

4 Pillars of Courageous Leadership



**THE COURAGE
OF A LEADER**
INSPIRE, ENGAGE AND GET
EXTRAORDINARY RESULTS

Our world, right now, needs leaders who know how to inspire, engage and get extraordinary results. As a leader, you've got opportunities, pressures, questions and complexities coming at you from all directions. You have team members who want meaningful work to do. You have stakeholders who need you to consistently create value. You work in dynamic marketplaces with competitive pressure. You have peers with whom you share the company's resources. How do you effectively lead in these circumstances with courage?

In my 2 plus decades of experience developing leaders at all levels, I've seen that leaders who thrive in these circumstances consistently demonstrate courage in 4 distinct ways. They uncover and share their authentic selves. They say what needs to be said. They ask others to believe and follow them. They are bold and create the extraordinary.

These behaviors are embodied in the 4 Pillars of Courageous Leadership.

Pillar 1: The Courage to Be Authentically You

You are a courageous and powerful leader when you do leadership YOUR way. When you lean into your unique strengths, passions, and approach to leadership – and stop trying to emulate what is not naturally you – your unique value is more easily recognized. Your brand will become clear to those around you. You'll also have more energy as you spend your time engaged in what you're good at and what you care most about. More energy means more creativity, more resilience, and ultimately more results!

With your unique value and approach to leadership clearly in mind, you want to declare your leadership legacy. I think of a leadership legacy as an aspiration about how you want to be known or about what you want to create. A leadership legacy is something that you can start living into right away. It can be an initiative, set of products, or improved processes you leave behind. It can also be a leadership trait for which you want to be known and foster in the organization.

Examples of leadership legacies include a fully optimized enterprise-wide software system, an innovative culture, and the creation of teams that operate with trust and transparency. With any of these there is work to be done in the moment like defining what fully optimized means, rewarding innovative behaviors, and creating a shared dashboard. There is also a legacy of work, skills, and thought processes that will be left behind such as real-time data accessible anywhere in the organization, processes that encourage innovation, and employees who know how to be authentically trusting with others.

There is great value in defining a leadership legacy. A legacy will help you set priorities, provide you with guidance, and keep you tuned into what will serve the greater good. Your legacy comes from your authentic self, is in line with who you are, and can have you at times act bigger than your ego or any other human consideration. I worked with a leader, Maria, who felt pressure to speed up system implementation timelines and give in to a certain outspoken and passionate senior leader. Yet, when I encouraged Maria to ask herself what her legacy of a fully optimized enterprise-wide system would want, she had to respond with "more dialogue and benchmarking." She knew the functional leaders

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needed more information about the capabilities and options for the system from companies who had been through the process they were embarking upon.

Maria stayed committed to her aspiration, put her personal discomfort aside, and made the career risky move to push back against a senior leader. And, it got shaky for a while. Some, who had previously been on board, questioned her decision to go up against a high-powered leader. It was the first in a string of decisions where Maria had to look to her legacy – and not her self-protective instincts – for guidance. It wasn't an easy time, yet she stuck with her consistent messaging, kept working the process and her aspirations and big picture commitment prevailed. The system was implemented and fully optimized by year two, which represents a very impressive timeline for systems of this nature. Several functional leaders told Maria they were glad they took the time upfront to learn about and workout key design decisions and implementation points. And, most importantly, the cross-functional leaders in this organization were connected, aligned, and operating more cohesively than ever before allowing for faster and better solutions for customers.

You can start living and leaving behind your legacy, right now, today. Doesn't matter if you're an emerging leader or have a small team. You have a sphere of influence and can begin to leverage it right away. Define your leadership legacy. Then, start living it by leveraging your strengths and playing where you know you provide value. Expand from there.

Too many – at all levels – are unknowingly playing the waiting game, waiting to *have* something. There's no need to wait until you *have* your next promotion, *have* the roadmap totally figured out, *have* the support of all your peers, *have* consensus at the next bi-annual Board of Directors meeting, *have* these pressing projects completed first... *have* everything you think you need. You can *be* the leader actively committed to your legacy today.

