

MANAGING YOURSELF

Cultivating Everyday Courage

by James R. Detert

FROM THE NOVEMBER–DECEMBER 2018 ISSUE

In many stories we hear about workplace courage, the people who fight for positive change end up being ostracized—and sometimes even lose their jobs. What I’ve seen in the course of my research, though, tells a more nuanced story. Most acts of courage don’t come from whistleblowers or organizational martyrs. Instead, they come from respected insiders at all levels who take action—be it campaigning for a risky strategic move, pushing to change an unfair policy, or speaking out against unethical behavior—because they believe it’s the right thing to do. Their reputations and track records enable them to make more headway than those on the margins or outside the organization could. And when they manage the process well, they don’t necessarily pay a high price for their actions; indeed, they may see their status rise as they create positive change.

Consider Martha (not her real name), a finance manager at a small company. For years she endured risqué comments and sexual innuendo from her boss, the company president, and she struggled with how to handle it: Should she talk to him about his behavior, or just quit? How could she protect the other women at the firm? Then, at a staff gathering, her boss grabbed her inappropriately during a light moment, thinking it was funny. Later that day, she confronted him in his office, prepared to quit if he made no changes. She told him that his behavior made her uncomfortable and was a signal to her that she’d never advance in the company because he didn’t view her as an equal. She said that perhaps he was trying to promote a fun work environment, but he was failing.

Martha was terrified that he would fire her, be angry, or tell her to toughen up. But instead, to her surprise, he apologized. He was horrified that this was how she felt—and that other women in the company probably felt the same way. He praised her for speaking out when no one else had dared to. Over subsequent months, he continued to seek her guidance on the issue and made a formal apology to the staff. A year later, Martha was promoted to a VP role: an incredible position to be in for someone who once believed that the president would never promote a woman to that level.

I began investigating workplace courage after spending more than a decade studying why people so often don't speak up at work. I've found many examples of people at all levels who created positive change without ruining their careers. Their success rested primarily on a set of attitudes and behaviors that can be learned, rather than on innate characteristics. I call people who exhibit these behaviors *competently courageous* because they create the right conditions for action by establishing a strong internal reputation and by improving their fallback options in case things go poorly; they carefully choose their battles, discerning whether a given opportunity to act makes sense in light of their values, the timing, and their broader objectives; they maximize the odds of in-the-moment success by managing the messaging and emotions; and they follow up to preserve relationships and marshal commitment. These steps are useful whether you're pushing for major change or trying to address a smaller or more local issue.

Lest anyone think I'm naive, let me be clear: Of course bad things do happen when people challenge authorities, norms, and institutions. Courage, after all, is about taking worthy actions *despite the potential risk*. If no one ever got fired, was socially isolated, or suffered other consequences for a particular action, we wouldn't consider it courageous. And good outcomes are more likely to come from some types of actions than from others. For example, challenging the inappropriate behavior of a colleague with whom you have a decent relationship is, all else being equal, likely to go better for you than defying the entire power structure over an unethical practice.

Among those I studied who had failed to create positive change, almost all still thought their risk-taking had been the right thing to do. They were proud they had stood up for what they believed in—but they wished they'd done so more skillfully. Following the four principles laid out here can help people at all levels improve their chances of creating positive change when they do decide to act.

Laying the Groundwork

My research shows that employees whose workplace courage produces good results have often spent months or years establishing that they excel at their jobs, that they are invested in the organization, and that they're evenhanded. They've demonstrated that they're able to stand both apart from and with those whose support they need. In doing so, they've accumulated what psychologists call idiosyncrasy credits—a stock of goodwill derived from their history of competence and conformity—which they can cash in when challenging norms or those with more power. (I've also seen the reverse: When people with a reputation for selfishness or ill will stand up for legitimately needed change, they tend to be less successful.)

Competently courageous people also work to earn the trust of those who see them as their champions. They invest in those relationships, too—engaging with people individually, taking the time to empathize with them, and helping them develop professionally.

Consider Catherine Gill, a former senior vice president of fundraising and communication at the nonprofit social investment fund Root Capital. Gill wanted to speak up about what she and colleagues saw as the organization's unintentional yet manifest internal bias against women. The issue was particularly tricky because criticizing the leadership could easily be viewed as criticizing the organization's socially conscious mission. But she was able to launch an honest—if painful—conversation with her colleagues in senior management about the organization's culture, leading to a number of concrete changes.

