere where everyone feels the sky could cave in at any moment, but you need to share the honest facts and have those difficult conversations with employees to instigate positive change.

Part of having difficult conversations is also a willingness to tackle any performance issues purposefully and promptly. It's never fun to tell someone they are underperforming. It needs to be handled in an honest yet emotionally intelligent way. Ignoring any issues will only create more significant problems later on.

Swift action has the best chance of getting the employee back on the right track. Perhaps they are facing some issues that you are unaware of, either personally or at work, and they have been too afraid to ask for help.

This point is why keeping the lines of communication open is essential for a courageous leader. This way, you can learn of any issues before they turn into serious problems.

As a courageous leader, you will also encourage pushback.

It's natural for a leader to feel under pressure about having all the answers, but that isn't your job. Your job is to channel the power of the team to get to the best solution, no matter where it comes from. People must know they can challenge you, raise concerns, and express their opinions.

Courageous leaders will constantly challenge the status quo when they believe it holds the organisation back. Do you want your team members to challenge you and push for positive change? You need to show them you are willing to do the same when it comes to your superiors.

However, although courageous leaders are open to feedback from others and seek alternative opinions, you move forward without doubts once you make a decision. Analysis paralysis, where you get stuck going over and over the potential choices you have available to you, is the domain of a weak leader – you act with authority.
Of course, despite you making the final decision, you are a champion of others. You will always ensure credit is given where it is due and celebrate victories as a team.

Part of being a courageous leader is will often mean you step away from the limelight when success is being celebrated.

But in the same way you give credit, you must hold people accountable when they don't perform, including yourself. Whole-hearted mistakes are OK when they are learned from, but what you can't tolerate is team members not giving their best. If someone doesn't deliver on a promise or a piece of work they committed to, it should be called out.

This is a lot to take on, and becoming a courageous leader will take work and experience. It may feel exhausting at times, and that is why you need several sources of strength to pull from.

These can include having a strong 'why' regarding what you do [4]. You know 'how' you lead, but when times are tough, complex, and uncertain, having a 'why' you come to work every day is essential.

Keeping your own resilience levels topped up to keep supporting your team members requires regular reflection. In a hectic business environment finding the time to reflect can be difficult. Still, it should be a major tool for any leader.

Here are a few tips [5] to get you into the habit.

First, start reflective journaling. *Thinking* about what has happened is great; what's even better is writing it down. Set aside some time each day or week to note down what you've experienced.

The act of remembering and writing down accesses different parts of your brain and will help you take lessons from recent events in your life to grow and improve.

Having a peer to meet with regularly is another excellent way to reflect on the challenges, successes, and failures you've experienced. You'll gain a different perspective you may not have considered previously.

Asking questions of your team members that encourage them to reflect on a recent work event can also provide a different viewpoint. It can help you uncover something you may have missed that led to a success or a failure. You can then reflect on this yourself to see how you can do things differently in the future based on whether it was a positive or a negative experience for your team member.

By combining the leadership traits that we've discussed with meaningful reflection, you can not only **become** a courageous leader but **maintain** being a courageous leader and avoid burning out.

Now it's time for you to consider which traits you already possess and which you require more work on to achieve your leadership potential.

Thanks for listening.

[1] *Three Key Skills To Develop Courageous Leadership*, Jill Hauwiller (2018) https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2018/05/01/three-key-skills-to-develop-courageous-leadership/?sh=16d3423e6b78

[2] *What Courageous Leaders Do Differently*, James R. Detert (2022) https://hbr.org/2022/01/what-courageous-leaders-do-differently

[3] *10 Traits of Courageous Leaders*, Susan Tardanico (2013) https://www.forbes.com/sites/susantardanico/2013/01/15/10-traits-of-courageous-leaders/?sh=4092ff3f4fc0

[4] *Aristotle can help young leaders create meaning in difficult moments*, Kayvan Kian (2019) https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/the-organization-blog/aristotle-can-help-young-leaders-create-meaning-in-difficult-moments

[5] *Leadership: 3 reflective leadership habits of highly effective leaders*, Hudson https://au.hudson.com/insights/leadership/reflective-leadership/