

1 The Business Case for Courage

*Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage.*¹

—Anais Nin

Anna is the kind of person we all want to work with. She is considerate, compassionate, and approachable. In an industry where attracting and retaining talent is nearly impossible, Anna has been extraordinarily successful at keeping her people happy. When I first met Anna, I was in the process of visiting various locations throughout her organization to facilitate feedback from employees in the field. Before meeting Anna and her team, I had heard nothing but gripes from overworked and underpaid employees in other locations, most of whom pointed their fingers at poor leadership—especially in the “disconnected” corporate office. But Anna’s team offered a very different perspective. Their unique account of their experiences was uplifting. I spoke with one team member who held one of the least desirable jobs in the company, having to work at all hours of the night to dispatch calls from employees in the field. He said, “Even if the competition paid me double, I wouldn’t leave this company. Anna treats us like family.”

Anna did, in fact, strike me as a warm and caring matriarch, protectively hovering and providing for her flock. My visit fell on a Friday morning, and per tradition, Anna had brought in her homemade

pastries. Before she could set them down on the breakroom table, greedy hands dug in, and her team clustered together to catch up on the week. I used this time as an opportunity to informally learn more about Anna's leadership. I heard nothing but praise for Anna's kindness and generosity.

After such an unusual visit, I returned to the corporate office to report back to the divisional president, excited to share a success story amid the myriad of dysfunctional stories I had cataloged during previous site visits. When I concluded sharing my testimonial to Anna's great leadership, the president shook his head in disappointment. He then pulled up an Excel spreadsheet and began walking me through Anna's key performance indicators compared to her peers in similar positions around the country.

On average, Anna paid her employees 25 percent more than other teams, even though the cost of living in her region was significantly less expensive. She had three times more resources allocated to the team's workload than her counterparts, and yet her branch was underperforming in every metric the company measured. In fact, year after year, the problems had progressively gotten worse. The president said, "Anna's people are happy and they don't leave because she babies them and lets them get away with not working. She doesn't do the hard stuff, and she is failing." He continued, "If she really cared about her people, she'd make some tough decisions because as it stands now, her branch is in jeopardy of being eliminated altogether." Six months later, Anna and her 60 employees were let go, and her office was closed.

Throughout the world, a business's success ultimately hinges on two things: the ability to increase revenue and the ability to drive down costs. Even if the business is a nonprofit whose mission is to save lives, without donations coming in and cost being managed, the mission cannot be achieved. In an ever increasingly competitive marketplace of doing more with less, it's not what you did for me yesterday that matters but what you can do for me today. Shareholders want to see progress, customers want innovations, end users want

enhancements, and patients want cures. These lofty goals don't manifest themselves. They require risk, overcoming obstacles, facing fears, and challenging the status quo. They require a courageous leader.

The Fear of Discomfort and Pain

When you were growing up, if you were lucky, you may have had one or more parents who said you could be anything you wanted to be—if you just wanted it badly enough and worked hard enough. But desire and work ethic alone are not enough. Courage is a fundamental building block to success. It is what differentiates the dreamers from the achievers. When we think of courageous people, we often associate their courage with their behaviors. And although how we see courage is in action, we often miss an inherent and important step that comes first—our emotions.

To explore this further, consider how you would feel encountering three possible scenarios for yourself. In each of these scenarios, take note of your emotions.

Scenario 1. You just ran into your college roommate for the first time in many years. Imagine for a moment how this encounter would likely play out. Would you be excited to see each other, spilling into old stories about fall homecoming games and late nights studying at the local café? Or would you be embarrassed and ashamed, his or her presence a reminder of how foolish and young you once were? In either case, you likely would feel something. Would you categorize that encounter as pleasant or painful?

Scenario 2. Imagine you are meeting a coworker in the cafeteria the morning following a dispute. You have been concerned that your coworker is unfairly targeting one of your team members and creating unnecessary conflict. On the other hand, he believes you are trying to cover up for your team's poor performance rather than taking responsibility. Your last conversation was heated, and you agreed to disagree.

Now, there he is standing in front of you. How do you feel? Do you imagine this encounter to be pleasant or painful?

