

Bob Gunn, Editor

# Courage

BY ROBERT W. GUNN & BETSY RASKIN GULLICKSON

“Do you have the courage,” a pundit asked an HR team discussing a restructure of the staffing function, “to prove the business value of what you do to non-believers? To take on a troubled division and turn it

around? Or to offer a side-by-side comparison between the performance of a division you work with and one you don’t?”

Elsewhere, HR managers were asked to show courage at a company where word of layoffs had become public before the affected people could be told. It was their job, the senior VP told them, to make sure that layoffs were handled with compassion, even if that meant overriding their business unit manager. “Get in front of the train if you have to!” the VP said.

The spotlight also fell on courage as Thomas M. Coughlin, Wal-Mart’s former vice chairman, was forced to resign from its board this spring. Coughlin’s ouster followed an internal investigation of alleged financial improprieties. *The Wall Street Journal* reported on March 28 that Wal-Mart President/CEO Lee Scott planned to tell company employees in an internal telecast, “If you see

something or someone asks you to do something that you know is wrong—whether that is a buddy or a supervisor or Lee Scott—you must have the courage to say ‘no.’”

Such sentiments are hardly surprising. Calling for courage to do the right thing in business situations is as uncontroversial as calling for correct addition on expense reports. Since it’s such a common value, why is it so often lacking?

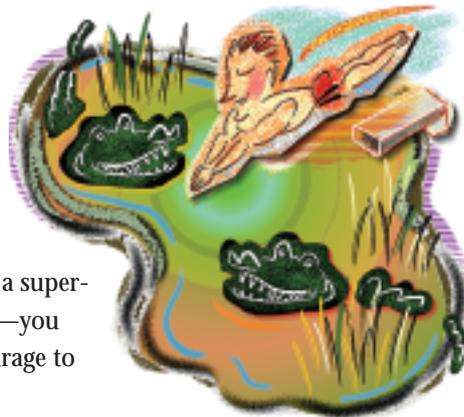
The answer isn’t in the nature of difficult external situations that leaders confront but in “negative” emotions that lead to wrongheaded behaviors in the heat of the moment. In other words, courage is lost or won as each individual’s thought patterns emerge in “spontaneous” action.

When we join an organization, we necessarily align our personal priorities with those of others. The result is mutually gratifying when what is best for the company fits our own

sense of purpose, when the company’s culture is consistent with our values. Sustaining that kind of work experience takes clarity of intention. Even if something occurs

that’s contrary to personal purpose or values, the *company* doesn’t have control over our own clear-mindedness. It’s our own fearful thoughts that all-too-often shake us off the beam—our own muddled thinking, such as: “What if I don’t please my bosses? What if I look stupid? Why should I be different from everybody else? Everybody shades the truth; why shouldn’t I if it’s good for me?”

Sadly, those nagging voices become the loudest when we need courage most—when our organizations—and we—face significant change. We must



move from what's known, safe, comfortable, or habit. We must ask, "What is the future? What is required? Desired? Compelling?" And to do that, we must cross what we call the Courage Line: We must become comfortable with being uncomfortable and remain steadfast through instability.

So how can we transcend fear? How do we tap into the strength necessary to make changes and find the courage to do the right things?

Step one is to increase your level of awareness. We've learned to think of fear as a stop sign. It doesn't mean, "Shut down the engine forever, decorate the car, and raise your family right here." Rather, a stop sign says, "Warning! There's something tricky up ahead. You need to really pay attention. Stop, look, listen...and then proceed with caution."

That means we need to take advantage of all the information resources available to us. Too often in business we operate strictly on the intellectual level. "Everybody" knows it isn't good to be emotional in the office. In our eagerness to "keep our heads in the game," we stop paying attention not only to our emotions but also to our physical sensations. The fact is, these can provide us with important information and a connection to deeper resources of common sense, insight, and wisdom.

The road to courage in a threatening situation can begin with noticing what you're feeling—physical sensations, emotions. The more intense your feelings, the more you can be sure that you've got a whole lot of thinking going on. The next step is to be your own detective. Seek out whatever thoughts are linked to your feelings. Notice, too, the language you use with others. What assump-

tions or beliefs does that point to?

Freeze frame your thoughts; identify those that are negative. Ask yourself, "Do I really want to continue this type of thinking?" Remember, *you*—and only you—are the thinker of your thoughts; *you*—and only you—are able to choose how seriously you can take them and what to do about them.

You can shift your thoughts from fearful to courageous with these steps:

1. **Summon presence.** Turn off the radio, TV, computer, cell phone—whatever might stimulate your nervous system. Take a few deep breaths. Sit quietly. Dismiss thoughts about the past (second-guessing) or the future (worry). Simply be *present*.

2. **Call to mind your personal sense of purpose and values.** What is important to you? What makes you feel good when you look in the mirror? What do you want your children and grandchildren to say about you? What would you want written in your obituary? Connect to yourself as a human being who is simply living this game we call life.

3. **Reflect on what needs to happen right now.** In other words, the obvious. Wait for your insight to inform you.

4. **Examine the alternatives.** From a calm state of mind, consider the worst thing that can happen, and follow it all the way to its conclusion. Consider other people and how your decisions will impact them. Be aware of old habits, and consciously look for new perspectives and possibilities.

5. **Take the first step. Act.** It isn't merely a matter of seeing what needs to be done—it is doing it that changes history's course.

Surely you recall the stories of

people who took courageous action in the face of danger: The mother who refused to leave the burning house, the policeman who refrained from shooting a young kid even as he pulled a gun from his waistband, the driver who veered into the wall in order to avoid hitting someone crossing the street. These stories remind us of the latent power of the mind—our deep consciousness—to guide right action. People who were in these situations tell us that time "slowed down" (in other words, they became acutely aware of the situation while being highly focused), that the event and its consequences were crystal clear (they felt a connection to the other person that went beyond words), and that they "just knew what to do" (as if a direct line to a deep source of knowledge opened up). Above all, their action felt inevitable (from a feeling of certainty). The business environment hardly presents such stark learning moments. But by training our mind to be in that calm state, each of us can act courageously in ways that light a beacon for how life can be lived.

"Fear is the mind killer," Frank Herbert wrote in the science fiction classic, *Dune*. Don't let fear "kill" your mind. In other words, don't shut off access to your common sense and innate wisdom. By becoming aware of your thinking, you can take the sting out of fear and cross the Courage Line. ■

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