The Leadership Seven

Focal Capability: Courage

"Courage is not simply one of the virtues but the form of every virtue at the testing point. " — C.S. Lewis

Courage is a necessary condition for the consistent and successful application of the capabilities outlined in the Leadership Seven. Casting a vision, communicating, coaching an employee or volunteer, seeking feedback, and adhering to moral and ethical standards, all hold courage as a necessary condition for execution. Each of these activities, by presenting personal, relational, and professional risks, can induce anxiety and fear. Overcoming and acting in the face of these fears requires courage. For this reason, courage operates as an essential catalyst to the enactment of leadership and is our first focal capability.

Unlike many of the Leadership Seven capabilities that may come naturally to some, finding, and building courage is a nearly universal challenge for leaders. Courage is rarely a default setting when confronting change, difficult circumstances, or uncomfortable decisions. Instead, we tend to shrink from risk and uncertainty, resulting in a "would be" leader paralyzed by inaction. For this reason, courage frequently represents an override of our hard-wiring and requisite condition for action in the face of these anxieties or fears. In this way, your life and your leadership can only grow in proportion to your courage.

The opportunity cost of inaction for leaders, organizations, and our communities is massive. While inaction may insulate you from risk and create the illusion of safety and security, it comes at the cost of opportunity, progress, fulfillment, and personal growth. Ultimately, unlocking the totality of your potential as a person and a leader will require courage.

In the discussion below, we will examine courage in leadership, and how you might become more courageous.

When do Leaders Need Courage?

Bill Treasurer, author of *Courage Goes to Work*, describes three circumstances in which courage is required in. Each is reducible to a decision to act—to try, to challenge, to ask for help.

Courage to Try:

"Courage doesn't happen when you have all the answers. It happens when you are ready to face the questions you have been avoiding your whole life."— *Shannon L. Alder*

At some point in your business education at East Carolina, you were (or will be) taught the critical differences between leadership and management. Greatly simplified, good management is defined as the delivery of consistency and predictability in outcomes—that is, a manager's goal is often codifying processes and practices in a way that assures predictable results. Good leadership, on the other hand, is about initiating and shepherding change and innovation, generally in the direction of some positive improvement in how well a team or organization fulfills its purpose. While both management and leadership require skill, leadership begins with a willingness to change—in short, the courage to say "I/We can/must be better".

Beyond a general aversion to anxiety and fear, the human mind tends to fixate quickly on a point of view, and in the process, resists change. Look around and you will find no shortage of people rusted onto ideas, approaches to the delivery of a product or service, or simply a way of thinking or acting.

These individuals find challenges to these ideas and approaches as a challenge to their comfort. Rather than endure the discomfort that challenges to their convictions or patterns of behaviors creates, they will settle for less-than-optimal outcomes. When their comfort is the priority, leadership stops, and the opportunity cost of inaction begins to accrue in their lives. The leader recognizes that temporary discomfort is the necessary price of growth and progress—to them personally, and the world around them.

Considered personally, the idea of self-leadership implies a state of constant change, growth, and discovery—in short, a journey towards the best version you. This journey means you must find the courage to confront long-held assumption, skill-gaps, and well-worn patterns of behavior, and find the courage to *try* something new.

In the context of teams, groups, and organizations, initiating change and new ways of thinking and behaving introduces tension to not just your own circumstance, but the circumstances of others. For this reason, introducing change should always be done carefully, and only when there is a compelling and well-considered reason. However, finding the courage to try something new is the moment leadership begins.

Courage to Trust:

"To share your weakness is to make yourself vulnerable; to make yourself vulnerable is to show your strength." — Criss Jami

Perhaps the most important form of courage the humility to admit that you need others—you need their input and feedback, you need their talents, you need their energy, and you need their effort. Many of us are conditioned to believe that leadership is about providing answers—it is not. In fact, a more accurate idea of leadership is that of an asker of questions—for example: how can we serve our customers?; how do we increase the value of a student group to its member?; or how do we exceed expectations in the delivery of a class project? Leadership *is not* arriving to the circumstance with an answer and simply convincing other to implement your ideas. Leadership *is* about enlisting others to help provide the best answer these questions. This approach means providing people the freedom to contribute fully to "how" we might answer the important questions before an organization. In sum, great leaders express fidelity to finding the best answer to these strategic questions and unknowns, not to their answer to these questions. This approach requires humility and a willingness to be vulnerable and surrender control, which requires courage. Doing so produces not just better answers but builds the commitment and ownership in others that is so critical to implementation.

Courage is required to trust others. Asking for meaningful input and giving responsibility to others places you at risk, especially when it involves something important to you. This vulnerability and risk are frequently compounded by the fact that we all tend to think our ideas are the most brilliant, our experiences the most relevant, and our work the most exceptional. Entrusting others with responsibility for outcomes that matter to you is not easy. Leaders find the courage and humility to say, "I need help", and then finding and trusting others to provide it.

The idea of the leader as an all-knowing authority are long past. In its place we understand leadership to be one of intellectual openness, humility, and an acknowledgement that the best leaders need only to provide the right questions, and then enlist others to help answer these questions.

Courage to Tell:

"I shall assume that your silence gives consent." —Plato

The courage to tell involves the courage to raise difficult issues and tell the truth. Too often, leaders fear blowback, rejection, or damaging relationships when they speak up. So, they bite their tongues and hope the issue or behavior changes or resolves itself. Most often, the situation will persist, and your silence only compounds the difficulty of eventually addressing the issue. A leader recognizes that the kindest and relationship-honoring action is to address the issue early and clearly. This includes relational difficulties, performance and contribution issues, or behaviors inconsistent with shared values or damaging to the interests of organizational stakeholders.

