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LEADERSHIP'S FIRST VIRTUE:

BE COURAGEOUS

Moving staff out of their comfort zones is the opening step for promoting personal growth and organizational development

BY BILL TREASURER

“Who the hell does he think he is? Let me tell you something — Larry works for me, not the other way around!”

Craig, the CEO of an Atlanta-based insurance company, was steamed. He had called me about an e-mail that he had been copied on by one of his senior vice presidents, a guy named Larry. In the e-mail, Larry criticized Craig's heavy-handedness in a recent meeting with Larry's staff. Among other criticisms, the message said, “It's demoralizing to people when you harp about all the threats the organization is facing and insinuate that people aren't working hard enough to meet the challenges. In this recession, people are already doing more with less. They are looking for you to provide leadership and hope, not micromanagement and fear.”

Craig had hired me two months earlier to begin coaching Larry and build up his professional courage. Craig had decided he would retire in three years and had identified Larry and another senior vice president as possible successors. While Craig felt Larry had the skills to be CEO,

he also worried Larry lacked leadership assertiveness. “He just doesn't fight hard enough,” Craig told me back then.

Ironically, Larry had done precisely what Craig had asked for, asserting himself courageously. Larry's strongly worded e-mail was, in fact, the best evidence yet that Larry was making progress toward being the kind of leader who could succeed Craig.

A Building Process

I am a professional courage builder. Since 2002, I have conducted courage-building workshops with educators at major universities and for such diverse organizations as NASA, PNC Bank, Accenture and the National Science Foundation. As my firm's chief encouragement officer, I have seen the dynamics between Craig and Larry play out many times. Leaders complain that people agree with them too much and don't assert their true opinions and ideas. But then when they do so, leaders get upset and view their subordinates' assertive behavior as disrespectful. Many leaders, unfortunately, desire courage but reinforce subservience.

As a superintendent, your most important job is to inspire courageous behavior among those you lead or influence. Like me, superintendents need to be courage builders, too!

What does it mean to be a courage builder? There are three equally important things you need to get right.

First, you have to be a good role model of courageous behavior yourself. Your courageous behavior as a leader will be the single greatest impact on promoting more courageous behavior among those you lead.

Second, you have to give people permission to be courageous. People will take risks only to the degree it is safe for them to do so. Your permission will go a long way toward creating this safety.

Third, you have to coach people so they can acquire the courageous behaviors you aim to promote.

“Because human growth and development do not happen in a zone of comfort. ... Learning requires stretching beyond what you already know, and that is, by nature, uncomfortable.”

Hurdling Comfort

Being a courage builder also means influencing people to move outside of their comfort zones. When people become ensconced in a zone of comfort, their growth and performance suffer. Your job, candidly, is to move people into a zone of discomfort. Why? Because human growth and development do not happen in a zone of comfort. They happen in a zone of discomfort. Learning requires stretching beyond what you already know, and that is, by nature, uncomfortable.

Larry's muscular e-mail to Craig was, for Larry, a movement into a zone of discomfort. It was something he hadn't done before but did so as a way to exercise his newfound assertiveness.

Now, to be clear, to influence the growth and development of the people you lead, it is not necessary to move people so far into their *discomfort* zone they become petrified with fear. It does mean, however, that you'll need to provide disquieting stretch goals that elevate one's standards while enlarging one's skill sets. Doing so is the best defense against professional complacency — the death knell of an aspiring career.

Having worked with thousands of professionals from the public and private sectors, I can say confidently that the most important lesson my clients have taught me is that the entire organization wins when everyone is showing up to work each day with more courage. With less fear and more courage, people take on harder tasks, deal better with change and speak up more willingly about important issues.

Courageous workers and courageous leaders try more, trust more and tell more. In my new book, *Courage Goes*

to Work, I describe these three types of courageous behavior as the Three Buckets of Courage, what I label TRY courage, TRUST courage and TELL courage.

TRY Courage

Leaders commonly tell me they want more people to step up to the plate and have more initiative. When people display TRY courage, they have the courage to take a course of action, the guts to take the lead and do something new, or even to attempt a first. They welcome challenges, stretch their skills and make things happen, all with little or no handholding.

To help people at this stage:

► **PLAY TO THEIR STRENGTHS.** Build on employees' existing capabilities when assigning challenging new tasks or “gulp goals.” Gulp goals are so ambitious they cause people to go “gulp!” Keep in mind it is easier to be courageous when the new task you're pursuing is an extension of smaller tasks you've pursued in the past. Rather than providing goals that require entirely new skill sets, provide goals that build off the skills people already possess.

► **GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO PROVE.** Provide challenges that cause people to prove themselves to themselves. When the going gets rough, having something to prove can be a source of energy and motivation. Assigning someone an important task where others have failed is one way of providing a proving ground for a developing employee.