Gill's track record of excelling and fitting in at the organization was fundamental to her success. Over her first two years at Root Capital, she achieved consistently high performance as a fundraiser and exhibited the emotional and intellectual intelligence to navigate complex issues. She showed that she was deeply committed to the organization's mission, regularly adjusting her role to tackle the most pressing challenges and showing how various initiatives she launched were aligned with core strategic priorities. She was careful to point out when she didn't consider something a gender issue so that people on both sides would see her as fair. All that gave her the idiosyncrasy credits she needed to be heard by the leadership team. She determined the limits of what change was possible so that she wouldn't push too far and get "voted off the island." Through her work ethic, judgment, and humor, she set the stage for more visible moments of courageous action.

Not every opportunity to display courage is worth taking.

Sometimes things don't work out, even with the best preparation. Competently courageous people develop mechanisms to mitigate fallout. That might mean finding ways to make themselves indispensable to the organization, keeping external options open, or minimizing economic reliance on an employer. For example, former Telecom Italia leader Franco Bernabè rejected many of the perks that came with being the CEO of a major company, knowing that doing so made it easier to take risks. "If I had lost my job," he said, "and gone back to something more subdued and less glamorous—well, it wouldn't have changed my life."

Choosing Your Battles

Not every opportunity to display courage is worth taking. The people I've studied who have been successful in their courageous acts asked themselves two questions before moving ahead: Is this really important? and, Is this the right time?

Importance, of course, lies in the eye of the beholder. It depends on your goals and values and those of your colleagues, stakeholders, and the organization itself. As you gauge whether an issue is truly important, be aware of your emotional triggers; allow yourself to be informed but not held hostage by them. Also assess whether engaging in a potential battle—whatever the outcome might be—is likely to aid or hinder winning the war. Ask yourself, for example: Will securing resources to address this problem make it less likely that a higher-priority proposal will subsequently get funded?

Competently courageous people are masters of good timing. To avoid being seen as a broken record, they are less likely to act if they recently cashed in hard-earned idiosyncrasy credits. They observe what is going on around them, and if the timing doesn't look right, they patiently hold off. They scan the environment for events and trends that could support their efforts, making the most of an organizational change or the appearance of a new ally, for example. They stay attuned to attention cycles—to public upwellings of enthusiasm for the issue at hand. Pushing for a more globally representative strategy or leadership team, for example, was for a long time risky in many organizations; now companies are more open to tackling those issues. Unless they've concluded that taking action is necessary to preserve their sense of integrity or to plant the seed of an idea, competently courageous people don't act before those around them are ready to take them seriously.

For example, when “Mandy” joined an accessories and apparel company as a product manager, she quickly learned that one of the company's vendors was highly problematic. Its reps were rude, dishonest, and manipulative, and the product itself was subpar. However, ties between the two companies were long-standing and included a friendship between two key managers. Mandy wisely waited; she didn't suggest a change until six months later. By that point she had demonstrated her commitment to the organization, and she was better able to gauge the relationships between the people involved. She used the intervening time to collect evidence of the problems, identify alternative vendors, and quantify the improvements they could offer. When she finally did make her proposal, the VP in charge responded positively.

In some cases, conditions or events such as sagging sales or a change in leadership create urgency for courageous acts—and make them more likely to succeed. Tachi Yamada, a physician-scientist turned business leader, has been a master of seizing the day during a successful career as a senior executive in the health care sector. When Yamada became head of R&D at Smith Kline Beecham in 1999, he quickly concluded that the R&D organization needed to be restructured around disease areas or “assets” (the molecules or compounds that might eventually make it to market) rather than the traditional silos. When a merger with another pharmaceutical giant—Glaxo—was announced, he campaigned for the R&D function of the combined company to be structured in that way. The proposal didn’t go over well. R&D leaders and scientists at Glaxo were particularly upset; here was the new guy from the much smaller company in the merger telling them they needed a major change. They “were pretty much aligned against me,” recalls Yamada. But he knew that the timing could be used to his advantage: “The merger and the thin pipeline in both companies gave me a burning platform.” His push for the reorganization succeeded in part because of his ability to recognize the opportunity and capitalize on it.

Persuading in the Moment

Workplace courage is, of course, about more than preparation. Eventually you must take action. During this step, competently courageous people focus primarily on three things: framing their issue in terms that the audience will relate to, making effective use of data, and managing the emotions in the room. (See “Further Reading” for more on persuasion.) They connect their agenda to the organization’s priorities or values, or explain how it addresses critical areas of concern for stakeholders. They ensure that decision makers feel included—not attacked or pushed aside.