What courageous action will you take today? How can you do leadership YOUR way? What's your leadership legacy? How can you start living into it right away?

Pillar 2: The Courage to Say What Needs to Be Said

When it's time to deliver a tough message, do you can feel like you've got to have a complex set of interpersonal skills mastered? If so, you're not alone. Many leaders I've worked with feel intimidated. 65% of managers frequently avoid challenging situations, according to Gallup (Amy Adkins, Gallup Workplace Publication, April 2, 2015).

Yet, I'd assert behaviors are secondary to your outlook, your beliefs about the persons involved. There's a well-known quote from Peter Drucker, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." You know this one? I don't think this could be more true, and I believe similarly that "Belief eats behavior for breakfast." Having the appropriate beliefs, or outlook, is way more important than perfectly executing the seemingly appropriate behaviors.

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If you want to help a person improve, you want to believe the person is capable, believe the person is responsible for his/her own choices and believe the person has his/her own strengths and skills. At least to some degree.

Why do you need to believe these assumptions? So you can be a courageous leader who trusts the capabilities of those around you and coaches whenever possible. Coaches empower, encourage critical thinking and thus, enable team members to find their own best ideas to improve and achieve the desired results.

This pillar – the courage to say what needs to be said – is also about determining what to say so the recipient can hear the message and take it in. There are 2 important intentions here. First, it's about taking the time to get to know a person so you can speak to what's most important to him or her. Second, and here's where courage comes in, it's about knowing what to edit out of your message because it's more about you, your knowledge and/or your ego then it is about growing the person and improving his/her performance.

Here are a couple examples.

You may know exactly what you'd do if you were in the person's shoes. Yet, if it's more important for the person to own the outcome and develop in this area, then you might want to discuss the desired outcome only. Let the other person determine how to achieve the outcome.

You may be able to clearly point out a handful of things a person did wrong. Yet, if you want this person's confidence to grow, it may be more positively impactful to point out a couple of key strengths and how they can use them to address 1 of the things that didn't work as well as it could have.

Be clear about your intention and how to empower, grow and motivate others to take action.

You also want to understand when you might be tempted to share an assumption or interpretation of behavior that may or may not be accurate.

You may believe someone was distracted and checked out during a meeting, when the person was instead working through scenarios in her head to address the situation as she stared out the window. You may assume that a leader believes the team off-site isn't worth his time and attention. When, instead, he was being pinged by his boss to address critical customer issues.

You want to ask questions about behaviors you could misinterpret before you assume intent or that you have the accurate interpretation. So then you know what does and does not need to be said. You can't influence a person's behavior until you understand the thoughts and intentions driving that person's behavior.

What courageous action will you take today? Make the bold declaration you've been putting off making? Set your ego aside? Shift your outlook about a team member?

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Pillar 3: The Courage to Ask Others to Follow

Leaders need the commitment, the ideas, the passion and the work of others to make big ideas come to life.

How do you get that kind of commitment from others? How do you get others fully engaged? Well, you certainly need to craft clear, compelling communication. Yet, your ability to get people to follow you to new and interesting places is more directly related to your willingness to be vulnerable. Being vulnerable means saying what you don't know, saying where you need help, keeping it real, being transparent, and allowing others to contribute and even change your mind. A leader who is willing to act and speak in these ways is a leader others can trust. And people need to trust you if they are going to take a risk with you and create something new.

I recently facilitated a program for new team leaders and one leader, very animatedly and passionately, pointed out how the senior leaders didn't answer the direct questions being asked of them in the most recent All Employee meeting. "They are like politicians," she said. "Repeating the same messages and not giving a true answer." Others in the group agreed. It was disheartening! I've seen this organization's C-level leaders speak candidly and vulnerably. Yet, that's all it takes: one meeting where questions seem to be dodged, and some degree of trust is lost.