Scenario 3. Imagine you are leaving a meeting with your boss during which you both presented to customers. During the presentation, your boss took credit for your ideas and eagerly accepted the praise of the customer. She seems to be oblivious to the problem while you are left baffled. How do you imagine this encounter would likely play out? Would you describe it as pleasant or painful?

The Courageous Leader is about being courageous in tough times. So, what are tough times, and what, exactly, is courage?

- Tough times are situations or people we encounter that create some level of discomfort or pain.
- Courage is what moves us to action in the face of tough times.

Recall a time when you were asked to assess your pain on a scale of 1 to 10, with 2 being little pain, 6 moderate pain, and 10 the worst pain you've ever felt. Now, think about the exercise we just completed, considering your emotional responses when you encountered the three different people. What was the level of pain each scenario would have created for you? (Refer to Figure 1.1.)



Figure 1.1 Pain Scale

Most of the time, when we encounter unpleasant people or situations, we experience some level of discomfort and even pain. If you are like most people, confronting your boss about taking credit for your ideas would likely not be comfortable and may even be painful. The fear of that pain is what stalls most leaders. Leaders who lack courage don't have the necessary conversations with their bosses. Instead, they hedge their bets that somehow miraculously the bosses will figure out how they feel and change their behavior accordingly without them having to say or do anything that creates pain. But let's take a step back into Reality Ville for a minute and talk about what really happens. What really happens is that the boss keeps taking credit for work that isn't hers to claim, and the leader puts a lid on the pot of resentment, hoping it doesn't boil over.

After many years of teaching leaders across the globe how to have tough conversations, I noticed one very consistent dilemma arises time and time again. Individuals would leave the class motivated to provide tough feedback to a boss or stand up for themselves to a peer, or talk with a family member about an unresolved dispute. They would also leave armed with new skills, having practiced the conversations competently, and yet nine times out of 10, they would never hold the conversation, or at least not the version they had prepared for. It left me speechless and wondering what was going on. After considering this more carefully, what I've come to understand is that in each of these scenarios, the individuals were both motivated and skilled at facing their tough situation or person head-on, but they lacked the courage to move forward in the face of the pain.

Let's be clear; tough times are more than just tough conversations. Tough times are tough decisions, tough encounters, tough changes, and tough circumstances. The list of scenarios is endless, but here are some examples that commonly show up in the workplace:

- Standing up to the boss about unethical behavior
- Telling an employee he isn't cutting it when he seems to be giving it his all

- Restructuring your organization and eliminating positions
- Getting feedback that others don't believe in you or trust you
- Asking a boss to be more respectful of your time
- Holding someone accountable to his or her commitments
- Disagreeing with your team on an important issue
- Admitting that you made a mistake

Pain Thresholds

Our threshold for pain is entirely subjective. Pain is a stimulus, and how we perceive that stimulus will differ based on our individual propensity to sense it and tolerate it.^{2,3} I first became aware of this phenomenon about six months into my first pregnancy. The reality that, to have my baby, I would have to subject myself to a tremendous amount of pain hit me hard. Anyone who knows me understands that, when it comes to physical pain, I am likely to be the first to leave running and screaming. In fact, I passed out the first time I had to get blood drawn and almost hyperventilated when I was informed that drawing blood would be a regular routine until the baby was born. Officially, when it comes to pain, I am a wimp. So the prospect of primal-screaming kind of pain during labor just did not seem like a viable option for me, despite knowing that millions of women—literally—had done this before and survived.

I told my doctor that I wanted to schedule surgery. He seemed a little puzzled, sifting through my file looking for an explanation of my request. When he couldn't find one, he reminded me that I was in good health and so was my baby, and there was no need for surgery. I told him I wanted surgery because I did not like pain. My doctor assured me that there would be pain involved in surgery as well. I asked him whether there would be less pain in surgery than in natural delivery, and he said yes, there would be less pain. When he realized I was serious, he chuckled a little and

told me that it was my choice. He said my baby would be healthy and would love me just as much either way. That was all I needed to hear. I left his office with a date for surgery three months later. This, of course, is a decision most moms probably can't fathom and may even shake their heads at in disapproval. And I'm okay with that. I have two healthy children who love me, and I have no knowledge of the pain associated with natural childbirth. I'll accept others' judgment for my ignorance any day. These are consequences I'm willing to accept.

