

Virtuous Leadership: Courage

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Leadership and the Creative Imagination

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Winston Churchill once said, “Courage is rightly considered the foremost of the virtues, for upon it all others depend.” (Tracy, 2004, p. 237) Courage is not difficult to define, but it is difficult to put into practice. For Aristotle, courage stands between rashness and cowardice. A rash person fears nothing, pretending to be courageous even in the face of disease and war, when fear is appropriate. A cowardly person fears everything, even inappropriate things such as friends and loved ones. Courage is the means between these extremes, and courage is directed toward noble ends (McKeon, 1941, pp.976 – 977).

Courageous leadership means addressing difficult issues. Many leaders are completely uncomfortable with conflict and difficult situations. Sometimes a difficult situation may be a coaching conversation that needs to occur in the workplace or an informal mention of how someone's actions in your organization are detrimental to the group's image and forward momentum. In other ways, the difficult issue could be a much larger question of misplaced strategy or mismanagement. The leadership opportunity here is to stand up and address the issue. Once an individual takes the lead and stands up, other leaders will follow or form a collective group to step forward and address the issue. (Nielson, 2008)

Being a courageous leader also requires a person to stand on their conviction. This balancing act is delicate – an individual doesn't want to be perceived as a leader who cannot admit they are wrong or one who can't be swayed by anyone at any time. If you have taken the time to think through your ideas, get feedback from your team, and process them into a strategic plan, you can stand up for them with confidence. By being confident and having the ability to face challenges you have a greater chance of being successful during difficult situations. (Nielson, 2008)

Leaders that have courage, both real and fictional, have been characters like Franklin D. Roosevelt, Gandhi, or Chris Keller from Arthur Miller's play *All My Sons*. Each decided not to run and hide, but to take the unpopular route and challenge their community and the tough issues that plagued them. Roosevelt followed an unpopular president, and dealt with moving the country out of a depression and through a war. Gandhi, though an educated man, was treated like the lowest class of people by the British Empire. Chris Keller confronted a dark family secret kept by his father.

Just eight days after taking office Franklin Roosevelt faced a challenge as he planned for his first Fireside Chat. As the Stock Market stopped trading, the Chicago Board of Trade bolted its doors and banks stripped rural America of its wealth, Roosevelt needed to exhibit courage and inspire millions of Americans. His ability to speak to the people, and not at them, ignited a national movement to change the direction our country. This was evident the very next day when people lined up at banks to re-deposit the money they hoarded under their mattresses. This helped both the Stock Exchange and banks to reopen. (Alter, 2006) Without Roosevelt's courage to face the banking crisis and the depression head-on we would have experienced a different outcome.

Gandhi realized that non-violence was the strongest weapon to fight against the tyranny of the British Empire. Through his courage he taught the masses how to use this approach to win their independence. He was able to empower the weakest person to have courage and strength and cause the cruelest people to feel remorse. Such was his discipline and his belief that good exists in all humans; one only has to awaken that good from within. (Romachandran) If Gandhi didn't challenge the hierarchy, independence would have taken much longer. Through Gandhi's courage and perseverance India became a free country.

Chris Keller, from Arthur Miller's play *All My Sons*, exhibited courage when he had to confront his father's deadly deed. Chris found that his father made the ill-fated decision to sell cracked cylinder heads to the Army, which resulted in the death of a squadron of pilots. His decision to confront his father was not easy, and it ended with his father taking his own life. The courage that Chris needed to possess was enormous. Holding his own father accountable was the most difficult thing he could have done. He could have taken the easy way out and left it alone. Without courage he would have taken the blood money that his father gave him and lived with the guilt that his father was a murderer and he had done nothing. Instead, he accepted the responsibility to confront his father with courage and conviction.

Courage is developed and strengthened by continuous use. "You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face," wrote Eleanor Roosevelt. "You are able to say to yourself, 'I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.' The danger lies in refusing to face the fear, in not daring to come to grips with it. If you fail anywhere along the line it will take away your confidence. You must make yourself succeed every time. You must do the thing you think you cannot do." (Kidder & Bracy, 2001)

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