These comments reminded me of a Senior Leader, Anna, (from the same organization) who did an amazing job of answering questions and giving direction, when not all the answers were known. Her sales group was changing their business model. The change was going to impact nearly everything: roles, processes, perspectives, structure and objectives. Anna stated it would be a process of learning, growing and figuring out together. She said she was going to lay out what was known, what was set in stone, what was up for debate, and what needed everyone's good ideas and risk-taking so they could find the best ways forward. And then Anna proceeded to do just that. Her team was riveted. You could feel and hear the fear and anxiety in the room. These emotions were evident in the questions they asked. Yet, you could also sense the excitement. The energy rose when Anna replied with, "This is what you'll need to study and determine. I don't know how we'll move this piece forward. I do know we've got the competence in this room to figure it out and create what our competitors haven't." Everyone was engaged in making the change happen. It wasn't easy. There were uncomfortable debates. And their Senior Leader kept normalizing their experience. "This is what cutting-edge change looks like. It isn't easy."

70% of engagement is attributed to the leader, according to Gallup (*Randall Beck and Jim Harter, Gallup Business Journal, April 21, 2015*). You have a big influence on whether people's heads and hearts are engaged. The big idea, the objectives for the initiative and the path forward need to make sense in people's heads. Most leaders, with some work, can accomplish this. It's employees' hearts that usually aren't engaged.

Release chemicals in their brains, if you want team members to truly care. There are 2 chemicals that are released in the brain that have us feel valued, give us a sense of belonging and inspire us to want to work for the good of the team/project. Serotonin is released in our system when we feel proud, the

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approval of others, supported and/or respected. When we feel lifted up by our leaders, we feel a sense of responsibility to offer something in return. As a leader, the more you give of yourself to help others succeed, the greater your value to the group and the more respect, dedication and passion they'll have.

It's not hard to get serotonin flowing, it just takes intentionality and commitment. Say, "Thank you," share in a team meeting how each person contributed to the team's recent success, ask questions to help an overwhelmed colleague prioritize her work, give him the chance to present his work in front of a larger audience. The examples of how you can release serotonin in others through your leadership are endless. That's why serotonin is often referred to as the leadership chemical. And, it feels good to everyone involved. It's a win/win.

The second related chemical is oxytocin. It's often called the love chemical. Oxytocin creates the feeling we have when we are with close friends and loved ones. It helps us be generous, want to do things for others and stay connected. It helps team members feel comradery and safety with one another. The more a leader does to create an environment of openness and connection, the more oxytocin flows. As a leader, you can ask how employees are feeling; really listen carefully to their responses; show empathy; share how you're feeling; get to know people and their interests, concerns, struggles and passions.

Both serotonin and oxytocin are long-lasting chemicals, get built up over time and feel great (unlike some other chemicals that are released in the brain). Leaders can create moments, processes and structures that allow serotonin and oxytocin to be released. They can create a culture of giving and receiving. Give praise, trust, approval and open forums and you'll get loyalty and full engagement.

What courageous action will you take today? Vulnerably connect with your colleagues? Intentionally release some serotonin or oxytocin?

Pillar 4: The Courage to Be Bold and Create the Extraordinary

How to be bold and create the extraordinary? Sounds like a big topic that would involve lots of methods and techniques. Yet there are 2 secrets to boldly creating extraordinary results. You 1) get your head in the clouds and 2) show some restraint. Let me explain what I mean by both of those phrases.

Get your head in the clouds. Be visionary. Even if you don't know yourself as someone who can create a compelling vision, you can. We all just take a different approach, depending on our strengths. Dream about what would be ideal. If you don't dream well on your own, invite others to a brainstorming session. If you're great at dreaming up the technology advancements, yet not great at articulating the benefits for people and business, invite marketing and learning and development professionals to co-create with you.

