

THE PRACTICE OF COURAGE

A martial arts sensei said, “You are always practicing something. The question is – What are you practicing?” Darn good question.

Whether we are practicing one-upmanship or cooperation, truth telling or lying, mentoring or self-promotion, fluency in three-letter acronyms or plain speaking, anonymous feedback or face-to-face feedback, our practices have an impact on our careers, our companies, our relationships.

In Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, written during his year in a one-room cabin with few possessions, is this quote.

“The cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call *life* that is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run.”

He was talking about the bigger house, and all the stuff we buy that ends up owning us, keeping us awake at night. Amen to that!

Let’s substitute the word “practice” for “thing.”

The cost of a practice is the amount of life and, ultimately, dollars that must be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run.

There is a direct link between our practices and our results and in my work with leaders and their teams, the practice that, when it is missing costs us the most, and when it is present makes the greatest difference, is courage. Backed up with skill.

Courage is a noun that shows up as a verb. It comes from old French *corage*, from Latin *cor*, “heart. We recognize it by what people do. We do what frightens us, even in the face of perceived or real personal risk. *The man who ran into a house that was fully engulfed in flames, to save a neighbor whom he barely knew.* We demonstrate strength in the face of pain or grief. *The hiker trapped beneath a boulder, who escaped by cutting off his own arm with a Swiss Army knife. No anesthetic.*

While we recognize courage in once-in-a-lifetime, go-down-in-history heroic deeds, it is far more powerful as a daily practice. Though *you* might have run into that burning house, your courage may be failing you where it counts most – in your day-to-day interactions with the people who are central to your success and happiness.

Let’s look at why courage sometimes fails us, the worst “best” practice that gets squarely in its way, and what to do instead.

WHY COURAGE FAILS US

Courageous acts, whether played out in the global media or in a meeting

room, are fueled by strong emotion. In 2002 Daniel Kahneman, a Princeton psychologist, won the Nobel prize for economics for his discovery that people act first for *emotional* reasons, second for logic.

It's not that we attempt to vanish off the radar screen in a meeting because we lack heart. We have plenty of heart, strong emotions. The problem is that our primary emotion may be fear.

How many times have you told someone what you thought he or she wanted to hear, rather than what you were really thinking? Painted a false, rosy version of reality, glossing over problems or pretending they simply didn't exist? Tossed out the ceremonial first lie?

The desire to keep our jobs, our good standing with our boss and colleagues overrides the impulse to disclose that, in our view, the latest plan is a really bad idea. (*What fresh hell is this?!*)

Telling it like it is, speaking the ground truth as opposed to the official party line (which we know to be bogus) is no one's notion of exalting. It's so upsetting, alarming, and risky that we're willing to place a for sale sign on our integrity to avoid it.

After all, we've all witnessed a kind of violence—a lost promotion, raise, or place at the table—visited on those who've spoken their hearts and minds, and it is raw.

You know how it goes. Someone speaks the truth out loud, in the presence of leaders, and soon it is difficult to breathe. Tension fills the room. The leader stiffens, gives us the look, sweeps the room with it. There's lots of fidgeting and darting eyes, until finally, the leader speaks solemnly, as if to a carrier of dengue fever. "I'm aware of these concerns, John (Jane, Larry, Linda). We've got it covered."

Translated: "What part of 'team player' did you not understand!"

Why saw off a metaphorical limb if there is a less risky, less painful way to get through a challenging situation?

A WORST "BEST" PRACTICE

At this very moment, tens of thousands of people on this planet are withholding what they really think and feel from someone at work or at home. They suffer from alethophobia—an intense, abnormal or illogical fear of the truth. And the approved cure – legislated optimism - administered by companies all over the world, is far worse than the disease.

Legislated optimism is the purview of the one- way leader. When optimism is legislated, meetings produce more nothing than something. Ideas die without a funeral or proper burial. Communication is primarily from the leader to everyone else. The reverse is not valued, not welcomed,

because the leader and his or her inner circle of advisers know best.

And the message is always upbeat. Information is presented with a coat of whitewash and abracadabra laid over it, as if leaders would have us believe they've sent all the Death Eaters flying. Naysayers will be sent to Azkaban.

