

# Claiming Your Courage

When you hear the word “courage,” what immediately comes to mind? Do you envision a person who has stood up for what they believed, even though others have ridiculed them? Do you picture someone battling a terminal illness? Do you think about a catastrophic event and the people who stepped in to help the victims?

Or do you even think about it? Most of us probably don’t until we hear about a sensational act that has made the news. Yet there is a great deal we can learn from those around us who demonstrate courage in dealing with the everyday issues of life.

In this exclusive interview, Sandra Ford Walston, courage expert and coach, offers her views about the concept and shows how we can demonstrate courage in the workplace.

**1. You are recognized for your work as a courage researcher, speaker, learning consultant, and Courage Coach™, but how would you define courage? Is it different for different people? Can you apply the same principles to home/personal situations and work situations, or does courage differ in each?**

Let's start with a foundation that reveals a few perspectives about what courage is and isn't and then move into my research and findings.

**Misplaced Courage.** First of all, courage has been misplaced and labeled incorrectly. Traditionally, only facing fear under perilous circumstances has been labeled courageous. Running into a burning building to save a pet, pushing a pedestrian out of the way of a speeding car, throwing yourself on a grenade in battle to save lives, or tackling a robber in flight are readily accepted instances.

It's your perspective about courage that makes a difference. One radio announcer said, "It's the man who pulls a guy out of the Potomac River when a plane goes down or the guy who runs into a burning building to get some kid out—that's courageous, not some woman who teaches in a hard-luck school in the ghetto for 25 years because 'they need her' or some kid who sends in his stupid allowance to the Red Cross when there's a flood in Africa or the guy who tells on a cheating boss. These are nice people, but they're not courageous! Real courage takes a lot of muscle and split-second thinking."

In my opinion, this radio announcer denigrates "true courage" by confining it to physical bravado—split-second sensationalism that relies on instinct. Yet in between emergencies is all of life for us "everyday people" to deal with. Plenty of ordinary people, such as Rosa Parks, for instance, have demonstrated "quieter" courage that left an indelible mark on history. I also include people such as Winston Churchill, Nelson Mandela, and Mother Teresa in this category.

What I'm suggesting is that everyday people display courage constantly but subtly. Split-second heroism and everyday courage aren't the same. Courage is much more complex than spontaneous reactions to traumatic events.

**Etymology of Courage.** Courage is a virtue, and the word "virtue" in Latin means "energy." Courage originates from the Old French *corage*, meaning "heart and spirit." I constantly apply this original definition to my life. As I become aware of the behaviors and rewards of courage, such as feeling joy and self-fulfillment or diminishing regrets, I feel more empowered to be discerning and better able to respond to my inherent courage energy. Para-

doxically, hiding my courage drains my energy. An untapped reservoir of courage waits in us all, and I know when my reservoir of courage is low or is brimming over. My reservoir is full when I turn down a piece of business because it doesn't feel like the right fit. And I know when I swallow my voice or sell my soul. I also have the dignity to dare. When I constantly ask, "Am I being true to who I am?" I know that I'm applying the original definition to my life.

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**Courage Research.** After 10 years of original research, I've discovered that each of us defines courage differently. What's important to realize is that *your* definition of courage defines who you are! What's your definition of courage?

I've also extracted 12 behaviors that exemplify courage. They are living convictions, manifesting vision, affirming strength and determination, embracing faith, conquering fear, confronting abuse, overcoming illness or loss, reinventing self, revealing vulnerability, speaking up, reflecting self-esteem, and hurdling obstacles/taking risks.

**Virtues Are Abstract.** Most people say, "Courage isn't even a word I think about." Why? Like all virtues, it's abstract. We grow up learning other virtues, such as honesty, integrity, or humor, but courage is the forgotten virtue because people don't recognize their everyday actions as significant. Courage is a state of Being. Sometimes courage is about quietly blazing a trail as a rebel with a cause who sacrifices for a bigger principle. Acts of personal courage rarely roar!

Each day your actions define who you are and reveal your heart. Most people don't perceive themselves as

courageous, and only 11% of women do. To rectify this, we need a shift in cultural tenets that begins with learning about courage at school, home, and work. Then you learn that courage is the mother of all the virtues.

To initiate that change in perspective, answer these three questions:

1. When was the last time you used the word “courage”?
2. Are you willing to invite true courage (heart and spirit) into your life?
3. When your time comes to pass on, will you have been true to your heart and spirit? (If so, there will be little to regret.)

