

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

by Keith Caver, DDI

Courage. Some leaders possess it. Some don't. It's a differentiator. Some organizations embrace it. For others, leaders' behaviours and business practices make it appear foreign. In concept, we understand courage from our earliest days, defining it through images of extraordinary efforts by ordinary people often facing dire situations. But how does courage play out in the world of business? USC professor Kathleen Reardon provides us 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."*

- Kathleen Reardon, 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's evidenced by the daring launch of products such as Apple's iPod and Toyota's Prius. It was displayed by organizations entering China in the '90s, when profits and sound strategies were merely promises and speculation. 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. In the words of many older preachers, "there can be no testimony without a test."

### The Business of Courage

Courage is far more than just a lofty, noble concept, appropriate only for fairy tales and movies. Rather, it's a skill that is essential to business excellence in execution; crucial to ensure a thriving, high performance culture. Let's take a look at two different, yet common, corporate goals that drive business, and how courage plays a part in accomplishing them.

Consider an organization challenged to step up its efforts to reduce costs and improve customer service while turning around lagging associate engagement in a crowded marketplace. In short, this company needs to build a high-performance culture. They need to develop an organizational culture of ongoing excellence and effective growth of the business while maintaining the highest integrity. Building a high-performance culture requires leaders to build talent, drive for results, and coach others to do the same. To achieve these objectives and transform the organization from the inside out, courage will certainly be needed to:

- **Spur discussions of "un-discussibles."** From honest, balanced individual feedback to criticism and objection to organizational norms, taboo subjects stifle an organization's ability to address issues. Leaders who drudge up these "off-limit" topics take the heat - but also take the action necessary to move forward.
- **Fight complacency and strategize turnaround.** When the business needs to change to survive, 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."** A high performance culture isn't possible if all members are working in their own best interests, not those of their organization. Teamwork is essential, but it takes courage to build value with others instead of alone.

Here's another example of a business driver many organizations face when launching new revenue streams: Drive Product Innovation. To do this, an organization must catalyse a culture that consistently generates innovative ideas, products, and services to create competitive advantage. "Change leadership," "empowerment and delegation," and "selling the vision" are all leadership necessities in this culture. Courageous leaders make this happen by:

- **Exploring the unknown.** It's unsettling for many to navigate uncharted territory. But stepping out of the box, the silo, the rhythm or the status quo is a necessary discomfort to realize 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.** Also potentially scary: 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.** When the measured risk falls short, then what? Is there another direction to take, or a lesson to be learned. 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*

My friend and colleague, Gus Lee, writes extensively about courage. He 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 leader will uncover a problem and need to take an action that will have a major impact.

It might make enemies or cross lines. Others may not be willing to recognize or deal with the issue. Whatever the gray area is, the leader must first have the courage to act, rather than avoid the issue and go with the status quo. And his or her courage must guide him to the right decision.

Another way courage differentiates a leader is when he or she is faced with a paradox. Say, for example, your organization needs to both cut manufacturing costs and improve safety for line workers. Two business drivers create a dilemma when a cost-cutting measure introduces a potential threat to safety. Courage is one of the essential skills leaders must use to address such an issue, perhaps as they question management about policies, or institute new rules sure to be unpopular with direct reports.

### Leading with Courage

Scroll back up and read Kathleen Reardon's quote at the beginning of this article again. What I love about Reardon's message is that it captures courage as 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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