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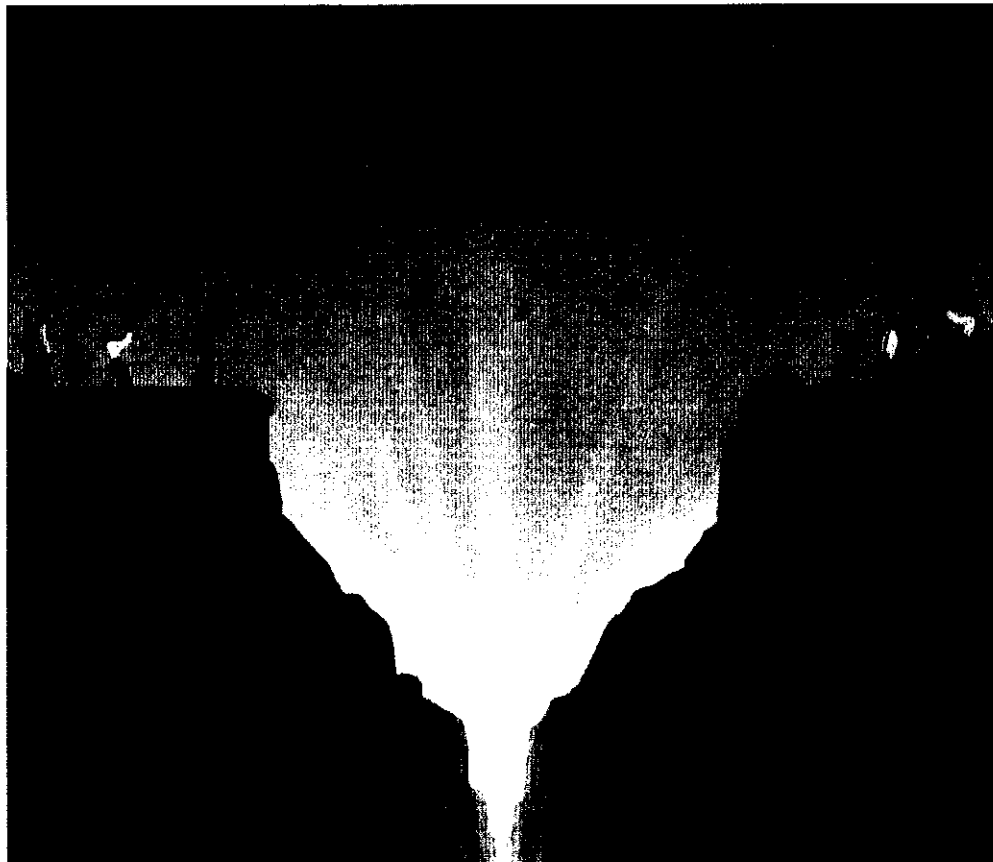
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COURAGEOUS LEADERSHIP: MODELING THE WAY

by Bill Treasurer

Throughout the ages, people have searched for the precise alchemy of characteristics that constitute great leadership. In proper proportion, great leaders demonstrate bold but reasoned judgment, spirited but calculated risk taking, and a confident but never complacent behavioral disposition. Leaders are “whole people” who demonstrate an extraordinary capacity to flex between counterbalancing (and contradictory) characteristics. Followers search for leaders who make decisions decisively but inclusively, who interpret situations with rational and emotional intelligence, and who exude confidence and humility.

The list of characteristics that make up great leadership is so long, and seemingly so contradictory, that the aspiring leader is left to ask, “Where on earth do I start?”

Fortunately, the starting point is clear. One leadership characteristic, or more accurately virtue, informs and strengthens all others: Courage.

Aristotle called courage the first virtue because it makes all the other virtues possible. Winston Churchill echoed this sentiment, calling courage the “first of the human qualities.” In addition to being the most important human virtue, it is the most important business virtue as well. Think about it: other important business concepts like leadership, innovation, and sales wither in the absence of courage. Leadership entails making bold and often unpopular decisions. Innovation involves creating groundbreaking but tradition-defying ideas. Sales requires being rejected over and over before closing a deal. Take away the courage, and sales, innovation, and leadership lose their potency. But courage itself can stand alone.

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For the aspiring leader, getting courage right has many peripheral benefits. It is courage that enables leaders to face troubling times, suffer through hardships, and withstand the scrutiny and second-guessing that followers often subject them to. It is also courage that fortifies the ability to move in a direction where others are too afraid to go, or to take on challenges that others willingly avoid. Courage gives leadership its backbone.

