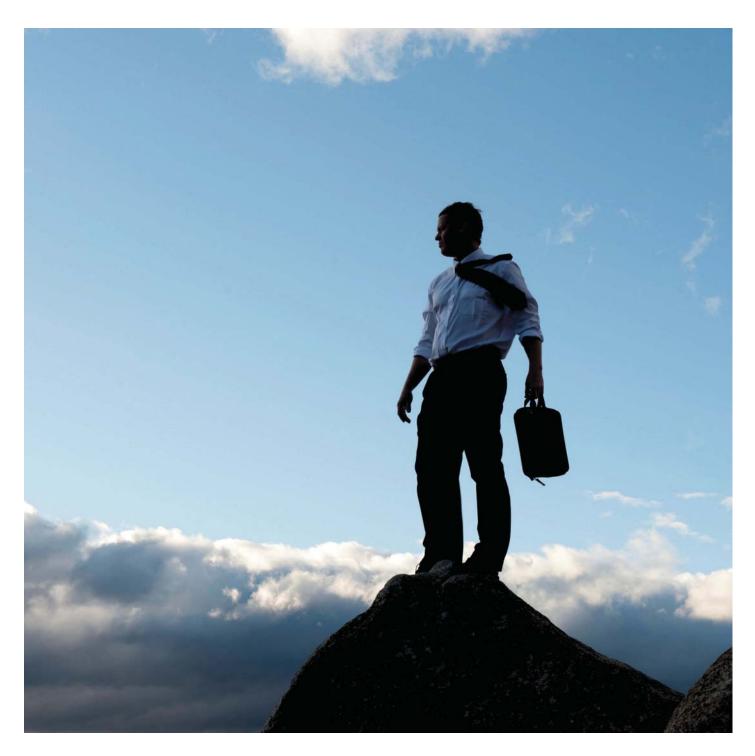# Courage in the Workplace

BY SANDRA FORD WALSTON

In uncertain times, employees are prone to looser ethics and mental paralysis. It takes courage to overcome these tendencies and guide the company through rough waters.

With an anemic economy affecting business vitality, it's important for leaders in learning and development to recognize signs of apprehension and vulnerability in employees. Looser ethical standards, knee-jerk reactions and mental paralysis tend to surface during times of uncertainty and change, and overcoming these basic human tendencies can help to promote a company's long-term survival.

One of the most cost-effective leadership solutions is to tap into everyday courage to strengthen and stabilize an organization. Courage-based leadership requires a re-evaluation of the beliefs, value systems and codes that guide decisions. While this process is neither complex nor dazzling, it can be difficult, and it begins with reflection.

The Courage Paradox

A common misconception is that any business situation can be fixed by doing more — working harder, working longer, taking on more responsibilities. But the paradox of courage requires us to slow down and reflect — to step back and gain perspective. To begin to understand the courage paradox, it helps to understand the true meaning of courage, which comes from the old French word corage, meaning "heart and spirit." Modern society tends to see courage as the type of heroic bravado that puts one's own life at risk to save a child from an oncoming car, for example, but courage is also a manifestation of one's heart-and-spirit identity. In other words, courage isn't so much about what one does as who one is.

By resisting the temptation to take quick action just for the sake of doing something, leaders can turn their attention inward and reassess the beliefs, behaviors, assumptions and control issues that keep organizations stuck in outdated modes of operation. In our hyper-busy electronic world of tablets and smartphones, allowing oneself to slow down and reflect on organizational or even personal life requires embracing courage. When we sit still, turning our attention inward and being quiet, we can find inner sources of energy, liberation, insight and personal courage.

In *The Courage to Be*, philosopher Paul Tillich writes, "Courage is an ethical reality, but it is rooted in the whole breadth of human existence and ultimately in the structure of being itself," which provides an indication of why courage is virtuous. Courageous action is about each individual acting truthfully from his or her heart and spirit. In choosing reflection over action, it's often easier for people to let go of old thought habits and get in touch with their true identity. By identifying with the true heart-and-spirit self, anyone can claim the courage needed to overcome the limitations that can prevent effective leadership. For instance, leaders might ask that sales people turn off their gadgets before meeting clients and center themselves for two minutes to focus on the meeting's purpose.