Naturally, addressing these concerns should be done carefully and privately, when possible. More importantly, prior to "Telling", examine your motive carefully. If your motive is anything but the restoration of a relationship, the success of the other individual, or the best interests of the organization, keep it to yourself. Defending the health of the relationship and organization is courageous. Sharing your every thought or judgement is rarely productive and is not courageous, it is reckless, exhausting and often damaging.

The courage to tell also includes a willingness to admit your mistakes and say, "I am sorry". You will screw up. You will make mistakes. We all do. When you do, own both the mistake *and* any consequence that may come of it. You will learn that it is rarely the mistake or error that compromise a leader, but rather the decision to ignore, deflect, or cover up their mistake that destroy credibility and undermines trust. Conversely, a willingness to admit your failings support transparency, builds trust, and gives permission to others to be honest.

Responding to failure

"Failure isn't fatal, but failure to change might be" – John Wooden

The courage to try, tell, and trust involves the risk of failure. It is true that when you step out courageously, you will fail eventually—new ideas will fail, people you trusted will disappoint you, and your voice may fail on deaf ears. The all-important question is our response and interpretation of this failure—is it simply an event, a moment in time, from which we can grow and learn? Or do we interpret it as a reflection of our worth and capability? The correct answer, of course, is that failure is an event that teaches us, and allows us to take on the *next* challenge smarter, and more resilient. No failure is permanent unless we allow it to be. Leaders feel the sting of failure in the same way everyone does, however, they choose to take the learning, and move on.

A Japanese proverb advises that we must "Fall down seven times, stand up eight" (*Nana korobi, ya oki*). In many ways, this adage describes the story arc of most great leaders. Many of our leadership icons- e.g., Steve Jobs and Abraham Lincoln, endured numerous failures. Indeed, our libraries and bookstores abound with stories of great leaders who endured repeated failure but found the courage to endure and try again. Rather than view these failures as life sentences, they learned from these events and moved forward more intelligently and armed with the lessons that only failure can teach.

Remember where we began this discussion—the price of inaction is unrealized opportunity, potential, and progress. So, focus not on the perils of failure, but on the future you compromise if you don't try again.

Building Courage

"We are all of us not merely liable to fear, we are also prone to be afraid of being afraid, and the conquering of fear produces exhilaration.…The contrast between the previous apprehension and the present relief and feeling of security promotes a self-confidence that is the very father and mother of courage." — Malcolm Gladwell

Courage can be developed. You may notice that when you successfully confront and overcome a scary or novel circumstance, your fear is often replaced with a euphoria born of relief (and sometimes astonishment that you survived after all!). The next time may still be scary, but you now know you will survive and will invariably approach that circumstance with more courage than first. Therefore, the key to the development of courage is to act courageously. If you wait for courage to come before you act, you'll never do anything. Courage only comes from doing the things we are afraid to do. Building the courage to try, trust, and tell will unlock opportunities for leadership and are a necessary first step in your development as a leader.

The most courageous leaders find their courage for the big moments in the reservoir of courage created by a thousand small decisions to act when others are still. Courage creates action. Action creates confidence. Confidence allows us to fulfill our potential as a leader.

Courage is a muscle that requires exercise and attention.

It is your Move….

How courageous are you?

Regardless of your stage of life, we can live fuller and more impactful lives if we give attention to the development of courage. As students, you are expected to try many new things. So, experiment aggressively. Ask questions. Speak up. Take chances. Try new things. Learn new skills. Explore new ideas.

Here are a few ideas that you can put to work immediately:

- **Start small.** Strike up a conversation with a stranger, make a phone call you have been delaying, answer a question in class. If you get a bit nervous thinking about it, it is an opportunity to express and build courage.
- **Name your fears.** Is it meeting new people? Speaking up? Suggesting new ideas? Public speaking? What about these activities scares you? Rejection? Failure? Think deeply about the root cause of the fear—naming and understanding it is the first step to overcoming it.
- **Create a visible cue to act courageously.** Write yourself a note. Put a sticker on your laptop. A post it on your mirror. Remind yourself and be intentional until it simply becomes a natural expression of your approach to life and leadership.
- **Do something that scares you.** If you are not routinely feeling the butterflies in your belly, you are unlikely to be growing.
- **Reveal your fears and be vulnerable.** Authentic leaders build trust sharing their fears with others. Identify a couple areas you are struggling with and ask for help.
- **Seek feedback**. Whether from a trusted friend, a mentor, or peer. Ask them how you can be better, and then act on it.
- **Introduce yourself to some who is living your dream.** Whatever your aspiration, find a person who is currently living that aspiration and ask for their help.

- **Find opportunities to challenge the status quo.** In the organizations you belong, where are their opportunities for improvement? How can you enlist others in making things better, faster, or truer to the team's mission?
- **Apologize.** Who do you owe anyone an apology? Before the day is over, make the apology.

Here are some questions for private reflection and action:

- What aspiration or dream for your life is on hold due to fear of change or risk? What steps can you take today, however small, to the realization of these dreams.
- What are the causes that matter most to you personally? Are you a vocal and active advocate for this cause? If not, what is stopping you? What can you do today to put yourself in a position to advance this important cause?
- What have you been hoping to try, and have not? Playing an instrument? Leading a student group? Joining a club? Develop a plan to do it.

Suggested Readings:

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