Further Reading

“Get the Boss to Buy In”

Susan J. Ashford and James R. Detert
HBR, January–February 2015

Mel Exon, a former executive at the advertising firm Bartle Bogle Hegarty (BBH), excels at framing proposals in ways that make them attractive to those whose support she needs. For example, when Exon and a colleague first pitched the idea for an

“Harnessing the Science of Persuasion”

Robert B. Cialdini

HBR, October 2001

*The HBR Guide to Office Politics,
“Conducting Difficult Conversations”*

Karen Dillon

HBR Press, 2014

“The Necessary Art of Persuasion”

Jay A. Conger

HBR, May–June 1998

“Moves That Matter: Issue Selling and Organizational Change”

Jane E. Dutton, Susan J. Ashford,
Regina M. O’Neill, and Katherine A.
Lawrence

Academy of Management Journal,
2001

*Giving Voice to Values: How to Speak
Your Mind When You Know What’s
Right*

Mary C. Gentile

Yale University Press, 2012

*Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas
Survive and Others Die*

Chip Heath and Dan Heath
Random House, 2007

internal innovation unit—BBH Labs—to senior management, support was far from unanimous. Some executives worried that the creation of a separate innovation group would imply that parts of BBH *weren’t* innovative. This was concerning in a firm that proudly considered itself the contrarian visionary in the industry, with a black sheep as its calling card.

To convince the skeptics that BBH Labs was philosophically aligned with the company’s mission, Exon took advantage of internal stakeholders’ pride in the black sheep image, pointing out that some of BBH’s clients had come to the company specifically for groundbreaking ideas. A lab focused on innovation would fulfill exactly that need. She won over others by describing the work of the new lab as advance scouting, promising that everyone at the firm would share in its findings. Exon eventually got the go-ahead from senior management, and later BBH’s CEO complimented her approach, describing it as building on the

company’s DNA rather than trying to change it.

Keeping your cool as you perform your courageous act can be just as important as how you make your case. A manager I’ll call Erik, who was tasked with growing the solar business at one of the world’s largest multinationals, frequently butted heads with senior executives in the company’s traditional lines of business. When he sought their support for new business models, they often pushed back, telling him brusquely, “We don’t do

that” or “That will never work here.” The discussions could get heated, and Erik often felt frustrated by the executives’ defensiveness. But instead of taking the emotional bait, he reminded himself that their response was a normal reaction to fear of the unknown. Acknowledging their mindset helped him stay calm and concentrate on simply making data-driven arguments. In the end, he was able to bring others around to his point of view, and the business made a strong pivot toward his recommended strategy.

Following Up

Those who exhibit competent courage follow up after they take action, no matter how things turned out. They manage their relationships with the people involved: When things go well, they thank supporters and share credit. When things go badly, they address lingering emotions and repair ties with those who might be hurt or angry.

For example, Catherine Gill made an in-the-moment decision to launch her campaign to change the culture at Root Capital during a retreat with about 30 leaders present. But as a result of her spontaneous decision, she caught the CEO off guard. Knowing that the very difficult conversation that ensued might have felt to him like an indictment of his leadership—and that he might see her actions as a personal attack—Gill checked in with him privately at that evening’s dinner. She assured him that she wasn’t trying to start a revolution; she was trying to advance the firm’s evolution into its ideal form.

Competently courageous behaviors can be learned with effort and practice.

Follow-up also means continuing to pursue your agenda beyond the first big moment of action. Even when their initial steps go well, the competently courageous continue to advocate, reach out to secure resources, and make sure others deliver on promises. And when things don’t go well, they take it in stride, viewing setbacks as learning opportunities rather than hiding from the fallout or giving up.

Take Fred Keller, who established a welfare-to-career program at the company he founded, Cascade Engineering. In the initiative's first incarnation, participants were often late or absent, and their performance was poor. Within a few weeks, not one of the new hires remained, and Cascade's employees and supervisors were left feeling frustrated. Instead of giving up, Keller viewed the failure as an opportunity to learn. Finding that neither Cascade nor its new hires had been well prepared for the program, he reinstated it with more training for everyone involved. When this second attempt seemed headed toward a similar fate, Keller harnessed the growing criticism to get it right. He further increased training of leaders and partnered with a county official to bring a social worker on-site to work with the new hires to identify and solve problems before they escalated. This time Keller's persistence and learning paid off: The program is now a core part of the organization and is widely lauded as a model for transitioning people from welfare to work. And through his persistence, Keller earned tremendous loyalty from his staff at all levels of the company.