Courage Is Afraid

One thing must be clear from the start—courage is not fearlessness. It is, in fact, the opposite. Courage is fearful. Courage isn't the absence of fear; it is the judgment that you have something more important to achieve that supersedes your fear. As long as you are moving forward, it is precisely those moments when your knees are shaking, your stomach is full of rioting butterflies, and your heart is racing that you are experiencing the fearfulness of your courage.

To understand the fearful nature of courage, consider the words of Sara Blakely. Blakely is the founder of SPANX, a premier women's apparel company that sells products designed to promote comfort and confidence. According to Blakely, "In every situation where I was ever courageous, you could just as easily substitute the word *afraid* for *courageous*. I was afraid, for example, when I started SPANX with \$5,000 in savings. I was afraid when I knocked on the doors of textile mills begging them to manufacture my prototype for a new footless pantyhose. . . . I was afraid when I traveled to Dallas with my lucky red backpack to meet the buyer

at Neiman Marcus to interest her in selling SPANX products. I was afraid the first time I was a guest on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*."

Blakely has made role modeling courageous behavior a top priority at SPANX. She believes that people are more apt to step up to challenges after she does. Also, when a person makes a mistake by taking a risk to move the company forward, instead of blowing a gasket (like all too many leaders are prone to do), she responds by walking up to the mistake-maker and, in her words, giving the person "a big high-five."

In ten years, SPANX has grown into a \$200 million international retail enterprise. And the impetus behind its growth wasn't the iron-fisted commands of a bull-headed leader; it was the tenacity of a kind-hearted, down-to-earth, and generous woman who always moves forward with courage despite being afraid. Blakely knows that the fearfully mobile—those who are afraid but carry on toward their goals in spite of their fears—are truly courageous.

Courage Focuses on What Is Worthy

Courage without discipline is a wild beast. A sword swallower is courageous, but what is redeeming about that? To have the greatest impact, courage needs to be put in the service of worthy goals and causes. Like leadership, courage matters most when it is focused on bettering the lives of others.

Richard Salem is the founder of Enable America, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping disabled Americans find employment and live independently.

PERSONAL COURAGE-BUILDING TIP #1: HONOR YOUR COURAGE HISTORY

Make a list of all the times you have been afraid at work but pressed on despite your fears. Start with the words, "I was afraid when I . . ." Then go back and substitute *courageous* for the word *afraid*. Consider how you might apply the lessons that you've learned while being afraid in the past to the current situation you're dealing with.

Courage without discipline is a wild beast.

As Salem will tell you, there are some 54 million disabled Americans in the United States, making them the largest minority population. Yet they are significantly underemployed—about 70 percent of disabled people do not have jobs. This is despite the fact that those who are employed have higher retention rates than the nondisabled and make extremely loyal and hardworking employees.

Enable America's mission of raising employment rates among people with disabilities is noble enough. But it has taken on new meaning since the start of the Iraq war, which has created an instant generation of disabled Americans. To serve the unique needs of this group, in 2006 Enable America launched a new division called VetConnect, dedicated to serving those who become disabled while serving their country.

Salem is a remarkable fellow. In addition to Enable America and VetConnect, the Duke-educated lawyer founded and runs four other for-profit and nonprofit organizations. His never-say-no optimism is contagious, inspiring, and even a little frustrating. Employees have trouble keeping up with Salem's thoroughbred pace.

Any small frustrations that employees may have about keeping up with Salem are eclipsed by the admiration that they have for him as a leader. They know that Salem is a man on a mission, a person whose courage has discipline and focus. They see his courage every day, when he "speaks truth to power" and lobbies politicians on behalf of the disabled, and when he meets with powerful company executives and appeals to them to hire hardworking Americans with disabilities. They know that Salem's cause, to create opportunities for

disabled Americans—whether an adult with cerebral palsy or a Gulf War veteran who now walks on prosthetic legs—is very, very personal. Richard Salem is blind.

It is easier to be courageous when your courage is applied to a worthwhile and deeply personal goal. Most people could not muster up the courage to jump off a 100-foot high-dive ladder. But the same people would do so without care if they saw their own child drowning in the pool below. Salem, the courageous and mission-obsessed lawyer from Tampa, takes high dives every day—and he can't even see the pool.