## **2. Is courage a matter of process and training or something else? Can it be taught, or is it a genetic trait inherited from ancestors and parents?**

**It's Your Birthright!** My first book on the feminine behaviors of courage (*Courage: The Heart and Spirit of Every Woman*) addressed this question in Chapter Three, “Innate or Acquired.” More than half of the original courageous 11% perceived courage as an innate virtue. Based on my research, I believe that courage is your birthright! How you choose to come by it really doesn't matter. What matters is your receptivity. There is certainly a huge benefit if parents add courage as one of the virtues they teach their children. It would also help if schools mandated courage as required learning. For example, the schoolyard bully grows up and goes to work. Then there would be defined steps clarifying the foundation about how to take courage to work.

**Declaration of Courageous Intention.** Ask yourself this question: Do you have the courage to create and sign a Declaration of Courageous Intention (DCI)? This personal document provides the critical first step to claiming your courage at work. You declare your intention to invite courage into your life. Most people are reluctant to give themselves permission to claim their courage. Why? They know their lives will change! What happens is that you can begin to understand the ways that you have failed to claim your courage. Life is rarely anguish-free. It takes personal courage to face the challenges of who you are capable of being. Ask yourself: “Are you willing to live your life with courage in a new way?”

## **3. Is women's courage different from men's? Are women more inclined or less inclined to find courage in the workplace?**

**Male Notions of Courage.** The impoverished view of courage that pervades society today would have us believe

that courage is almost solely a male trait. Pulp fiction, comic books, action-oriented television programs, and films have all contributed to this view. The more women recognize the energy of their courage and act on it, the more society will break from its stereotypical description of courage as physical or daring. When you explode the myth that women rarely demonstrate courage, it gives women permission to be courageous. Courage is genderless, ageless, and colorless.

I haven't conducted research on courage gender differences, but gender colors behavior, perception, and perspectives. I have discovered, though, that, throughout history, women have always acted from their hearts, but male notions of courage as heroic have diminished the recognition of feminine courage. Perhaps women have been unaware of the truth that they have always been courageous. Discovering their courage awakens an ancient feminine energy that every woman benefits from individually and collectively.

**Women and Courage at Work.** In today's business world, courage has a much deeper meaning and a more relevant role for women (e.g., the family-career balancing act, confrontation issues, reentering the workplace, political finesse, women undermining other women, and the way people judge women who stand in their “originality”).

When women take a stand on a precarious issue or speak up in a traditional male industry, for example, they tap into their courage energy. Courageous women “step up” to the next level. They design their steps rather than let outside influences dictate who they are or what they should be. As a result of learning to live wholly in the moment and having the courage to stop and reflect, they process choices clearly and quickly, take action more readily, and stay centered in their Truth.

**The Label Trap.** Unfortunately, when working women do demonstrate the behaviors of courage, they're often labeled with some unflattering word to keep them “in their place.” On a performance review, they may receive what I call the “too syndrome” comments, such as “too strong,” “too driven,” or “too outspoken.” The irony is that these descriptions are often desirable for men to possess. Yet if these stereotypical limitations are used to inspire a woman to action, they can actually benefit her and increase her courage quotient. Facing habitual stereotypes, we should all acknowledge and honor the personal courageous behaviors in every human spirit so that we move beyond typecasting.

## **4. Do you think organizations undervalue the effect**

### **courage can have on the bottom line? What impact does courage have on the bottom line?**

Yes, most organizations undervalue the power of courage and its bottom-line effect. It's the same with quality control, risk management, or diversity. How do you label an abstract? How do you capture the nuances of the human condition?

In reality, each person has the capacity to be a courageous leader regardless of his or her company position. Whether you're a graphic designer, a sales executive, or the CEO, how you confront workday issues and contribute to your own professional advancement speak volumes about your courage quotient and set a leadership example others can follow. So why aren't organizations catching on?

**Courage Is Caged.** Unfortunately, most people don't identify and display courage as one of their primary leadership skills at work. They mistakenly believe that courage is only relevant during particularly risky times, such as downsizing or being a whistle-blower. As a result, they don't perceive exploring new ideas, confronting gossip, transitioning to a new career, transcending rejection, or taking initiative as courageous leadership moments. If an employee starts to awaken his/her individual courage, then he/she may confront elements of corruption and begin to ask: "What can I affect in our culture when corporate corruption seems to be so pervasive? How am I selling my soul?"

Unfortunately, corruption severs the company's spirits as well as those of the individual—the opposite of a symbiotic relationship. The origin of corruption is uncovered in a broad spectrum of organizational hypocrisies, which range from a management team in disarray to a history of underlying animosity or a handful of people with counterproductive interpersonal skills who implode an organization.