People must reflect on their own state of being to recognize the misperceptions and attachments that keep them stuck in false identities and counterproductive patterns. For example, observant people re-evaluate their identity to discover what is true and vital, and then summon their courage to step up if called to action or if the need arises. In this way courage replaces elements of uncertainty, enabling employees to gain self confidence and focus their energies on strengthening the organization through improved productivity and innovation.

The Paradox of Uncertainty

Prior attachments are difficult to set aside during cultural shifts. Psychotherapist Anthony de Mello defines attachment "as a belief that without something you are not going to be happy. Once you get convinced of that — and it gets into our subconscious, it gets stamped into the roots of our being — you are finished." The courage paradox is to confront beliefs and let go of misperceptions, which eliminates ambiguous attachments created by the ego, which include everything from inflated self-image to self-righteousness and control issues. For example, it takes practice,

courage and self-awareness for a learning officer to speak the truth in spite of criticism from ego-dominated personalities. Further, learning to implement linguistic techniques that curtail posturing words and mixed messages can increase performance levels and accountability, help employees meet deadlines and sustain enthusiasm.

To be courageous is to live and work from the heart, and it doesn't require purchasing and implementing new technology. But organizations traditionally have been established and defined by the thought processes of the conscious mind, which is inextricably tied to ego. The human ego insists on doing whatever it thinks is necessary to maintain control, so business leaders naturally expend their energies on things such as planning sessions, employee evaluations, training for hard skills, meetings and micro-managing their employees. As long as leaders busily fill up their calen-

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dars with things to do, they have no time to quietly reflect on the heart-and-spirit courage that allows them to be effective.

The tendency in American culture is to value complicated projects instead of simple truths. Simple is efficient. Paradoxically, slowing down to reflect empowers people to accomplish more because they become more focused and therefore can work more efficiently. For example, it is often simpler and more effective for leaders to encourage courageous action and accountability than to expend time and energy trying to control employees through oversight and micro-management. Each department or team is aware of its contributions, and they act on behalf of the organization. Rather than being fragmented, they holistically sustain promises, and cumulative accountability grows out of that unity.

By promoting personal courage, leaders can develop a sort of Zen fitness at work — a calming, enlightening influence that supports efficiency and productivity. For example, slowing down to examine the path forward fosters a better understanding of where an organization is headed, while furiously charging ahead exposes the organization to dangerous pitfalls.

Uncertain times call for change. Doing more and more of the same old thing is not sufficient. In *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation,* educator Parker Palmer writes, "We have arrived at the heart of paradoxes: each time a door closes, the rest of the world opens up. All we need to do is stop pounding on the door that just closed, turn around — which puts the door behind us — and welcome the largeness of life that now lies open to our souls. The door that closed kept us from entering a room, but what now lies before us is the rest of reality." Ask these questions:

• What intrinsically simple adjustments can be made to stop pacing in the hallway and welcome the next door?
• What perceptions need to be re-evaluated?
• What attachments need to be released to achieve a Zen quality at work?

If an individual can clearly see the current predicament, he or she is primed to step beyond it.

The Paradox of Simplicity

Courage tends to be identified with emotional, dramatic events, the stuff of soap opera sagas, Hollywood thrillers and tabloid headlines. But emotional reactions create little more than drama, which distracts everyone involved from accomplishing necessary tasks. For example, a learning leader who learns that training budgets have been cut can view the cuts as a threat to his or her authority, stirring up emotions such as anger and resentment. Armed with emotional self-justification, it would be easy to blame others for the budget cuts and create unnecessary drama and resentment instead of making the best of a tough situation and perhaps unearthing new, valuable insights via creative alternatives derived to get around the budgetary deficits.

Leaders of legendary stature began as ordinary people. Against the odds, courageous leaders of the past such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Nelson Mandela acted from their hearts and applied courageous leadership behaviors that empowered them to make a difference. Bonhoeffer, a Christian pastor, died in a Nazi prison for his simple, courageous actions, but his example and writings continue to inspire people around the world. Mandela's courageous actions sent him to prison, but he ended up serving as president of South Africa, the country that imprisoned him. Their presence lent considerable strength to their causes, and their legacies include the positive ways in which they influenced other people to claim their own courage.

