
Be honest, direct, and willing to risk it all for your beliefs

Among others, there are two poignant examples that point to Coach staying true to his values and convictions. In 1947, Indiana State won its conference title; however, Coach rejected an invitation for his team to play in the post season NAIA tournament because African Americans were not allowed to play. (Note: The NAIA changed this rule the next year, and Indiana State participated in the tournament with one of Coach's players, Clarence Walker, becoming the first to break the color barrier.)

Another example occurred on the first day of practice in 1973 when All-American center and returning national champion Bill Walton was beginning his senior season. Bill took exception to Coach's requirements regarding facial hair and hair length, and arrived in the gym looking less than tidy. Calling Bill aside, Coach reminded Bill about the need for grooming. Bill protested. Coach replied that while he respected Bill's political and social views of the day, he reserved the sole right to determine who would see playing time. Ultimately, Bill grabbed a bicycle and raced to a nearby barbershop.

Your coaching imperative: If you don't stand for anything, you will fall for anything

This principle is about courage, having convictions, and sticking to them.

When we think about courage, it is often in the context of someone responding to danger: a soldier, a police officer, a nurse, a fire fighter, or other first responder, risking their own life to save another's. We may also see courage when someone takes a strong, unpopular, or unprecedented political or social stand. People like Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Eleanor Roosevelt, John Lewis, and John McCain come to mind. They saw the world through a different lens, understood the sense of timing and gravity about their causes, and took their challenging journeys of burden, accepting personal responsibility to the end.

Courage in an organizational setting is generally not predicated upon a life or death situation; it is about intentional bold action. Its examples include having difficult performance and personal discussions, standing up to bullies, taking on the naysayers, confronting questionable management choices, breaking disappointing news, sailing uncharted waters, and fighting for time-tested values and principles.

Courage as a skill

Coach had a saying, "Don't be afraid to act. Don't be afraid to fail."

Courage is not taught in a classroom. It is not in your gene pool. It is not a behavior for which you can be conditioned. It is also not possible if you have a fear of failure.

Courage is a voluntary willingness to make yourself vulnerable, to open your kimono. It is highly personal. It is only gained through a magnitude of experiences involving risk-taking.

Contemplating courage

Kathleen Reardon argues that courage in a corporate setting is not about impulsive action-taking. It is about calculated risk, where, in most cases, time is not yet an enemy. When matters are of high importance and involve the potential use of significant political capital, Reardon suggests that your situational analysis should include confronting questions such as:

- Why am I pursuing this now?
- Am I contemplating a considered action or an impulsive one?
- How long would it take to become better prepared? Is that too long?
- What are the pros and cons of waiting a day, two days, a week or more?
- What are the political obstacles? Can these be removed or reduced in the near future?
- Can I take steps now that will create a foundation for a courageous move later?
- Am I emotionally and mentally prepared to take this risk?
- Do I have the expertise, communication skills, track record, and credibility to make this work?

The tipping point of courage

As James M. Murray, former director of the United States Secret Service mentioned in his 2023 commencement address at the University of Scranton, the essence of courage, in any environment, is captured in these two questions:

- 1 If not you, then who?
- 2 If not now, then when?

Courage exemplified

Courage comes in several different flavors. In both public and private environments, it is often accompanied by ambiguity, doubts, chaos, and threats.

The courage to create

It takes bold decisions, unconventional initiative, and risk tolerance to start any company. In Silicon Valley, Singapore, Zhongguancun (the technology hub in the Haidian district of Beijing), and in garages beyond, would-be entrepreneurs are working today on the next generation of technological products and services that may holistically and dramatically impact our lives and livelihoods. As time evolves, not all of these entrepreneurs, or their potential or early investors, will have the stomach for the chase; however, in looking back, we can find several notable and inspirational examples of

individuals who have helped shape both the United States and global business landscape by rolling the dice. Among them:

- In creating the virtual bookstore on Amazon.com in 1995, Jeff Bezos left a blossoming Wall Street career to become an Internet pioneer. In less than four years, the company became profitable. Bezos showed early critics that the Internet was more than information dissemination and exchange as he built a business that is today's dominant force in e-commerce.
- When Ingvar Kamrad was 17, he started his own company. He began by marketing a hodgepodge of products, mostly affordable furniture, via mail order. After a slow start, he changed course, shifting from the competitive mail order industry to allowing customers to see and "touch" the furniture before deciding to buy. It was a gamble. His first exhibition opened in 1953, when he greeted 1,000 customers with coffee and buns. Ultimately, his company manufactured its own furniture and he later introduced flat packaging in 1956. By the turn of the century, IKEA had 150 stores in 30 countries, employing over 44,000 people.
- In 1954, at the age of 52, Ray Kroc changed the way America ate. After spending the previous 17 years of his life selling mixers, he was introduced to the McDonald's restaurant in San Bernardino, California. Here, he witnessed the "recipe" for operational efficiency and customer service. By 1961, after experiencing severe financial problems that almost caused bankruptcy, he bought out the owners for \$2.7 million. He built new restaurants with the "pillars" of "quality, service, cleanliness, and value."

The courage to stay the course

Coach Wooden would not let outside parties dictate his decision-making. Fans, parents, media critics, alumni, skeptics, competitive pressures, or others would not influence him with their parochial interests. He had a system. He believed in that system. He believed in himself and his players, even if the banners at Pauley Pavilion would take a few years to come. With university support, he could be patient in his early years with the progress shown.

The courage to transform

If you stand still, you might be left behind.

In 1989, the five largest companies in the world by market capital valuations were NIT, Industrial Bank of Japan, Sumitomo Bank, Fuji Bank, and DKB. ExxonMobil was eighth. Fourteen of the twenty companies were Japanese. Three (NIT, IBM, and AT&T) were technology-driven.

Almost 20 years later, the top of the list features Apple, Amazon, Google/Alphabet, Microsoft, and Facebook/Meta—all companies that either were not in existence in 1989 or in their infancy. ExxonMobil, the only company to still be on the list, was now tenth. There are NO Japanese companies. There are eight technology-driven companies and China has a growing presence.

WOW! The pace of change is stunning. Blink, and your company could sadly share the fate of Sears, Blockbuster, Borders, J.C. Penny, Lord & Taylor, or Toys "R" Us.

To keep pace, much less get ahead, may take some foresight, courage, and prayer to transform your organization. Bill George, a Harvard faculty member and former CEO of Medtronic, captured some prolific examples.

- When Alan Mulally arrived at Ford, it was losing \$18 billion a year. (Yes, that is a “B”!) In response, he convinced the Ford family to pledge their support, stock, and name in order to borrow the money to retool the entire product line. It worked. Unlike their competitors, Ford never declared bankruptcy, regained market share, and returned to profitability, saving thousands of jobs in the process.
- How would you like to take the helm of a company whose products once had 50% of the market share, which had dipped to 18%? Welcome to General Motors. It was Mary Barra in 2014 who set the course of a different direction by killing off duplicative and inwardly competitive brands, while transforming the product line. They had to go the route of a government bailout, but they re-established the company, killed off many of their former “cultural problems,” and streamlined and redesigned their vehicle line-up.
- Embracing a sustainable living platform, Paul Polman set stretch goals at Unilever in 2009 to double revenues and to generate 70% of that from emerging markets. In his first eight years at the helm, aligning 175,000 employees around defined metrics, he returned 214% to company shareholders.
- When Indra Nooyi was named CEO of Pepsi in 2006, she foresaw the marketplace shift from carbonated sugar-flavored sodas and salty snacks to healthy alternatives. Under the mantra “Performance with Purpose,” she pushed the company to expand in that direction, returning a sizable increase in Pepsi stock, as compared with competitors.

Beyond the above, George also mentions the leaders of Delta, Starbucks, Xerox, Nestle, Merck, and Alibaba as examples of leaders who had the courage to transform their companies.

The courage to stand your ground

Sometimes, courage is about holding firm to your convictions.