Ask yourself: Are you a profile in courage at work? Chances are, you don't think of yourself in that light. Courage is awareness of the heart. The heart has an unlimited capacity to hold all that you are to be; otherwise, confess now and change. The change begins with a shift in your "perspective lens," and it occurs when you come to understand and practice the art of Being Present. Present to your actions, regaining your courage means you step up. The opposite is dragging your feet.

Courage leadership in business also means managing with courage the paradoxes that occur, such as:

- ◆ If I tell my boss we've understated our debt by \$1 billion, I lose my job. If I don't tell my boss, I may go to jail.

- ◆ If people are empowered with courage, then how do I stop them or control them?

### **5. Who decides if we have been or are courageous at work? If our peers don't notice our courage, does it matter? Is the individual impact just as important as the effect on the organization's culture?**

**Courage Change Agents.** Most organizations haven't developed a courage leadership program that supports "courage change agents," much less distinguished the value of courage in the individual spirit. First, the individual must declare a courageous intention to display their courage. Then they need to assess which of the 12 behaviors of courage they are most familiar with, such as their dominant, auxiliary, and tertiary, and which one(s) are missing.

Does it matter if this behavior goes unnoticed? No. As mentioned before, your journey is about your dignity. Inserting your spirit at work makes a positive and practical difference. Look around, and you'll observe a courageous person in your midst—the leader who guides his or her team members to build on their strengths and embrace their "challenged" areas as well. Size doesn't matter, and one size of courage doesn't fit all. What most organizations don't do is stop to celebrate individual or organizational courage-defining moments demonstrated by the "courage change agents." For example, acknowledging a team who finished a project under budget or an individual who chose to stand in their convictions at the risk of losing a client only to have the client applaud their courage to stand in their dignity.

**Wider Impact.** The individual impact is just as important as the impact on the organization's culture. Why? Dispirited individuals create a dispirited culture.

Let's consider some possibilities for both genders.

- ◆ A woman has been passed over for a promotion and is upset. How can she find the courage to speak up and state her qualifications?

- ◆ A man has made an error in a corporate proposal for a customer. How can he find the courage to be vulnerable and admit his mistake?

- ◆ A woman learns she has an illness that might jeopardize her career. How can she face her fear and summon the courage to affirm her determination?

While none of the above examples is a perilous, life-threatening event in the typical sense, all are common occurrences that challenge both genders to test their everyday courage. Without this vital virtue, a key part of a human being's spirit is lost.

Everyone can learn to tap into a valuable personal resource by exhibiting workplace courage, whether it is taking a stand on a creative project rather than mediocrity or taking a professional risk. Courageous people “step up” to the next level. As a result, they process choices more quickly and take action more willingly. They design their lives rather than letting outside influences dictate who they are or what they should be. That’s why I teach the ancient Chinese proverb: “He who hesitates before each step spends his life on one leg.”

#### 6. Is courage leadership a matter of only “amazing” moments, or is it a lifestyle choice?

Whistle-blowing is an example of amazing moments in courage leadership, yet you don’t have to be a whistle-blower to display courage leadership. For example, an engineering client shared that they learned after 15 years that one of their seven engineering principals had lied on his résumé about his education. The engineers in the firm discovered that, not only had he not attended the prestigious MIT, but he had never attended college at all! When he was hired, no one had checked his credentials, and, as the years went by, his skills allowed him to advance to a principal role. With little more than basic engineering skills and innate knowledge, he allotted himself additional influence, power, and advantage within the firm by claiming the credibility of an MIT degree. What does this have to do with courage leadership?

The firm claimed that it stood for ethics and values, yet when the other principals learned about this lie, they didn’t ask the culprit to leave. Over the following year, the company confronted an unprecedented loss of young engineers. During exit interviews, all of them courageously expressed their disapproval of the double standard this created between the principals and the employees, which finally prompted the president to let the man go.

Hypocrisies—such as those double standards—are as much a form of corruption and lack of courage leadership as a CEO having an affair with an employee in direct violation of company policy. Most people view corporate scandals as business corruption, but what about telling your boss that you are working while you’re still at home in your pajamas? What about padding your expense account because you work hard and deserve it? Most people prefer to bury their heads in the sand—they don’t want to know what they know. Going numb is easier than nurturing your courage and changing your behavior.

#### 7. The first years of your research focused on awakening women to the feminine behaviors of courage. What are these behaviors? What influence would you like your personal discoveries and insights to have on women at work? What legacy should be passed on to the next generation of women in the workplace?

**Courage Blueprint.** By gaining control over the blueprints that govern their belief systems, women everywhere can manifest and foster courage. For example, that women should be “ladylike” is deeply imbedded in the psyche of our culture: They should focus on others and be reserved, supportive, considerate, and compliant. But such limited aspirations paralyze women and cause them to founder in society’s traditional definition of courage—those daring physical acts of “courage under fire.” A woman’s desire to be “accepted” can undermine her personal demonstrations of courage. For example, she may decide not to speak out about a controversial issue when she wants to.