Getting Started

Courage isn't required only for high-stakes campaigns. My research with Evan Bruno, a PhD student at Darden, shows that a host of everyday actions require employees to act courageously. Sometimes simply doing one's job well requires courage. It's also worth noting that "risk" encompasses more than the prospect of financial ruin or getting fired. Humans naturally fear rejection, embarrassment, and all sorts of other social and economic consequences. From the outside, for example, it might be easy to question whether Fred Keller's actions required courage. As the owner of the company, Keller could do whatever he wanted, so where's the risk? But for years, he faced doubters both inside and outside his organization. To persevere knowing that people might think he was a "nutcase" or that he was wasting time or money took courage.

The good news is that the experiences of those I've studied show that competently courageous behaviors can be learned. They're dependent on effort and practice, rather than on some heroic personality trait limited to the few. (So don't use that as an excuse to let yourself off the hook if you find yourself in a situation that calls for courage!) One piece of advice I give to students and clients: Don't jump into the deep end right away.

Instead, approach this work incrementally by trying smaller, more manageable acts before proceeding to progressively harder ones. That might mean having a difficult conversation in some other sphere of life, or broaching a tough topic with a colleague you like and respect, before confronting a boss about demeaning behavior. It might mean guiding your own team in a new direction before suggesting a transformation of the whole organization. And consider what “small” means to you—we all have different perceptions of which actions require courage. (To see how your perception of what takes courage lines up with others’, take our Workplace Courage Acts Index self-assessment at www.workplacecai.com.) Then, as you tackle each step, focus on what you learn, not whether it goes perfectly the first time.

Above all, keep your values and purpose front and center. You’ll have a stronger sense of self-respect through any setbacks you face, and you’ll be less likely to regret your actions, no matter how things turn out. And by using the principles discussed in this article, you’ll increase the chances of successfully creating change, making the risks you take all the more worthwhile.

A version of this article appeared in the November–December 2018 issue (p.128–135) of *Harvard Business Review*.



James R. Detert is a professor of business administration and the associate dean of Executive Degree Programs and Leadership Initiatives at the University of Virginia’s Darden School of Business.

This article is about MANAGING YOURSELF

 FOLLOW THIS TOPIC

Related Topics: INFLUENCE | INFORMAL LEADERSHIP

Comments

Leave a Comment

POST

Comments

Leave a Comment

POST

8 COMMENTS

Jardena DiGiorgio 10 days ago

I was so excited when I saw this article, I flipped right to the back of the magazine to read it first! I was disappointed when I found it to promote what I would consider almost the opposite of courage. The section on "Laying the Groundwork" is particularly concerning. By spending "years fitting in", through "conformity" we are not building the courage 'muscle' nor are we setting an example to others on how to display courage. As Jim Hollis writes "We are not here to fit in."

While the article is an accurate reflection of what is true in many organizations today, is this really the behavior we want to perpetuate? Can we find the courage to make actual courage acceptable?

REPLY



▼ [JOIN THE CONVERSATION](#)

POSTING GUIDELINES

We hope the conversations that take place on HBR.org will be energetic, constructive, and thought-provoking. To comment, readers must sign in or register. And to ensure the quality of the discussion, our moderating team will review all comments and may edit them for clarity, length, and relevance. Comments that are overly promotional, mean-spirited, or off-topic may be deleted per the moderators' judgment. All postings become the property of Harvard Business Publishing.

8 COMMENTS

Jardena DiGiorgio 10 days ago

I was so excited when I saw this article, I flipped right to the back of the magazine to read it first! I was disappointed when I found it to promote what I would consider almost the opposite of courage. The section on "Laying the Groundwork" is particularly concerning. By spending "years fitting in", through "conformity" we are not building the courage 'muscle' nor are we setting an example to others on how to display courage. As Jim Hollis writes "We are not here to fit in."

While the article is an accurate reflection of what is true in many organizations today, is this really the behavior we want to perpetuate? Can we find the courage to make actual courage acceptable?

REPLY



▼ [JOIN THE CONVERSATION](#)

POSTING GUIDELINES

We hope the conversations that take place on HBR.org will be energetic, constructive, and thought-provoking. To comment, readers must sign in or register. And to ensure the quality of the discussion, our moderating team will review all comments and may edit them for clarity, length, and relevance. Comments that are overly promotional, mean-spirited, or off-topic may be deleted per the moderators' judgment. All postings become the property of Harvard Business Publishing.