In a culture of legislated optimism, leaders know only the sound of one hand clapping. They ask questions not because they want answers, but because they want to hear how they sound asking them or because they are trying to create the illusion of inclusion.

In this environment, conclusions are reached at the point when everyone stops thinking, which is often short of brilliant. The leaders have already done the thinking for us and have called it good. No point in telling them what we're actually dealing with every day, since to do so would not be a career-enhancing move.

And this is a shame because our first thoughts, unfiltered, uncensored, are usually on to something. We may not even know how or why we know what we know, but we do know, and these thoughts are usually the most true, most honest, yet all too often the courage to capture and voice them fails us.

THE FIERCE ALTERNATIVE

Emile Chartier wrote, "Nothing is more dangerous than an idea when it's the only one you have." As one of my friends would say, "Tru dat!"

We need input from others. Human beings are hardwired to solve problems and are usually successful when they address the real problems, the root causes of whatever challenges they're encountering.

The practice that must take center stage today is radical transparency.

Weak leaders want agreement. Strong leaders want to know the truth. They encourage those they lead to tell them the whole truth, paint the whole picture, even if it's ugly, unpleasant, not what we wish it to be. Because only then can we put our best efforts forward to fix what needs fixing.

The first frontier is finding our own courage.

I was recently in London helping a company kick off the introduction of Fierce Conversations to their leaders in Europe. The objectives were to interrogate reality concerning their goals and the plan for achieving them, provoke learning for everyone in the room, tackle and resolve tough challenges, and enrich relationships.

The first thing the attendees saw when they walked in was a poster with the question, "What are our mokitias?" (*a Papua New Guinea word for that which everyone knows and no one will speak of*). As they walked down

the hall towards the meeting room, there were more posters suggesting topics guaranteed to provoke high emotions, competing perspectives, and fierce debate.

The Managing Director was convinced that until these topics were aired and resolved, the European division of the company was in no danger of achieving their goals.

They talked, courageously and skillfully, for two days.

I can practically hear you groaning. *I don't have time for a two-day meeting. Nobody on my team does. And sotto voce – And even if we did, no one would disclose what they really think and feel.*

May I suggest that *not* having a meeting like this will very likely take you longer. Initiatives may stall. People will likely offer valid excuses to explain disappointing results. Engagement will diminish. The competition may already be surpassing you and poaching your best people. Even though you lowered your price, customers are still leaving. Margins are shrinking. And *you* are not sleeping well at night.

Time is not the issue. The issue is what gets talked about in your company.

What gets talked about in a company, *how* it gets talked about, and *who* gets invited to the conversation, determines what is going to happen *and* what is NOT going to happen. And while no single conversation is guaranteed to change the trajectory of a career, a company, a relationship, or a life – *any* single conversation can.

In London, two days of radically transparent conversations resulted in increased clarity, accountability, collaboration, and partnership across the leadership team, which will translate to the top and bottom line.

If you would like to see more courage in *your* organization, start by having a fierce conversation with yourself. *Where am I going? Why am I going there? How am I going to get there? Who is going with me?*

Change “I” to “we” and you have questions for your team. Let them know that you genuinely hope to be influenced by them, that you invite them to push back on your views. And mean it.

In addition to the questions above, tack on a few more:

- What is the most important thing we should be talking about?
- What has changed since last we met?
- What are our mokitas?
- What do we believe is impossible to do, that if we *were* able to do it, would change everything?

- What are the conversations – with each other, with our customers, with the unknown future - that are central to our success and when will we have them?

In the comic strip, Mutts, two birds sit on a wire.

“I wrote a NEW song!” one says.

“A NEW song!?! But we’ve been imprinted in our hearts to sing the SAME song for thousands of generations.”

“Yes, but mine ROCKS!”

The practices of fierce leadership can be scary—but they rock. They sing to the soul and want to change us. We could talk about them all day, but where they live is out there in the marketplace, in the hallways, offices, meeting rooms. And it is good to remember that like attracts like. When we embrace higher practices, we are soon surrounded by higher practices. When we indulge in inferior practices, we can expect to produce inferior results.

The practices of fierce leadership are for those who are not interested in living a guarded, careful life and are quickly bored in the company of those who are. They are for people who would choose a fierce conversation, a fierce relationship, a fierce life over the alternative, any day.

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