On November 15, 2018, British Prime Minister Theresa May faced some brutal clashes at the House of Commons as she attempted to make the case for her negotiated Brexit terms. In what *The Times* called the worst day of her premiership, standing alone, she was weakened by an attempted coup, stirrings of a no-confidence vote, and a wave of same-day resignations.

At a news conference later that day on Downing Street, she stood at the podium. Some expected her to wilt or change her mind. More drastic forecasts claimed she might leave office. Yet, despite her relatively unpopular stance, she defiantly told those in attendance and others watching, she was not modifying her stance. In fact, she proclaimed, “I believe with every fiber in my being that the course I have set out is the right one for our country and all our people.” She further added, “Leadership is about taking the right decisions, not the easy ones.”

In a political environment fraught with overwhelming negativity, cynicism, and unrelenting criticism, her line in the sand was drawn. And while her stance ultimately did not turn out to be the basis for the way forward, she remained steadfast and firm until her resignation. Interpersonal courage and fortitude personified.

The courage to speak up

Would you confront a colleague who just accepted an excessive gift from a supplier? How might you handle the situation if you came to know that your company's inventory reports have been altered to make the short-term balance sheet look better? Would you have the moral fortitude to expose an injustice, even if its repercussions could possibly jeopardize your company's viability and subject you to coworker isolation?

Hold that last thought ...

In 2001, Sherron Watkins, the former vice president of Corporate Development for Enron, wrote an internal memo to Ken Lay, the company founder, detailing her concerns about the company's creative accounting methods. She cautioned their improper practices were too risky and that they might not withstand scrutiny. Her fear was that scandals were on the horizon absent immediate change. She urged the company's leaders to come clean about its misleading accounting statements.

The leaders ostensibly did not listen or choose to ignore Ms. Watkins' warnings. Her memos later went public during a congressional committee hearing, exposing and labeling Ms. Watkins as some type of corporate "whistleblower." The company did ultimately implode and its executives went to jail.

Watkins did all she could to right the wrongs. And we cannot imagine her lost sleep and sweaty pillows. She must have been consumed with "ratting out" others, loyalty divisions, conflicts about personal ethics, and her own internal struggles with integrity and reputation. This is a woman with true gumption!

The courage to do the right thing

Andrew S. Grove was born in 1936 in Hungary. He survived scarlet fever at age four, grew up in poverty, was sheltered from Nazis, and ultimately escaped communist Russia into Austria in 1956. He arrived in the United States in 1957 and enrolled in and subsequently graduated from the City University of New York. His degree was in chemical engineering. He later received his Ph.D. at UC Berkeley.

His first job was at Fairchild Semiconductor. He later joined a start-up, Intel, in 1968, where he rose through the ranks to COO, and then CEO. In 1987, a minute technical flaw was detected in the company's flagship Pentium processor. It may have gone unnoticed by unsuspecting or unknowing retailers or consumers. Instead, Grove made the \$475 million decision to recall and replace the product.

While Intel suffered a significant financial hit, the recall left the company's reputation intact, if not enamored. Any potential public relations issues were avoided, and profits eventually rose.

The courage of transparency

This type of courage was shown by Jerry Senion in the mid-90s. Jerry was the general manager of an appliance manufacturing facility in central New Jersey, where I headed-up the HR team. At the time, we were being threatened by off-shore competition that had shuttered similar manufacturers. Jerry knew that in order to sustain, some difficult decisions needed to be taken, many of which involved rebuilding the site's relationship with organized labor. To this end, he opened the company's books (within context) to the local unions and sought their partnership in a turnaround.

The unions were at first skeptical about this approach. Perhaps they were even suspicious. However, the partnerships unfolded—locally and with the international union heads. As a result, the site moved forward with training and incentive programs for flexible, multi-craft practices. Much needed cost savings were attained in other areas. Ultimately, these efforts, along with other re-engineering initiatives, led to a 25% increase in productivity and a 30% increase in return-on-assets.

Production from this site was eventually moved to China, but Jerry's leadership kept that facility and its 2,000-plus jobs viable well beyond its expected shelf life.

The courage to endure

Can you push yourself when you have little left to give?

