

Cultivate and Maintain Courage

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1) *Make fear a friend*

Fear is a useful part of the human condition—it tells us when we might be in danger so that we might become safe again. The trick is to respond to fear not automatically, but consciously.

2) *Identify your courageous stance.*

Everyone has been courageous at some point. For instance, perhaps you switched careers, stood up to a perceived wrong, or advocated an unpopular point of view. In that moment, you took a stance. You *embodied* courage. Notice your thoughts and feelings, how you are breathing, the feeling of your muscles on your bones. While this courage stance may have been prompted by an external situation, it is available at any moment. Call on it.

3) *Develop support systems*

Contrary to popular belief, courage need not be a lonely pursuit. In fact, effective support systems are critical to helping us stay true to our convictions when we might otherwise waver. We need people to fill a variety of needs, such as:

- *Prevent Isolation:* people who like you and will affirm you. People with whom you share feelings freely and without self-consciousness.
- *Prevent Marginality:* Mentors who can assist, guide, and open doors for you. People who are striving for similar goals and with whom you share experiences, ideas, and favors.
- *Affirm Competence:* People you respect and who can evaluate your competence.
- *Teach:* people from whom you can learn new skills, knowledge, and perspectives on the world; who keep you growing and up-to-date professionally
- *Prevent Crisis Overload:* People who will move in at bad times (foul weather friends). Those who seem to be easy to ask for help when you have a particular problem.
- *Stimulate/Challenge:* People who challenge your basic assumptions and working principles and ask you things you haven't considered.
- *Models:* People whom you admire, respect, see as competent and confident.
- *Referral Agents:* People who are linking pins to needed resources. Those you turn to when you are faced with not knowing who or what can be helpful in a situation.

Ironically, getting ourselves to actuate our support systems can require courage for those of us who have concerns that asking for support discloses weakness. Heaven forbid! Will the need for courage never cease?

4) *Develop discernment and discipline*

Courage is not tilting at windmills, sounding the alarm at the slightest provocation, nor is it self-righteousness that bludgeons all around. It is crucial to be able to discern fact from fantasy—when am I in danger? What is the real risk here? Where do I really need to focus?

Often we use fear as an excuse to do nothing. Oh, it seems quite reasonable. *If I challenge the boss, I'll get fired or lose the*

contract. If I tell the truth I'll be labeled a troublemaker and marginalized forever. We all have some version of what we call *the bullet train to hell*. It's a short mental trip from the current situation to our worst case scenario, which is rarely before us.

The essential task is to discern fact from fiction. Fear is a great early warning system. But that's all it is. The next task is to discern what has triggered the system. What in this situation requires that I be careful? What is truly at risk and what am I making up? One key to our fantasy is absolute language that suggests that our imaginings are inevitable and indelible. *I will never work again; He will hate me and tell all his friends and colleagues.* It's fascinating that we can be more powerful in our imaginations than we are willing to be in the real world!

However, this is not a reason to ignore the fear and merely barrel ahead. There *are*, at least, *potential* safety issues. The important skill is to determine what is at stake and what is truly required for safety. By systematically answering the following questions, we can make useful distinctions.

- Can you survive the worst case scenario? This is not whether you want or like the worst case but whether you can withstand it.
- How likely is the worst case scenario? What is the probability that you will get fired or never work again? Has it happened to you or others before? Or are you merely frightening yourself with horror tales?
- What do you really fear? Tell yourself the Truth. It could be the discomfort of being different or being accountable for your observations or ideas.
- If it is at stake, how might you avoid or at least prepare yourself for the *potential* loss? Perhaps coaching, learning new skills, taking smaller steps than envisioned, or the receiving the powerful reassurance of friends and loved ones that you will still be in the fold.

Discernment requires discipline. Pursue something of interest and challenge that will also require you to mindfully slow your mental processing. Meditation, yoga, or any martial art, journal writing, music, dance, art, sculpture, or a sport like tennis or golf can do the job. Slowing down allows you to distinguish automatic reactions from the reality of the situation, and then you can act on the full range of options available and not just our default responses.

Conclusion

Courage is always possible, yet at times difficult to locate. Make fear a friend, identify your courageous stance, develop support systems, and develop discernment and discipline, and you'll discover your courage exactly when you need it.

Adapted from "Courage And OD That Works: Inseparable Partners." Heather Berthoud & Michael Broom, OD Network conference 2005 proceedings.

