

A Different Look at Courage

By Steven C. Coats

Courage is a word quite frequently associated with great leaders. And it is demonstrated in several ways. For example, in the movies, you will often see the “leaders” such as Aragorn in *Lord of the Rings* or William Wallace in *Braveheart* on horseback bravely leading the troops against unstoppable enemy forces. Or you might see the captain of the fire department toss a few of his underlings out of the way as he rushes into the burning house to save the children. These larger than life acts of bravery and courage are always inspiring, especially when viewed on the big screen.

But what does courage look like on a day-to-day basis for the rest of us? From my years of work with leaders, I tend to see examples of courage in a different way. It is seldom about the grand gesture of putting on the armor and leading a commando team into Iran to rescue company employees taken hostage, as was done by EDS in 1978.

Rather, it is more about simply taking a stand on values or

beliefs in very difficult situations. I have found it is much easier to talk about values, particularly lofty, aspirational ones, than it is to actually live them, especially when times get tough. Yet when I ask people to describe one of the aspects they most admire in a favorite leader, *standing up for what they believe in or value* is one of the most frequent responses.

Why Courage is Needed

There are a couple of reasons why it takes courage to take a stand. Values are very personal, and because of that, not everyone else shares yours. Conflicts over columns on a spreadsheet or the right template for a presentation can be exasperating, but are resolvable. Conflicts over values are not so easy to settle. Although almost any book on organizational effectiveness states how vital it is to appreciate differences, that advice is much harder to practice when some of those differences are core values.

Part of the issue is definition. People often assign their own

personal meaning to values. So, values such as respect, fairness, or quality mean different things to different people. For example, back in the early '90s, the basic belief of *Respect for the Individual* at IBM became translated by employees to mean lifetime employment with no layoffs. This came to light when the company experienced the first layoff in its history, and stunned employees accused the company of violating its key values.

Funny thing, respect was never formally defined that way at IBM. Yet, in the minds of many of those facing the loss of their jobs, uninterrupted, lifetime employment is exactly what *Respect for the Individual* meant.

This misunderstanding can easily lead to the conclusion that, “my definition is better than yours.” I have literally witnessed this kind of non-winnable argument on a number of occasions. My guess is that you have also. Because values are so personal and important, people may do some unusual things to justify their points of view.

I have often wondered how differently people regarded the values of freedom and equality back in the days of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I sometimes reflect on the number of different definitions those two values have, even today.

Another Source of Conflict

The other conflict-creating issue is that too often people believe their own values are more important than someone else's. "For Pete's sake, how could you not place a high value on honesty, integrity or responsibility?" Notice the implied judgement on a question like this. Remember, the judgement does not have to be outwardly stated, just internally felt. (Care to admit whether you have ever judged someone else's values to be inferior to your own?)

As I write this, there is immense controversy about the recently passed law in Indiana, allowing people the right to not have to compromise their religious beliefs when transacting business. What a firestorm! People on both sides can certainly make their cases.

To the advocates, it took courage for the governor to take a stand on the need to honor religious beliefs. To those opposed, it is a stupid

law which overtly sanctions discrimination. You can decide for yourself.

However, I will say that whenever religious values are in play, emotional controversy is usually just around the corner. It appears that remaining closed on Sundays (like Chick-fil-A) is no longer a big deal, but when those values begin colliding with issues such as contraception, abortion, or same sex marriage, watch out!

Based on the outcry from the Indiana law, I get the impression the governor may have preferred to actually run into a collapsing, burning building, rather than defend this decision.

Because values are defined differently, or just plain disregarded in importance, you can easily face a wave of opposition when standing up for them. This is why it takes some guts, backbone, and persistence to publicly live those values you profess.

A few years back, Fisk Johnson, CEO of SC Johnson, opted to change the formula on the highly profitable Saran Wrap. As someone who is personally and organizationally concerned about the environment, he was unwilling to allow this product, which contained the toxic polyvinylidene chloride, to continue to be offered. With

PVDC removed, Saran Wrap lost much of its competitive edge, and market share suffered. Its stickiness, odor protection, and freshness advantages pretty much disappeared.

Market share today remains around 11%, down from its PVDC high of 18%. So there was a measurable, financial consequence of Johnson's decision. However, he would still tell you today, this decision was the right thing to do.

Our challenge as leaders is not to find new values, but to live the ones we already profess.

John Gardner

There is one last short, but important thing to remember about courage and values. We already know that courage is often required in order to stand up for your beliefs. However, it may take just as much courage to actually more carefully listen to, and fully understand the values which others hold near and dear, and are committed to live and defend.

This understanding requires more than patience. It poses a threat that we may actually need to change our opinions

about what we believe regarding absolute right and wrong. We may indeed discover, and have to admit that those opposing us do actually make a good point or two along the way. Heaven

forbid that should ever happen.

So, in our often shortsighted and unforgiving world today, I hope you can find the courage to be both a role model of

living your key values, and understanding the values of others. Never underestimate how challenging either of these leadership actions can be.

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