

Leading with Courage: Why and How Good Leaders Go Out on a Limb

Courage. Some leaders possess it. Some don't. It is a differentiator in today's complex organisational world. Some organisations embrace it. For others, leaders' behaviours and business practices make it appear foreign.

US academic Kathleen Reardon provides a tangible perspective of how courage manifests itself in some leaders: *"Courage is rarely impulsive. Nor does it emerge from nowhere. In business, courage is really a special kind of calculated risk-taking. People who become good leaders have a greater than average willingness to make bold moves, but they strengthen their chances of success - and avoid career suicide - through careful deliberation and preparation."* (From 'Courage as a Skill', *Harvard Business Review*, January 2007.)

Courage in the business world is complex, whether struggling with business paradox or dilemmas for which there are no clear cut answers, or exploring uncharted territory. For some leaders, courage is simply about trying something different, and making decisions based on intuition and experience.

It takes courage to make the first move — the big 'leap' sometimes based on nothing more than faith and intuition. Leaders must be bold to objectively evaluate the last action and to consistently challenge themselves and others to the highest standards - both morally and related to performance. In sum, there simply is no way to truly test one's mettle or to exercise courage without a 'test'. That test or trial comes as a daunting obstacle, throng of resistance, or future unknown. When it arrives unannounced, it promises grave consequences if one's calculations prove in error, or efforts fall short of the goal.

Crucial to a high-performance culture

Courage is a skill that is essential to business excellence in execution; crucial to ensure a thriving, high performance culture.

Leaders must have courage. In this world of change and complexity, courage is needed to:

- **Spur discussions of ‘un-discussibles’.** Leaders who drudge up ‘off-limit’ topics take the heat — but also take the action necessary to move forward.
- **Fight complacency and strategise turnaround.** It takes a bold leader who can objectively evaluate past successes and failures, and use what’s learned to create a new direction.
- **Empower others, define accountabilities, and set expectations of excellence.** Setting others up for success takes excellent leadership.
- **Move from ‘I’ to ‘we’.** It takes courage to build value with others instead of alone.

Innovation is a key driver of sustainability and long-term organisational success. Courageous leaders make this happen by:

- **Exploring the unknown.** Stepping out of the box, the silo, the rhythm or the status quo is a necessary discomfort to realise the next big idea.
- **Trusting one’s ‘gut’.** A leader’s intuition and instincts are honed by years of experience. Sometimes trusting them is a necessary leap of faith.
- **Nurturing the creative.** Removing boundaries, enabling time to think provocatively, and the breathing room needed to uncover a great idea together.
- **Taking measured risks.** This calculation is often built on years of experience, but ultimately leaders must be able to pull the trigger and commit to an uncertain plan with potential but no promises.
- **Contingency planning.** Courageous leaders think it through.

A good or courageous leader?

*‘An executive without courage is a captive of fear who cannot lead others across the river.’ - Gus Lee, in *Courage: The Backbone of Leadership**

Gus Lee offers a provocative analogy about the necessity of this skill. Courage may not be needed for days or weeks at a time. But suddenly and without notice, a paradox or a problem may be uncovered and the leader will need to take an action that will have a major impact. It might make enemies or cross lines. Others may not be willing to recognise or deal with the issue. The leader

must first have the courage to act, rather than avoid the issue and go with the status quo. And courage must guide the right decision.

As Kathleen Reardon's quote at the beginning of this article suggests, courage is a skill - one that encompasses risk-taking, decision-making, and experience. It surfaces when crisis and confusion arise. But it's equally important to head off chaos, when employed to address small breaches destined to erode and become big failures.

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