But in leadership, we don't get to cop out so easily. Or if we do, we suffer bigger consequences with larger impact. In leadership, we are responsible for the collective good we represent. When we don't address a problem, we create a dynamic that touches all parts of the system—like a pebble that causes ripples through water. As leaders, our actions do not just affect us alone—ever. Others are watching what we do and listening to what we say, their goal being to observe and determine how we will lead when faced with tough times. Even though our pain tolerances—or thresholds—may differ, with what seems routine for one feeling like walking over hot coals to another, as leaders, we are all held to the same standard. Leaders are expected to be courageous.

Here is the good news. Although courage is not easy, it is accessible to everyone. Here is the not-so-good news. The way to embrace courage is to embrace pain. It's not that courageous leaders derive pleasure from pain but that they are willing to accept pain as part of the process.

Common Reactions to Tough Times

Although our threshold for pain is different, we are likely to have a common reaction to it. Let me illustrate this by sharing a story you can likely relate to. After an incredibly long travel day, I finally landed at my home airport and shuffled my way through the crowds to the

walkway to the parking garage. As I stepped off the curb and onto the street, pulling my bag behind me, a large bus was barreling toward me. Without a single thought, I instinctively jumped back onto the curb. It took about 30 seconds before I could process what had just happened. It occurred to me afterward that whatever drew me back to safety was not *me* but something instinctual inside me that sensed danger before my sleepy head could acknowledge it. And that's exactly what happened.

We Feel (We Experience Fear, Discomfort, or Pain)

There is a part of our brain that knows instinctively when danger is imminent. It is called the amygdala. According to the Institute for Health and Human Performance, the amygdala's job is to perceive and respond to threats. It answers the primal question of "Do I eat it or does it eat me?"⁴ The amygdala responds to a threat in milliseconds, before the part of our brain that processes information for reasoning, the neocortex, can respond. This explains why, if you've ever been in a near death situation, you likely found yourself responding before you really understood the rationale behind your response. Your fight, flight, or freeze response took over so that *it* could be driving your brain rather than the part of your brain that needs to intellectually process information.⁵

Consider the options if my neocortex had engaged in a series of questions to assess my options while confronted with the bus:

- Option 1—leave the bag on the curb and run across the street to beat the bus.
- Option 2—take your bag with you back to the curb.
- Option 3...by this time, I'm dead.

The amygdala helps ensure our safety by providing us an immediate reaction that shows up as fear, discomfort, or pain. This is how we

know that there is a threat. These emotions are our early warning signs shouting, “Warning! Warning! You are entering dangerous territory!” Now, the problem is that not everything the amygdala perceives as a threat is real. At the airport walkway, the amygdala saved me from being hit by a bus, but in the conference room during a meeting (even though it feels like we are getting run over), the threat in the room is likely a differing opinion, not a bus. For many of us, our body will respond to the fear, discomfort, or pain in the meeting room as if it were warning us of a real physical threat. And we’ll move to fight, flee, or freeze, regardless.⁶

We Think (We Process It Intellectually)

Once we feel pain, we move to engaging our neocortex, which then has time to think about what just happened. This part of the process is completely objective. Our brains are processing information about what occurred. In my scenario, once safe, I could acknowledge that I stepped out in front of a bus and stepped back with my bag before it could hit me. I then acknowledged that I was tired and not paying attention to where I was going as the probable cause of why I ended up in the situation. Back in the meeting room where we feel run over by a bus—our colleague who represents a threat—we can now intellectualize what has just occurred. This is when we collect data based on what we can see or hear.⁷ Likely we might collect data that looks something like this:

- I asked for support from Robby before the meeting, and he agreed to go into this meeting aligned.
- Robby shared concerns to others in the room about my ideas.
- Others in the room agreed with Robby’s concerns.

In and of itself, this data we observe and collect during this phase is benign.