**Unsung Stories.** To change or reclaim your courageous will, look for female role models who display unsung day-to-day courage. Role models are imprints for change; they light the path. As more women recognize and subscribe to the behaviors of courage, such notions will no longer be deemed unusual. Other women will be encouraged to display their courage, and their collective behaviors will ease or even erase the idea that “by nature, women are not courageous.”

Women who view themselves as courageous have a distinct advantage in the workplace. Not only do they have the power to direct their lives, but they are more willing to accept the success that comes from taking a stand or making a change. Truly courageous women have learned to overcome the business world’s stereotypes in an effort to lead more fulfilling professional and personal lives. Katherine Graham, the former CEO of the *Washington Post*, is a great example. Many say she was the greatest CEO of American history when she exposed Watergate over the security of the *Post*’s stocks. Clare Boothe Luce, another courageous woman of the same era, once said, “Courage is the ladder on which all the other virtues mount.”

**Defining Moments.** Additionally, I suggest that women watch for career-defining moments (e.g., being passed over for a promotion, not receiving a fair raise, being spoken down to, or being publicly reprimanded). Recognizing these workplace incidents is the first step to reclaiming your courage. Unfortunately, many women misinterpret these examples of defining moments and

respond in self-defeating ways when the correct choice would be to declare their courage. They may believe these incidents are “part of the job,” or they may feel that, in some way, they deserved the unfair treatment. They become the martyr in order to keep the peace or maintain the status quo, which ultimately stifles their courage even more.

If you find it difficult to recognize the defining moments in your own workday, ask yourself what events make you upset, angry, uncomfortable, embarrassed, or acquiescent. Chances are that those are the times when you will want to display your newfound courage. The first step is to realize which specific events challenge your effectiveness. Then you must acknowledge the pattern that undermines your progress.

**Feminine Behaviors.** Here are the main feminine behaviors of courage I discovered in my research. While no single profile typified them all, these women:

- ◆ Perceived themselves as courageous;
- ◆ Lived in conscious choice;
- ◆ Acted decisively;
- ◆ Confronted the facts;
- ◆ Conversed in the language of courage;
- ◆ Understood and emphasized the courageous steps in their lives;
- ◆ Continued to “step up,” regardless of barriers;
- ◆ Evaluated the consequences of sacrifice and discipline;
- ◆ Respected the power of “courageous will”;
- ◆ Remained focused on the goal, regardless of feeling alone; and
- ◆ Wanted to remain authentic or “true to their hearts” in spite of the circumstances.

How many of these attributes do you identify with? The more you do, the more apt you are to excel at identifying and designing your own courage at work. My goal is for women to animate their individual courage consciousness, celebrate collective courage, and pass it on.

### **8. Exactly what is courage in the workplace? Can you give some examples? Is there such a thing as “team” courage, or is it individual?**

Courage in the workplace is made up of several courageous actions, such as asking for the tough project, confronting an uncomfortable truth, and exiting bad situations quickly. Others are focusing on the results and being willing to sacrifice to achieve them. The human being is easily distracted in projections or judging personalities, and we forget to focus on the main issue: getting results through collaboration.

While preparing a presentation on courage leadership for a *Fortune 500* company, my client and I decided that having a panel of four internal employees would be a great way to reveal courage leadership within their organization. These four employees briefly shared a scenario about how they had uniquely displayed their courage at work. After they each shared their brief stories, an audience member asked the panel a question. Immediately, one of the panelists responded quite simply and strongly: “Look, the bottom line is about getting results—that’s all!” Results mean a profitable business. Claiming your courage, like achieving organizational goals, is very simple. What are the results you are trying to achieve? Who or what can you contribute? Is your intention aligned with purpose?

**Team Courage vs. Individual Courage.** Courage paradoxes permeate the workplace. This makes it difficult to distinguish “team” courage, such as an independent thinker who also remains an active team player or a team player who doesn’t bend under pressure. Team players become “courage change agents.” When an organization has committed to a courage leadership environment that includes courage actions, then team courage would certainly prevail. Conversely, if each individual portrays his/her courage leadership style, then “team courage” would also shine. Both sides of the coin are called courage consciousness. For example, a courage leadership style reveals how each individual is innately challenged to step up and be held 100% accountable. In this flow, you witness a wholehearted workplace effort rather than half-hearted motions. Soon, you sense a “courage code.” Courage becomes contagious, and it becomes the sponsor for improvement. There is a direct correlation between your success quotient and your courage quotient. ■

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