Courage Is Jumping First

To help workers confidently face their fears, the leader's job is to put courage inside people—to encourage them. To get followers to move away from the safe shores of today and toward a compelling vision of tomorrow, the leader needs to activate the followers' courage. The hard truth is people won't start being courageous just because you tell them to. You need to show them that you know what it's like to be scared. If you as the leader want workers to take organizational "high dives"—in the form of large, skill-stretching challenges—then you yourself need to be the first one up and off the high dive platform, just as Richard Salem did. I call this form of courage role modeling "leadership by jumping first."

Leaders must be willing to be the first to initiate movement toward where they want others to follow. Leaders have to be willing to go there—with "there" being

PERSONAL COURAGE-BUILDING TIP #2: HAVE A CAUSE FOR COURAGE

Write down a list of all the things you care deeply about (not including essentials like money, food, and sex). Ask yourself which "causes" you have been avoiding and why. Next, look at the list and select one item that you would be proud to apply your courage toward. Finally, identify three actions you will take immediately to champion the cause.

politically dicey, interpersonally awkward, or just plain scary places. Usually, at the start of a consulting engagement, when an executive whispers to me, “Whatever you do, don’t go there,” that is precisely the matter that is tripping up the organization. In contrast, courageous leaders know that despite the political challenges, opportunities are often to be found “there.”

Randy Willis is a senior executive with Accenture, one of the world’s largest management consulting companies. Willis is a jump-first leader who knows the value of “going there,” even if it means jumping straight into a political lightning storm.

Much of Accenture’s business involves business process outsourcing, and some of it is done offshore. Often, Accenture clients can reap significant cost savings by using the company’s offshore operations (such as those in India or the Philippines). But offshore outsourcing is a political hot potato, causing a significant amount of business—specifically business with the U.S. government—to be lost. Many state and federal contracts prevent suppliers of government services from using offshore call centers, for example, often citing government security issues as the reason. More often the real reason is that offshore outsourcing is such a politically charged subject that most politicians won’t support projects that benefit from the use of offshore resources. Their constituents would complain too much about moving American jobs overseas.

Willis, a Sioux who spent some of his formative years on a Native American reservation, combined a number of disparate factors and wove them into an idea rich with potential. Accenture’s government clients were looking for a way to get high-quality services at competitive rates delivered onshore. Willis thought, why not build a call center on a Native American reservation? Most reservations are in rural areas, so labor costs would be significantly lower. Additional cost savings could be realized because reservations are not subject to corporate income tax. Plus, the people living on reservations have deep roots, so there would be a “stickiness” to the labor pool, resulting in much lower turnover rates than those experienced in major metropolitan areas.

Jumping first often starts by watching where the herd is headed—and then moving in the opposite direction. When most companies had turned away from even trying to secure government call-center work, Willis moved away from the herd and came up with an attractive way to win government contracts while creating opportunities for people of his own heritage. The idea was received with enthusiasm by Willis’s government clients, his Accenture colleagues, and, what is more important, by the leaders of the Confederate Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR). Like many tribal leaders, the CTUIR was looking for a way to invest the considerable cash resources that the tribe was taking in through its casino. This investment would make it possible to create sustainable employment opportunities for their tribal members.

Cayuse Technologies opened in 2008 and is a first-of-its-kind provider of technology and call-center services. The business, based on the reservation in rural Oregon, is a solely owned enterprise of the CTUIR. The facility, which provides call-center, documentation-preparation, and software-development services, sits directly across from the Wild Horse Resort & Casino. Notably, all the revenues stay on the reservation. Willis and Accenture’s clients benefit by having ready access to low-cost technology labor to meet the outsourcing needs of its clients, while Accenture is paid to manage the operations. By jumping first, Willis found a way to create opportunities that satisfy the needs of thousands of people. Now that’s courage.

PERSONAL COURAGE-BUILDING TIP #3: MOVE AWAY FROM THE HERD

Make a list of all the seemingly intractable challenges facing your organization. Prioritize the challenges by identifying which ones other executives are most apt to move away from. Next, identify the actions that you could take to move toward the challenges. Finally, ask yourself what acts of courage might solve the challenge.



Bill Treasurer is founder of Giant Leap Consulting (www.giantleapconsulting.com), a company that exists to help people and organizations live more courageously, and the author of "Courage Goes to Work: How to Build Backbones, Boost Performance, and Get Results." He is a former member of the U.S. High Diving Team and performed more than 1,500 high dives from heights that scaled to above 100 feet—three times the height of the highest platform in the Olympic games. Bill has led workshops for Accenture, CNN, EarthLink, Credit Suisse First Boston, SPANX, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Department of Veterans Affairs, among others.