When an organization's leadership becomes stuck in a rigid worldview devoid of any creative spark, courageous leadership has failed. Social psychologist Erich Fromm said, "Creativity requires the courage to let go of certainties," and a lack of creativity reveals a lack

IN PRACTICE DEBUNKING THREE COURAGE MYTHS AT WORK

Uncertainty may seem unavoidable in today's business climate, especially for leaders in learning and development. But the degree of uncertainty within an organization is inversely related to the level of courageous leadership. Without clear, courageous leadership, uncertainty — and the apprehension it generates — can run rampant. A good way to begin developing courageous leadership is to recognize three myths about courage at work.

1. **Courageous leadership is displayed by the majority of people at work.** It's become commonplace to hear about employees being told to do something unethical and then doing it in spite of the obvious inappropriateness. Businesses flourish when corporate ethics honor everyone's courageous intention. Case in point: a woman working at a hospital noticed a peer inadequately sterilizing surgical utensils. Fortunately, she had the courage to report the problem, and hospital management acted to resolve the problem, avoiding injury, costly lawsuits and damaged credibility.

2. **Courageous leadership is demonstrated through feats of heroism.** In business, a hero is the person standing behind the counter who attempts to thwart a robbery or the pilot who makes an emergency landing on the Hudson River. These headline-making feats represent the sensational, amazing or tragic. Most people are not heroes in this sense, but our culture rewards heroic behavior and labels it courageous. However, simple, everyday courage can be a powerful force for positive change, and it's available to everyone. It's what gives someone permission to finally ask for a raise or admit they hired the wrong person.

3. **Courageous leadership development in business is easy.** If the goal is to implement a courageous culture, company executives must lead by example. It's the same with quality control, risk management and employee development. Courageous leadership in business means managing the paradoxes that occur with courage. For example, employees are almost universally told to speak their minds, take a stand and take risks, yet most organizations reward employees who play by the book and play it safe. `CLO`

— *Sandra Ford Walston*

of courage and an absence of true leadership. Because the concepts of courage-centered leadership are deceptively simple, the mind — ego — will find ways to undermine them, especially when uncertainty spawns rampant fears and insecurities. How could something so easy work, and be overflowing with self-fulfillment?

In the article "Simple Courage," René Da Costa, strategist of Renecents Solutions in the U.K., writes that people demonstrate a tendency to shun simplicity for complexity. "Simplicity takes talent and dedication. … It takes courage to advocate simplicity. Simplicity has nowhere to hide and neither do those who advocate it." We become courageous by deciding whether this virtue is worth practicing. Leadership qualities such as self-discipline, self-motivation, accountability and vision are defined by courage.

Leaders do not always need a complex management matrix or an elaborate and lengthy development exercise to become more effective. When individual courage is evident on a grand scale, organizations can experience transformative effects. The motivation to explore courage-based leadership can stem from just about any unsatisfactory business situation — fear of bankruptcy, lack of competitiveness, an uninspired workforce or a top-heavy management hierarchy. Any undesirable situation can be improved by teaching and fostering

courage at work, and learning leaders should have an inherent interest in teaching people how to improve these situations through courage development.

In *Wherever You Go, There You Are,* Jon Kabat-Zinn, professor emeritus of the University of Massachusetts Medical School, writes, "We see that the mind has gotten cluttered over the years, like an attic, with old bags and accumulated junk. Just knowing this is a big step in the right direction." In organizations, this mental clutter produces predictably counterproductive reactions to uncertainty, from high-level training cutbacks to neglecting fundamental truths such as that the foundation that nourishes the heart of the company is its people.

Ironically, the effort expended to hide courage at work produces an energy drain that depletes the spirit of the organization and its employees. By hiding their heart-and-spirit courage, employees are not being true to themselves, which leaves them disconnected and dissatisfied. It doesn't take an intellectual giant to realize the best, most productive employees have a strong sense of identity, self-worth and satisfaction at work. `CLO`

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