We Feel Again (We Choose an Emotion)

Once we have had the opportunity to really scrutinize the situation with our intellect, we choose an emotion we want to hold on to. For example, after stepping out in front of the bus, I initially felt scared. I then analyzed the data and realized I had a contributing role by being sleepy and not paying attention. I then began to feel something else besides fear. I felt embarrassed. I mean, really, what was I thinking walking out in front of that bus without looking? Or maybe I could have chosen another emotion. I could have chosen anger projected onto others. How dare that bus driver! What was *he* thinking?

When we are faced with unpleasant emotions, we usually take one of two paths. We *blame in*, or we *blame out*. When we blame in, we turn our emotion inward and feel something about ourselves, taking on the weight of the information we have processed. These emotions include guilt, anger, disappointment, shame, helplessness, irritation, frustration, confusion, anxiety, worry, fear, concern, and more.

When we blame out, we turn our emotions outward and feel something toward others. The same range of emotions are available to us when we project them onto others as when we project them into ourselves. It's also important to know that this emotional choice is not mutually exclusive. We can feel something toward ourselves, as well as toward others, and we likely do. When we feel, think, then feel again, there is usually a lot going on at once and it is difficult to sort out. Some individuals don't even try to sort through the emotions firing in all directions. They just move to the next step, which is to react.

Before we study our reactions to our emotions, we need to further study the origin of our emotions. How exactly do we go from thinking with our neocortex to choosing an emotion? The process happens quickly, maybe not as quickly as the amygdala perceives a threat, but usually within minutes, we form a hypothesis and choose an emotion to go with it. We take that which is otherwise completely and totally objective, and we add meaning to further understand the situation.

Let's go back to the example of Robby in the meeting room. We know our immediate emotion is not a choice; the amygdala perceives a threat in milliseconds before our thinking mind, the neo-cortex, can engage. So we immediately feel pain, and the amygdala perceives Robby as the threat. Then, we process the situation with our thinking mind and evaluate what we can observe—the data, which in and of itself is completely objective. Then we feel again, but this time the emotion is projected toward Robby. As human beings, we are meaning-making machines. We do not leave the situation as data. Instead, we add meaning, which creates an emotion. The emotion we choose is based on the meaning we give the situation. Or said differently, the meaning we give to a situation creates the emotion we feel.

Let's say the meaning we give Robby's actions is that he is out for himself and looking to serve his own agenda. If that were the case, we would likely feel anger and bitterness toward him. But what if, instead, the meaning we give Robby's actions is that he forgot about what we talked about before the meeting and doesn't have all the necessary information he needs? If that were the meaning, we'd likely feel more curiosity than anger.

The question, then, when confronted by a primal emotional response followed by objective data, is "What do we make this mean to us?" This is our first opportunity to choose carefully, respectfully, and appropriately.

We Respond (We Choose Reaction or We Choose Action)

Depending on the emotions we choose, we set ourselves up for either action or reaction. If we choose an emotion that is constructive, such as curiosity, then we will likely soothe our fear and choose an action that moves us forward productively. If, on the other hand, we choose a destructive second layer of emotion, then we exacerbate our fear and move to reaction.

It is important to understand that reaction is not the same as courage. Reaction is an unhealthy coping strategy an individual uses to deal with tough times. Because the amygdala is the site of emotional learning, we learn to perceive whether something is a threat early on in our life. As a result, reaction becomes our most natural way to deal with tough times we have little or no control over.⁸ To remedy this, we develop strategies to deal with the threats we face. If our strategy gets results, we keep using it. Unhealthy coping strategies take many forms and range from avoidance to aggression and everything in between. The problem is that, in leadership, reaction is not very effective—mostly because what we perceive to be a threat isn't always such. Although it may feel as if we are being run over by a bus in the middle of the team meeting, we are, in fact, not in any physical danger. Our physical safety is not at risk, only our fragile ego.

The first reactive leader I ever worked for was a middle-aged man with a meek stature but a forceful and belittling style. Let's call him Gerald. During the hiring process, I was continuously surprised that I kept getting called back for the next step. When we met, Gerald did not seem to like me much. He was gruff and disconnected during the interview and seemed frustrated by my answers. I left each of my three interviews with him feeling as if I had royally blown it. And yet, I was offered the job. I decided to take the position because of the opportunity for growth, a decision to this day I wonder about.

