



IT'S IMPORTANT FOR A LEADER TO HAVE THE COURAGE OF THEIR CONVICTIONS

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Deciding what path to take as a leader isn't always easy. Even if you can clearly see a path going forward, other members of your team may not agree with you, so standing up for what you believe in takes both mental and moral courage. Mental courage allows you to examine all the options, including those that don't initially attract you, while moral courage is when you have the courage to take action for moral reasons despite the risk of adverse consequences. Either way, this takes guts. And guts are good to have when you lead.

Jane Goodall, the famous anthropologist, had this to say about courage: "My mother always taught us that if people don't agree with you, the important thing is to listen to them. But if you've listened to them carefully and you still think that you're right, then you must have the courage of your convictions."

Let us first look at mental courage. Again, it means to examine all the options, including those that don't initially attract you. For a project leader, this is an opportunity to take a risk assessment. Ask yourself these questions:

What happens to you if you speak up?

What happens to you if you don't?

What happens to others if you speak up?

What happens to others if you don't?

Here is an example of a project leader showing mental courage. Joe was the new director for a mining project. The project had just passed the front-end load stage of pre-digging planning, and was about to start digging the shaft. Joe was told at the beginning that the completion estimates of the schedules and budget were all set. What's more, they had been approved by the board, which meant the project was a go. However, once he got into things, Joe found that he might have a different perspective on those scheduling assumptions.

As a seasoned project director who was a new addition to the project, Joe decided to take three months to listen and observe. Any good project director would do the same. His initial approach was to ask questions, take lots of notes, and learn as much as possible.

Joe kept his counsel and worked hard to learn all about his team, including their strengths and challenges. He wanted to see what the culture of the team was, how he could fit in, and lead them in a good direction. He also wanted to learn whom he could rely on for what. This was important. Not all new project directors work this way. Sometimes a new project director may jump in with his or her own observations and make recommendations right off the bat. But Joe had the courage and confidence of his convictions to wait, knowing that his initial

perceptions might not be correct, and that his action had to take the culture of the team into account.

He knew from prior experience that there are always layers and nuances to learn, and to discover. It is vitally important for a leader to show the courage and mental toughness not to make a decision when it may be premature to do so.

Joe wanted to win the respect of his team, and knew that jumping in with criticisms or conclusions too early was not the best way to go. As a result, he asked questions of all those team members. He would say: "Help me understand," or "There's something that concerns me a little," or "What's your perspective on this?"

Little by little, he managed to confirm some of his first impressions, but he also discarded other impressions and gradually formed a point of view. At the same time, he looked for opportunities to recognise and support his team's insights, and to build his reputation as a fair manager with those people.

A couple of times during this process his boss had asked him about his views, and he said he hadn't made up his mind yet. He wanted more time, but made sure to book a meeting with his boss at the three-month mark – three months after he took over the project as leader.

Eventually, after investigating and challenging his own assumptions to test their strength,

BIG TREE STRATEGIES

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Joe went to his boss and they discussed his perspective. He was now ready. Because Joe had been so thorough and had initially held back, his boss was very open to hearing his views. The upshot of all this was that Joe asked his boss for additional resources; he wanted to bring in an outside person who could analyse the situation and test his own assumptions. It was a good thing, too, because Joe and his boss were able to amend the schedule.

What are the benefits of demonstrating such courage?

In resisting the pressure to commit to a certain point of view too soon, Joe was able to avoid looking like he was quick to judge, and he also avoided alienating his people. This was wise because he needed them to trust him.

He used this time to explore the issue with the team, and get their insights. He slowed things down to make sure he was right. This was important, since it would involve taking some bad news up the organisation (i.e. extending the deadline). He was able to convince his boss that the integrities of himself and of the boss were both on the line.

Moral courage is just as important for a leader, but it's different. Here is an industry example of moral courage.

Sheila was an experienced supervisor in a project team that worked for the EPCM (Engineering, Procurement, and Construction Management) contractor.

She noticed how a new supervisor in the owner's company – a man who was new to

the position – was interacting with an older, more experienced team member.

It was obvious to Sheila that the supervisor seemed afraid to hold the older staff person to account and make him wear his personal protective equipment. There were consequences with the supervisor's lack of resolve. Such behaviour allowed others to disregard safety rules, with the result that a culture of carelessness was getting established. Also, the new supervisor's team interacted with her team every day, and it was harder for her to hold her team accountable when he wasn't doing the same with his team.

Sheila didn't have direct jurisdiction over him. Nevertheless, she still decided to speak up. First, she spoke to the new supervisor to let him know that she had noticed his good

start in the role. Then she mentioned that his hesitancy in this situation was holding back his good reputation from growing. She offered a suggestion.

Sheila said the supervisor might take the older man aside privately and ask for his support in taking a turn to lead the safety share (each team started its shift with this daily reminder of safety issues) and to show a good example by wearing his personal protective equipment. The supervisor took her advice and the older man responded well, so things took care of themselves. But this required moral courage on Sheila's part. It required moral courage because this person – the first-line supervisor – wasn't her employee. Still, she saw something that wasn't working and chose to speak out. In short, she used her voice.

In these two examples, both Sheila and Joe had the courage of their convictions to take appropriate action. Team cultures are built on the accumulation of little actions. By their actions, Sheila and Joe communicated the importance of their team's culture and of respect. They also communicated the importance of speaking up when things weren't right, and of their willingness to take time to choose the right action.