



## Leadership and Courage

*Other virtues become irrelevant without the courage to lead*

Tim Stevenson

**THE NEED OF** the moment in our nation is for strong and effective leaders with particular qualities: Clarity of thought, clarity of speech, integrity, and a healthy vision for how the future can be better than today.

As good as they are, those qualities will be of no value without the requirement of leadership, which is **courage**.

### The requirement of leadership

While current events serve as an enormous case study, my aim here is to illustrate what is needed to succeed as a leader at any level. Before proceeding, what is courage?

Unlike what many assume, courage does not mean the absence of fear. If you listen to people who have acted bravely in the face of terrible dangers, such as soldiers in battle or firefighters racing into a blaze, they seldom say they felt no fear. In fact, many heroes have said, “I was scared to death the whole time.” *But they acted, nonetheless.*

Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is the willingness to do the right thing *in spite of* anxiety or fear. I’ve always liked the John Wayne line, “Courage is being scared to death but saddling up anyhow.”

### The first of the virtues

Without a measure of courage, no one would venture out to lead ... no one would contend against the present state for a better future ... no one would stand by their convictions against the crowd ... and so on for every leadership challenge.

As C. S. Lewis wrote, “**Courage is not simply one of the virtues but the form of every virtue at the testing point.**”

Winston Churchill had the same thought in mind when he said, “**Courage is the first**



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of human qualities because it is the quality that guarantees all the others.” Why so?

### Why leadership is hazardous

- *Leadership is inherently risky*

Holding a position of leadership can mean you become the focus of people’s anxieties and fears. People hate anxiety and instinctively try to offload it to someone else. The handiest object on which to unload one’s anxieties is the leader, the person who “is supposed to fix everything and make everything all right.”

This attitude is not intelligent or rational, understand. If asked directly, people know that no leader can be expected to work miracles, magically fix everything, or control all reality. But that is exactly the point: They *aren’t* thinking rationally. They are *feeling*. History tells of scores of leaders who were discarded because of unrealistic expectations and realities of which they were not at fault.

It is far safer to sit back and be part of the crowd. It is far easier to try to do nothing to bring about change while criticizing those who do. It takes courage to venture in.

- *Facing criticism*

Being criticized is simply part of daily life for people who try to make a difference in the world. It is irritating but true: Often a leader is viciously criticized and resisted in the process of leading change, but sees that criticism melt away without any acknowledgement or credit after the change works successfully. Critics just nonchalantly move on.

- *Calls for unrealistic answers*

John Galsworthy observed, “**Idealism increases in direct proportion to one’s distance from the problem.**” Answers are generally only “easy” from a distance and

come from people who lack the imagination or will to explain how they could work in the real world. It’s incredibly childish.

- *Second-guessing*

Hindsight is 20/20. Any knucklehead can see that something didn’t work after the fact, but leading is done in real time without knowledge of the future. Leaders are easy targets for second-guessers, those who now confidently declare what they “should have done.” It’s unfair and can be maddening.

Reflecting on his Civil War experiences, General U. S. Grant wryly observed:

**Later experience has taught me two lessons: first, that things are seen plainer after the events have occurred; second, that the most confident critics are generally those who know the least about the matter criticized.**

- *Managing uncertainty*

Many novices believe that as you rise in leadership all issues become clearer. No, often it’s the opposite. Andy Stanley put it this way (emphasis mine):

**Uncertainty actually *increases* with increased leadership responsibility. The more responsibility you assume as a leader, the *more* uncertainty you will be expected to manage. The cost of success as a leader is *greater uncertainty*, not less.**

A business plan is fine as a roadmap for how to get your organization or team from here to there. But no business plan is a substitute for the real-time wisdom and decision-making required in the adventure of life, where events are unpredictable and answers uncertain.

- *Remaining optimistic in the face of discouragement or fear*

The attitude required for leadership is optimism. Properly understood, optimism is not

about denying or ignoring negative reality. Optimism looks at problems right in the eye and attacks them with the determination and confidence that things can and will be better.

Every leader, being human, feels the same anxieties and fears as others. In their role, however, they realize they cannot display those feelings, or they will demoralize their followers. Leadership requires imparting confidence and optimism to the people. It takes maturity, self-mastery, and determination to be what you need to be under pressure.

All the challenges above require leaders to be people of courage, but that's not all. You need courage also for things like these:

- Attacking rather than ignoring problems
- Maintaining your intellectual independence, i.e., thinking for yourself
- Speaking unpopular truth, especially in an age when “outraged” mobs can destroy a career
- Addressing deviations from cultural values and insisting on alignment
- Risking blame for failure
- Confronting poor performance or unacceptable behavior
- Enduring the loneliness that often goes with leadership

### **Can you grow in courage?**

We are not created equal in our natural possession of qualities like assertiveness, boldness, and courage. They come more easily to some of us than to others.

Can you grow in courage? If so, how? The answer is yes. As to how, it's the same way you can get to Carnegie Hall in the old joke: “Practice! Practice! Practice!” My suggestions:

#### • ***Practice daily preparation***

The best leaders don't just step into the current of their day and wing it. Daily preparation is their lifestyle. They read, think, and focus. If persons of faith, they center themselves there every day. Clarity of thought comes through persistent practice.

#### • ***Determine your convictions***

People who wait until the time of challenge to figure out what they believe usually fail. Convictions are the backbone of leadership. They must be thought out *in advance* or they'll never withstand a real-life challenge. If a value goes out the window in the face of a test, it wasn't a value at all, just a mood.

#### • ***Practice pressing on against fear***

Every time you face anxiety or fear and you push through it, even in a small matter, you bank another memory building confidence. Keep doing it and you'll discover you don't have to be ruled by feelings. You can push past them and do the right thing called for.

#### • ***Count the cost ... and choose to lead***

Directly face the hazards of leading I've written above. Consider the whether you are willing to risk experiencing them. It will come down to this: Do you believe in your cause enough that you're willing to lead regardless?

The future of our country will be determined by whether leaders with integrity arise. They will need huge amounts of courage to do so – no doubt one reason the Bible tells us to pray for all those in authority.

Whether on a national scale or a small team, we need leaders who accept the risks, count the cost, and venture out to lead us to a better future. We need leaders with courage. **L**