


# DEVELOPMENT

## Courage Leadership

How to claim your courage and help others do the same.

By Sandra Ford Walston

*This article is second in a two-part series*

 "Collaborative Decision Making" (Development, July T+D).

Speaking up at a company meeting. Confronting gossip. Making the transition to a new position. Opportunities for courage leadership occur at work nearly every day, and are often the defining moments of a person's career. Unfortunately, most people don't con-

sider courage to be a primary work value. They mistakenly believe that courage is relevant only during particularly perilous times, or that only executives can demonstrate courage leadership. In reality, courage is crucial in a wide range of work situations, and anyone in a company can demonstrate courage leadership. Whether your position is entry-level or executive, how

you confront work issues and how you manage your professional development speak volumes about your courage quotient and set a leadership example for other people.

### What courage is

The French word *courage* means “heart and spirit.” Great leaders throughout history have acted from their hearts, but the definition of courage has been narrowed to simple heroics. Courage, however, means a lot more, and it is key for each one of us. According to Aristotle, courage is the first human virtue because it makes all of the other virtues possible.

Here are a few ways in which courage can be applied at work.

**Revealing vulnerability.** Having to learn a new software program may generate feelings of anxiety or ineptness. But revealing vulnerability is a courage behavior. Courage leaders are able to say, “I’m in over my head and need assistance to guide me through this transition.”

**Voicing an unpopular opinion.** Courage leaders don’t give up easily on opinions and judgments they feel to be right, even when challenged. They’re not close-minded; rather, they leave conformity and safety behind to offer opinions and solutions that may be unpopular. Enron and WorldCom are examples of companies lacking courageous change agents.

**Making sacrifices for long-term goals.** It takes courage to attend evening classes for a degree or give up vacation time to focus on a sideline that’s one’s real passion. Courage leaders know career advancement is worth the necessary time and sacrifice.

People with courage state their goals and then work backwards to find ways to achieve them. They develop new models when old models don’t work. They move forward and upward, never quit, and take risks to reinvent them-

selves. Their drive for constant learning and improved performance builds their courage and helps them achieve success.

### Stepping up with courage

Building your courage and advancing professionally are similar to climbing a 6-foot ladder. The first step is low and wide, and each consecutive step is higher and narrower. Near the top of the ladder, the ascent gets shakier as the steps taper.

As you climb each step of the ladder, your motivation intensifies to improve, to commit to the organization’s goals, and to seize opportunities. Unfortunately, 20 percent of people never make

refocus and continue their climb. For such courage leaders, settling isn’t an option. They reach the top rung.

Which rung will satisfy you?

### Tips for applying courage at work

Courage leaders recognize defining moments and apply courage consciously. Here’s how to do it.

**Affirm your strengths constantly.** Realize that no one expects you to be perfect, only to do your best. Take time for daily reflection so you can evaluate your strengths and how to best use them. When you know how your talents can benefit your organization, you’ll act with determination.

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it past the first rung: They don’t identify goals. The other 80 percent set goals but, as the challenges increase, take a break to regroup and refuel. The majority of those people decide they’re content to stay where they are, so they settle in.

Only a few people reset their goals, commit to their original vision and purpose, and continue to climb. When they reach an obstacle, they ask themselves, Do I really want my goal? Then, after reevaluating their path, they decide whether the sacrifice is worth it. If they need to adjust their plan, they do. They

**Hurdle obstacles, take risks.** Every behavior you exhibit and every action you take are conscious choices. Give yourself permission to choose to be different so you can creatively navigate your way around, through, or over any obstacles in your path. When you feel fearful, ask yourself, What’s the worst that can happen if I do this? Usually, the worst never happens. So take the risk.

**Manifest vision.** There are no shortcuts in courage leadership. Develop a crystal clear vision of your goal, and become stubborn about attaining it. That will help you discard any nonproductive

## Build Your CQ

Practice this exercise to enhance your courage quotient: Recall a specific moment in your work life when you were proud of yourself. Maybe you finally confronted the supervisor who always berated you in front of others, or perhaps you committed to learning a new skill that benefited your career. Relive that experience, and determine the specific behavior you used that made the difference. That was your courage at work!

Think of a recent time when courage wasn't called upon, when you didn't act decisively. That was a missed opportunity that can never be reclaimed. Think about how the outcome could've been different if you'd acted with courage.

State your intent to claim your courage. Write it down and post it prominently. Keep asking, Am I acting courageously?

Confront issues even when your own job is at stake. Be vulnerable, and admit a mistake. Reinvent yourself.

judgments others may make about you. **Reflect self-esteem.** All of your actions reflect who you are and what you stand for. If you're repeating a certain behavior that you don't like, ask, What do I need to change? Sharpen your skills and abilities through education, reading, and training, and surround yourself with the kind of people you want to emulate.

**Speak up.** If you feel uncomfortable in a situation, listen to your intuition and tell those involved why you believe the situation isn't right. Exercise your voice of courage when someone puts you down or when watercooler gossip gets out of hand.

**Claim your courage now.** If courage has eluded you in the past, now is the time to demonstrate your heart and spirit. Confront issues even when your own job is at stake. Be vulnerable, and admit a mistake. Reinvent yourself to transcend an old career and begin a new one. And most important, manifest a vision and realize it. When you take a de-

cisive course of action, you become a catalyst for change and an initiator who can lead others to the same path. With such courageous leadership capabilities, professional success is assured.

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