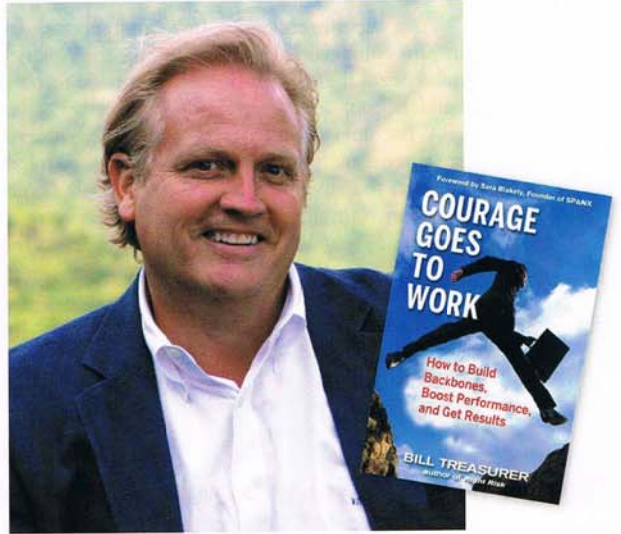
► **EMPHASIZE THE RISKS OF NOT RISKING.** The risk of inaction is usually more perilous than the risk of action. For example, it may take a significant investment of time and money to pursue a new certification or credential. But not pursuing one's own development will eventually result in one's own obsolescence. When doling out tough assignments, emphasize the dangers of not taking the risk, including a potential hit to employees' personal and career development or, worst-case scenario, their job security.

TRUST Courage

Many leaders tell me that they wish more people would just give them the benefit of the doubt and have more trust in the direction the leaders have set. Relying on the actions of others, though, takes courage. This is the type of courage it takes for employees (and leaders) to let go of their need to control situations or outcomes and, instead, put their faith in those around them. It takes courage, for example, when delegating a consequential task to an employee to resist the temptation to micromanage them after doing so. People with this kind of courage are open to direction and change and don't waste time questioning motives or looking for hidden agendas.

To help workers at this stage:

► **TRUST FIRST.** Resist the temptation to turn trust into a quid pro quo — “I will give you trust after you give me trust” — and end up producing a stalemate in which nobody trusts anyone. When it comes to trust, you



Author and consultant Bill Treasurer exhibits his own courage during a high-diving stunt.

get what you give. If you want to build a more trusting environment, then you have to have the courage to trust first, period.

► **BUILD "INSTANT TRUST."** With the right conditions, trust can be gained surprisingly quickly. Create a trusting environment by establishing ground rules with employees on issues such as keeping confidences, respecting others and fostering true professionalism. Avoid "trust vampires," such as those who constantly engage in gossip and innuendo.

► **KNOW THE CRITERIA.** Get to know people, who they are and what they value, and find out the criteria by which they give their trust. Ask each person on your team to complete the statement: "I will trust you when ..."

TELL Courage

Many leaders express frustration that not enough people willingly and truthfully express their ideas and opinions. The courage of voice is the answer. Employees engage others with candor and conviction. They raise difficult issues, provide tough feedback and share unpopular opinions. It was TELL courage that Larry, the senior vice president at the insurance company, was exercising when he sent the e-mail to his boss, the CEO.

To help others at this stage:

► **GIVE "PUSHBACK PERMISSION."** People will speak up and offer more ideas when they know it is safe to do so. If they think it's unsafe to disagree, especially with the leader, you'll get a lot of brown-nosing and yes-saying — neither of which will help you as a leader. Be explicit in letting people know you expect them to push back on ideas with which they disagree. Be sure to provide some pointers about how to disagree with you in a way that will meet with your reception.

► **TAKE ACTION.** Employees get frustrated, rightfully so, when they muster up the courage to speak up, only to have it fall on deaf ears. Respect and reinforce this type of courage by taking swift and sure action on what people say.

► **BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR.** Remember how upset Craig got when Larry applied more assertiveness? As a superintendent, you may think you want your staff to exhibit more TELL courage. But when they start speaking out, you may think otherwise. Commit yourself to listening to what people have to say, no matter how hard it is to hear, and refrain from responding rashly or defensively. For superintendents, this requires a special kind of courage — the courage to be told to!

Current Capacity

While being a courage-building leader is not easy, the good news is everyone has the capacity for being courageous. To what extent they are willing to use that capacity is another story. But use it they should because, on balance, courageous employees excel far more than their cowardly counterparts.

Your job, as an organizational leader, is to build people's courage by putting courage inside of people, to encourage them, so they can grow and develop by moving into a zone of discomfort. The best way to do that is to be courageous yourself. Be a role model of courage. ■

Bill Treasurer is founder and chief encouragement officer at Giant Leap Consulting in Asheville, N.C. He is the author of a new facilitator training program, *Courageous Leadership: A Program for Using Courage to Transform the Workplace*. Copyright of this article by AASA and Bill Treasurer. E-mail: btreasurer@giantleapconsulting.com