As it turned out, Gerald didn't just not like *me*; he didn't like people in general—or at least people whose views were different from his own. Gerald had one employee, however, whom he was very close to. The two of them would routinely discuss—in public—the performance of others on the team in a derogatory and unproductive manner. Many of the leadership team meetings consisted of the two of them sharing gossip about the happenings in the company. Those of us on the team were awkwardly placed in a position of either joining the gossip ring or staying out of it, which resulted in making us

fodder for future gossip. It was a lot like being in the eighth grade actually, only we were all adults being paid to accomplish goals instead of working through the life lessons of an adolescent.

Although I'll never know for sure, it occurred to me years after working with Gerald that his belittling and gossiping nature seemed to stem more from insecurity than from a real disgust of others or even narcissism. He was caught up in gossip as a method of maintaining a position of importance over others. If he criticized and put down others, then the attention was on our faults rather than on his. I wish I had been able to see this then, but I was far too immature and took it personally. When Gerald was confronted with discomfort or pain, his reaction was to belittle others and gossip to deflect criticism. In doing so, he created discomfort and pain for others.

There are some organizational cultures that still exist today—too many, unfortunately—where aggressive, belittling, controlling, and manipulating coping strategies are used and get results. Why? Because those on the other end of the reaction also feel the need to protect themselves. They choose compliance as a strategy to stay safe, thus creating a false sense of safety and a false sense of results. These kinds of results are not sustainable. Leading is not about creating coping strategies in others. As a matter of fact, if we see others moving to fight, flight, or freeze and we don't intervene, we are inviting them to create coping strategies that get the results we want. On the surface, this may seem useful and even productive, but ultimately we have created a culture of fear and reaction. Creativity, high levels of problem solving, intuition, and other forms of excellence are not accessible when we are reacting.⁹

Sadly, when leaders continue to work from this place of reaction, team members become anesthetized to the stimulus and eventually feel nothing more than apathy or indifference. Apathy can show up in the form of lost productivity and focus. The threat the leader represents no longer has merit, and the coping strategy is no longer necessary; instead, the leader has created a team of zombies, armed with deadweight and

mindless contribution. Sound familiar? It isn't long before even the leader finds himself drowning in apathy as well and is ready to give up.

Uncommon Choices

We have many choices about how to feel about the situation that presents itself to us and many choices about how to respond. However, we cannot access these options when we choose emotions that reinforce our body's natural inclination to move to a fight, flight, or freeze response. Therefore, improving this phase of our development is not easy. It requires great emotional fortitude and practice. It requires letting go of our coping strategies. It's important, however, not to be too hard on ourselves as we are learning this. I shared my story about Gerald, but "Gerald" could have been you or me. We all demonstrate reaction from time to time, some of us more than others.

Our common reaction to tough times is what makes us human, but our uncommon choices are what make us courageous.

The question is "Can we move to action in a way that is informed by the fear of discomfort or pain but is not led by the fear of discomfort or pain?" This is how courageous leaders move to action. Let's look at an example of action versus reaction.

Father Bob is the pastor of a church and the head of a top-rated private school. His school lives by an honor code that, like many organization's values and mission statements, is displayed on the walls throughout its building and in every classroom. The students recite it each morning after they say the Pledge of Allegiance.

"We will not lie, cheat, or steal."

"We will respect property, ours and that of others."

"We will respect the dignity of every human being."

Proudly, Father Bob can say that among his school's many accomplishments, his school received the sportsmanship award from the

state athletic association for six straight years. In the middle of another thriving football season, it was brought to Father Bob's attention that two players on his team had yelled anti-Semitic remarks to another team's players. During an investigation, the accusations were corroborated by third-party witnesses. Not only did the two boys violate the honor code through their behavior, but other teammates also stood by and said nothing. Adding insult to injury, it was discovered that the entire team agreed to lie about the situation to protect the two players.

In Father Bob's eyes, the fact that the other boys did not discourage the behavior and then agreed to lie about it made every player guilty. As a result, he alerted the school's board that he wanted to cancel the rest of the football season. Parents made up most of the board, including some who had students who played on the football team. Reactions to his message shocked Father Bob, with some board members arguing that canceling the rest of the season would be counterproductive and cause more problems than it was worth. They shared data supporting the financial implications it would have if high-donor families were to remove their children from the school because of the decision. Additionally, some other parents who heard about the situation and Father Bob's proposal stormed into his office, ranting about the other team's inapproprieties and the injustice of the situation.

