

COURAGE



Calling for courage in business situations is as non-controversial as calling for correct addition on expense reports. So why is it so often lacking? Courage is lost - or found - in each individual's thinking.

"Do you have the courage," a pundit challenged an HR team discussing a restructure of the staffing function, "to prove the business value of what you do to non-believers? To take on a troubled division and turn it around? Or to offer a side-by-side comparison between the performance of a division you work with, and one you don't?"

HR managers were also asked to show courage at a company where word of layoffs had become public before the affected people could be told. It was their job, said the senior vp, to make sure that layoffs were handled with as much compassion as possible, even if that meant overriding their business unit manager. "Get in front of the train if you have to!" admonished the VP.

The spotlight also fell on courage as Wal-Mart's former vice chairman, Thomas M. Coughlin, was forced to resign from its board this spring. Coughlin's ouster followed an internal investigation of alleged financial improprieties. The Wall Street Journal reported on March 28 that Wal-Mart President/CEO planned to tell company employees in an internal telecast, "If you see something or someone asks you to do something that you know is wrong – whether that is a buddy or a supervisor or lee Scott – you must have the courage to say 'no.'"

Such sentiments are hardly surprising. Calling for courage in business situations is as non-controversial as calling for correct addition on expense reports. As it's such a common value, why is it so often lacking?

The answer to that is not in the externals, but in the internal game of leading. Courage is lost – or won – in each individual's thinking.

When we join an organization, we necessarily align our personal priorities with those of others. We create a result that is mutually gratifying when what is best for the company fits with our own sense of purpose, when the company's culture is consistent with our values.

Sustaining that kind of work experience takes clarity of intention. Even if something occurs that is contrary to personal purpose or values, the company has not control over our clarity. Nope. It's our own fearful thoughts that all-too-often shake us off the beam: "What if I don't please my bosses? What if I look stupid? Why should I be different from everybody else?"

Sadly, those nagging voices become the loudest when we need courage most; when our organization – and we – face significant change. We must move from what is known, what is safe, what is comfortable, what is habit. We must ask, “What is the future? What is required? What is desired? What is compelling?” And to do that, we must cross what we call the “Courage Line:” becoming comfortable with being uncomfortable; remaining steadfast through instability.

So how can we transcend fear? How can we tap into the strength necessary to make change? And the courage to do the right things?

Step one is to increase your level of awareness. We’ve learned to think of fear as a stop sign. It doesn’t mean, “Shut down the engine forever; decorate the car and raise your family right here.” Rather, a stop sign says, “Warning! There’s something tricky up ahead. You need to really pay attention. Stop, look, listen...and then proceed with caution.”

That means we need to take advantage of all the information resources available to us. Too often in business, we operate strictly on the intellectual level. “Everybody knows” it’s not good to be emotional in the office. In our eagerness to “keep our heads in the game,” we stop paying attention to not only our emotions, but also our physical sensations. Fact is, these can provide us with important information, and with a connection to deeper resources of common sense, insight, wisdom. The road to courage in a threatening situation can begin with noticing what you’re feeling – physical sensations, emotions.

The more intense your feelings, the more you can be sure that you’ve got a whole lot of thinking going on. So the next step is to be your own detective. Seek out whatever thoughts are behind your feelings. Notice, too, the language you use with others; what does that point to in your thoughts?

Freeze frame your thoughts; identify those that are negative. Then ask yourself: “Do I really want to continue this type of thinking? And why?” Remember: you – and only you – are the thinker of those thoughts; you – and only you – can choose how seriously you can take them, and what to do about them.

You can shift your thoughts – from fearful to courageous – by these steps:

1. Summon presence.

Turn off the radio, TV, computer, cell phone – whatever might stimulate your nervous system. Take a few deep breaths. Sit quietly. Dismiss thoughts about the past (second-guessing) or the future (worry). Simply be present.

2. Call to mind your personal sense of purpose and values.

What is important to you? What makes you feel good when you look in the mirror? What do you want your children and grandchildren to say about you? What would you want written in your obituary? Connect to your grounding.

3. From that state of mind, consider the worst thing that can happen – and take it all the way to its conclusion.

Consider others, and how your decisions will impact them. Be aware of old habits, and consciously look for new perspectives and possibilities.

4. What you need to do will show up as something obvious, as the natural decision to make, step to take.

“Fear is the mindkiller,” Frank Herbert wrote in the science fiction classic, Dune. Don’t let fear “kill” your mind – i.e., shut off your access to your common sense, intuition, innate wisdom. By becoming aware of your thinking, take the sting out of fear. And cross the “Courage Line.”

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