Show some restraint. We want to stretch our teams regularly, yet not stretch them to the breaking point. This makes perfect sense in theory and is often difficult in practice. We see an opportunity to launch in 2 new markets before the end of the quarter or to smash a sales goal and we get all hands on deck. This is fine – and can actually be quite motivating – from time to time. The problem is the big push

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is addicting. We do it once and we want to do it again. At some point, this becomes unmotivating for team members. They don't know when the next big push is coming and they haven't recovered from the previous big push when it comes. Eventually, employees are burnt out.

An alternative – that still nets extraordinary results – is to have team members' involvement in setting a regular stretch goal. This stretch goal, in some circumstances, is easy to achieve. Yet, it's a stretch goal because sometimes it's quite difficult to achieve. When the goal remains consistent and the team consistently meets it, often with a great deal of effort (and sometimes more easily), confidence grows on the team. The team is known as one that constantly meets its mark, one that has sustained high performance. The results, over time, are extraordinary. And the team members are engaged, proud, confident and not burnt out.

A new Plant Manager I worked with, Aaron, saw that updated Standard Operating Process documentation (SOPs) were needed. The current SOPs were sometimes sorely out-of-date and were causing confusion. The real knowledge was with the operators, yet you never knew who had the final say on what. This problem was creating many inefficiencies, yet the problem also seemed insurmountable. Hundreds of documents needed to be updated. Aaron decided it was time to tackle the SOPs. Up-to-date, accurate process information would establish the foundation for so many possible cost-saving improvements. They needed a plan. Yet, how do you eat an elephant of this size? Show some restraint.

Aaron met with the handful of Production Supervisors whom he had decided would own this endeavor. They certainly wouldn't do all of the work that needed to be done, yet they were the folks who could coordinate and drive the effort. He needed their commitment and he needed them to create a realistic, yet stretch, plan. They quickly zeroed in on the appeal of a weekly goal. The question was how many SOPs could be updated weekly? The discussion went in circles for a while, "Depends on production levels and what maintenance has scheduled." "It would change depending on how much customers drop in on us." "Some weeks we could crank through a lot, other weeks very little."

Aaron pushed for a number that would be achievable no matter what took place during the week. He knew that if the group didn't commit to a number, it would be easy for weeks to slip by without much SOP updating. The Supervisors decided on 8 SOPs per week. This was somewhat disheartening because it would take them two-thirds of a year to update the documentation. However, Aaron didn't push them further. He wanted consistent, weekly production on the SOPs. They agreed and moved forward.

Around mid-week, Aaron would come around and ask how they were tracking. It often led to a second half of the week scramble. Yet, the goal was met every week, with only a couple of exceptions, over several months. As the end-of-the-year shutdown approached, the Supervisors could see the progress made and the benefits they were experiencing as a result. They asked Aaron if they and a number of operators could come in over shutdown and finish off the documentation process. And they nearly did! Just a few more procedures needed input from folks that weren't present during shutdown, and one week later they had a full set of accurate SOPs for the plant!

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Aaron firmly believes that if he had let the goal fluctuate each week, it would have fluctuated to little to none. A steady pace that was at times challenging is what created momentum and a sense of accomplishment. It was a great example of how showing some restraint can lead to extraordinary results.

To inspire, engage and get extraordinary results; leaders need to demonstrate courage in these 4 distinct ways. The 4 pillars of courageous leadership are accessible by any leader at any level.

What courageous action will you take today? Create a vision for yourself or your group? Encourage the team to set a regular stretch goal?

If you want support, ideas or to let Amy know about the courageous action you took, contact Amy at amy@thecourageofaleader.com.

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*Amy L. Riley is an internationally renowned speaker, author and consultant. She has over 2 decades of experience developing leaders at all levels. Amy's clients include Cisco Systems, Deloitte and Aon. Her second forthcoming book is entitled, **The Courage of a Leader: How to Inspire, Engage and Get Extraordinary Results**.*

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