Take a moment and consider: If you were Father Bob, what would you do?

Father Bob decided to stick with his choice to cancel the football season even with the backlash and potential consequences the board warned him about. Two years later, the school is growing in donations and in enrollment. Although there were some parents who were not happy with the decision, there were many more parents who were grateful for Father Bob's strong leadership.

Using what we know now about feel-think-feel-act, let's look at the differences between Gerald's and Father Bob's choices and outcomes (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Reaction Versus Action

Gerald's Reaction	Father Bob's Action
Feel: Discomfort and pain	Feel: Discomfort and pain
Think: I'm not good enough. Others will take advantage of my imperfections.	Think: Some parents and board members are sharing concerns about canceling the football season.
Feel: Insecurity and vulnerability	Feel: Curiosity, empathy for parents, concern for students' education
React: Belittle and gossip about others.	Action: Cancel the season.
Outcome: Discomfort and pain for others	Outcome: Strong message about the importance of values and overwhelming support from most parents and educators

A Message from Father Bob

We hang up signs, and we talk every day in our classrooms and in our chapel about respecting the dignity of every human being, yet it was this decision that was instrumental in teaching our students what this commitment really means. I don't regret it because the decision spoke a thousand words. It was the right thing to do.

When one considers a decision like this, you often have this inner voice that can paralyze you. You don't want to be disliked, you don't want to be confrontational, and you don't want to cause a disruption in your relationships with those you know and love. So instead you tell yourself that six months from now no one will care, so you don't do anything. You just let it go.

And that is the big temptation.

—Father Bob, pastor and head of school

The Big Temptation

When we give in to the temptation just to let an issue go rather than address it, we can expect one of two outcomes with regard to pain (see Figure 1.2).

In the avoid-create-avoid cycle, we avoid a situation to the point that we find ourselves feeling backed into a corner, and we eventually explode. When we do explode, we usually say and do things we later regret, so we tend to move back into avoidance, not wanting to re-create the same pain for ourselves and others. We avoid pain, create more pain, and then avoid pain again.

In the avoid-suppress-avoid cycle, we avoid a situation by never really addressing it, but instead hold in our opinions and words, and let the pain eat us up internally. Our frustration grows, and the problem remains unresolved. We avoid pain, suppress our pain, and avoid pain again.

Neither of these two outcomes produces sustainable, healthy results. Even though we alleviate our pain in the short term by not moving to action in the face of tough times, we create more pain for ourselves long term. If Father Bob had allowed the issues of disrespect and racial slurs to go unaddressed at his school, it would have saved him many headaches in the short term, but long term, it would have affected his credibility, the school's value system, and the students' education. Leaders have a responsibility to consider the impact of their action or inaction as it relates not only to them but also to the

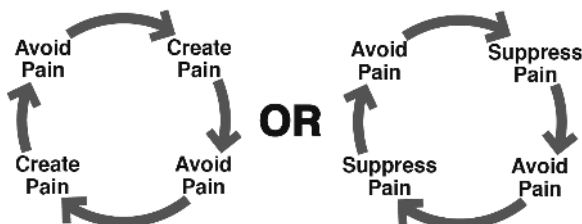


Figure 1.2 Pain Cycles

larger collective they lead. Let's look at another example of the Big Temptation in the workplace.

Marcus was a new manager who inherited a team of hourly workers who were padding their time sheets with hours not actually worked. When he realized that this was going on, he addressed the issue with each of his seven team members individually. Each one of them explained that this had become a common practice originated by his predecessor as a way to address the issue that they were underpaid. They all shared similar perspectives, explaining that because pay increases were difficult, if not impossible, to come by, this had become the most acceptable and easiest path to paying them what they were worth. Some told Marcus that this arrangement had been part of their informal interview and offer process, setting the expectation that they would be paid more than the hours they were actually working. When Marcus explained that padding time sheets was a violation of the company policy and had potentially serious consequences, not one of them expressed remorse for his or her actions but instead felt justified. To make matters more complicated, Marcus's predecessor was also his new boss. He now had ethical questions about the choices both his boss and his team members had made.

Marcus knew he could ignore the problem and let it continue. But he also knew that wasn't the kind of leader he wanted to be. A big problem faced him. He knew that addressing the problem would mean facing his boss, and he also wasn't sure how far up the chain the unethical behavior went. If he addressed the issue, it was possible that he would be opening himself up to retaliation on a larger scale. On the pain scale, he was at a 7—feeling overwhelmed—and could feel himself slipping into the Big Temptation just to let it go.

So, what is the solution for Marcus and others when faced with the Big Temptation? *Feel the pain, but do the right thing anyway.* Easier said than done, right? Not necessarily. Like Father Bob, Marcus was surprised to learn that when he addressed the issue rather than falling into the Big Temptation, good things followed. Not surprisingly,

his boss was defensive at first, but Marcus continued to emphasize his goal of doing the right thing for the organization and the people rather than focusing on his boss's poor choices. A couple of days later, Marcus's boss agreed to meet with their senior leadership together to address the issue of fraudulent time sheets and rectify the situation as best as possible. In this scenario, Marcus's boss was given the opportunity to clean up the situation and address compensation through the proper procedures without any formal consequences. It was a humbling experience for him to be sure. He later told Marcus that he had learned much from Marcus during this situation and apologized for putting Marcus in a tough spot.

I realize not every story of doing the right thing has a happy ending. There are times when doing the right thing means suffering a tough consequence. *No good deed goes unpunished*, as the saying goes. But in the twilight of the day, after the laptops have been shut down and the employees have gone home, a question defines *The Courageous Leader*:

“Did I honor the courageous leader in me today, or did I give in to the Big Temptation?”

Honoring the Courageous Leader in You

To honor ourselves means we are willing to fulfill a commitment we have made to ourselves. To honor the courageous leader in you, you must first make a commitment to yourself to be willing to do the tough stuff in the face of discomfort and pain. Before you read any further, think about this and really consider this commitment. To what degree are you willing to do the tough stuff in the face of discomfort and pain (see Figure 1.3)?

I'm out sounds something like this...

“Not in this lifetime, lady. Take your courage and shove it where the sun don't shine.”

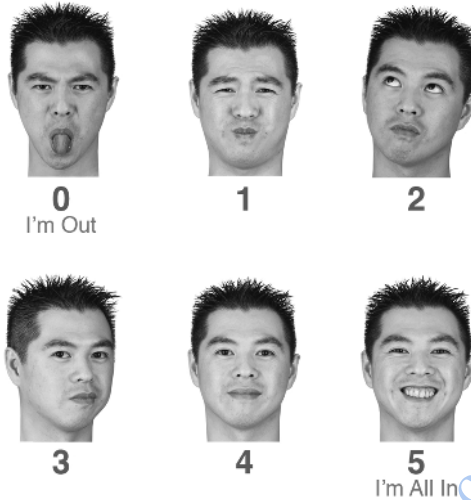


Figure 1.3 Commitment to Courage

I'm all in sounds something like this...

"I'm ready. I know I'm ready because I've considered the pain of not being courageous and it is significantly more than the pain or discomfort I might sustain by leading with a spine. I am willing to do the tough stuff even though it won't always be easy. I am committed to honoring the courageous leader in me for the benefit of others, the organization I lead, and myself."

You may not be ready to be all in. You might be somewhere between *I'm out* and *I'm all in*. That sounds something more like...

"I get that courage is important and I'm committed so long as I can really do it well."

This is a conditional response to courage—"I'm committed unless..." or "I'm committed until..." or "I'm going to try to give it my best shot..."

I'm going to sound a little bit like Yoda here, but there is no try, only do or do not when it comes to courage.¹⁰ Courage is a mind-set that requires grit and determination. Doubt is the enemy of courage. Where doubt seeps in, courage erodes.

Having said that, it does not mean that by choosing *all in*, you have to do as Marcus did and confront your boss next week about an unethical choice. That kind of courage might just give you a heart attack or paralyze you indefinitely. That's not the goal here. It could be that, for you, being all in means being willing to take the first step, like sharing your ideas in a meeting when no one has asked for them but you know they would add value. That may be where you are ready to engage courage. Remember, pain is subjective, and it's up to the individual to determine what behaviors reach a tolerable pain threshold.

Assessing the Risks

Now I realize I just spent the last few paragraphs asking you to commit to courage, but before you do, it is important to assess the pros and cons of this choice. There are risks associated with courage, and knowing them is paramount to making an educated decision about your commitment to courage.

The risk of being courageous: We are vulnerable, we feel pain, and we are exposed.

The risk of *not* being courageous: We stop short of achieving our goals to the fullest.

At one point in my career, I was working for a construction materials company leading its talent development function, and I was tasked with creating an internal leadership development program. I was excited but also very scared. I had done the same thing in my previous organization but on a much smaller scale, and I had a team to support me and great people to learn from. At the construction company, I was initially a team of one, carrying a tremendous weight on my shoulders. If I succeeded, it would be a worthy accomplishment, but if I failed, the only person to blame would be me. I felt totally and completely exposed. On a pain scale, I was at about a 6. I

was losing sleep and eating too much. I was definitely stressed out. I had a ton of unproductive questions swirling around, such as: “What if, in this process, people find out I’m not really all that talented? What if they think I’m a fraud? Am I a fraud?”

During the design process leading up to the execution of the leadership program, our company was acquired by a company based in Switzerland. As soon as the purchase was announced, I raced to the Internet to look up the company and learn as much as I could about its leadership and how it developed its people. The company was, in a word, impressive. I had a few speculative conversations with other team leaders, and we all agreed it was likely we would be rolled into the acquiring department’s team. I had a moment of complete and total relief when I realized that if I did nothing, if I just gave up trying to launch a program internally, then I could just join this other team and help them—blend in, if you will—and could step out of the spotlight. I could let the people in this acquiring company take the lead. I could drag my feet for a few months until the dust settled, and that would be enough time to delay the project altogether. What a relief!

But as soon as the relief finished washing over me, I was left feeling disappointment and regret. I thought to myself, *If I don’t do this now, it’s possible I’ll lose the opportunity altogether and risk not being able to create and contribute something significant.* In a matter of minutes, I went from relief to disappointment to resolve. I chose to honor the courageous leader in me and get moving. If the acquiring company was going to pull the plug on the project, there was nothing I could do to stop it, but I wasn’t going to hide from this opportunity. I was going to give it all I had and hope that I could make a difference with my work.

As it turns out, I was able to launch that program and many more to come after that. Several years later, I honored the courageous leader in me again by launching a leadership development company with

my business partner, and we created Personify Leadership, a program that is now being distributed globally.

In business, if achieving more with less is the goal—as it certainly seems to be—achieving your fullest potential is your greatest tool to thrive. There is no other way to reach our fullest potential or achieve our most profound goals in life than to put ourselves out there and embrace the pain. The risk in being courageous is real, but so are the results that follow.

Chapter Application

Questions to Consider

1. What is your pain threshold when faced with tough situations or people?
2. What situations or people are most uncomfortable for you?
3. Do you find that, when faced with tough situations or people, you tend to react, or are you careful to think things through and instead move to action?
4. When faced with the Big Temptation, do you tend to avoid, create, and avoid pain or avoid, suppress, and avoid pain?
5. Is your strategy for dealing with the Big Temptation getting you the results you would like? If not, how might you change your approach to be more successful?

Strategies to Practice

1. Take a moment to plan how you want to act (instead of react) the next time you're faced with a challenging person or situation that seems to be troubling you.

2. Breathing is a powerful tool to keep us thinking instead of reacting. It brings oxygen in and pushes against the chemicals pulsing through our bodies. When you're faced with tough times, practice breathing more consciously.
3. Practicing being courageous during tough times actually increases our tolerance for pain and builds our courage muscle. The more we move to action (not reaction) and experience success, the less discomfort or pain we feel being courageous. Practice is the key!

Notes

1. "Anais Nin Quotes." Excerpt from THE DIARY OF ANAIS NIN, Volume Three: 1939-1944. Copyright © 1969 by Anais Nin and renewed 1997 by Rupert Pole and Gunther Stuhlmann. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.
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