In October 1803, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark set off on what was to be the most famous adventure of their lives. Given the mandate by President Jefferson to explore the lands of the vast Louisiana Purchase that he had bargained from Spain, their mission was to record the geography, geology, and commercial possibilities of the newly acquired region. Two and a half years and over 8,000 miles later, their “Corps of Discovery” reported back, after undergoing extreme hardships under extraordinary conditions.

The expedition was fraught from the start with mistakes and misgivings, yet somehow it attained its goal. Maps were poor or non-existent, guides were unavailable or untrustworthy, and communication with the Natives was difficult at best. Along the way, this group encountered dangerous wildlife, roaring rivers, leaking boats, harsh weather, and threatening situations ... conditions that would have caused others to turn back. One can only imagine the homesickness and depravity they must have experienced as they trekked across the unknown.

Lewis and Clark knew the risks, weighed the odds, and accepted Jefferson's mandate—a task many others would have shunned. They never lost track of their goal nor wavered in their faith as they charted the American West. Although many mistakes were made along the way, the results of their efforts helped map out an entire new region, and it stands as one of the greatest accomplishments in American history.

In the corporate world, you may not be asked to make these types of physical sacrifices, but your energy, patience, and dedication may be tested.

The courage to go forward

The passing of a well-liked co-worker who was close to many is a steep personal and professional challenge. Hopefully, you never have to experience this.

In 2018, my company lost a long-service employee. She was a friend and colleague. She reported to me in HR. We had worked side-by-side for almost ten years. She was scheduled to retire shortly. Unfortunately, she was taken far too soon.

Jan's absence left our company's workplace with a terrible void. She was an integral part of our team, with involvement in many projects and initiatives. She was also a role model and mentor to many, deeply entrenched in our organizational fabric. It was suddenly strange to walk by an empty desk; stranger still to refer to her in the past tense.

There is no textbook on how to handle these types of tragedies. I can only say that I did my best. I spoke with her husband and helped coordinate related benefits and activities; I gave time and space to all team members; we held private meetings to talk and/or listen to stories;

I crafted related messages and announcements; and with my voice cracking, I delivered words of remembrance at her memorial service.

As a team, we grieved. As a team we (slowly) picked up the pieces. As a team, we each showed courage to go forward.

Why courage is hard

Hypothetically (or not) ...

Let's say that you have worked hard and smart your whole career. You sacrificed. You strategically changed jobs a couple of times, keeping yourself on a fast track. You took night classes and earned the advanced degree. You belonged to the "right" professional associations and got the "right" accreditations. You worked for some terrific mentors who sponsored your next steps. You put in the long hours at work, traded off family time, traveled extensively as needed, and established your reputation as an "up and comer." No assignment was too challenging. People inside the industry came to respect your opinions and you attained a heightened professional stature. Well-deserved rewards finally came your way. Your dream job was finally realized and your future seemed even brighter!

And then, conflict is at your doorstep ...

You come to work on Monday. There is a rumor that your closest coworker and someone you consider to be a friend, may have been involved in a serious compliance violation. Innocent or not, the company's gossip grapevine is in overdrive. You have no direct knowledge of the potential indiscretion, but, with the benefit of hindsight and reflection, you can connect quite a few suspicious dots. What to do?

At least two choices await you. In option one, you report nothing. You mind your own business and ignore the possible indiscretion. You ask nothing, volunteer nothing, and hope that you will not be tarnished by any worst case association. You might even be able to rationalize your inaction by convincing yourself that nothing good is going to come out of this anyway. Maybe it will blow over or go away.

Your other choice involves doing something. Saying something. Options here can take you down many rabbit holes, some of which point to why courage is fleeting in today's corporate environment.

- *You could be humiliated. Why didn't you originally report your suspicions? Might you be faulted for not recognizing the concern and saying something sooner? Would your reputation be put at risk? And everyone knows that you both worked closely together ...*
- *You could damage relationships. If you report your suspicions, will your friend hold it against you? Assuming he survives, would you be able to continue working together?*
- *Your credibility could become damaged. Would you be considered a snitch? Who is going to trust you going forward?*
- *You could lose your job.*

Goodness knows where this investigation may go. It may mean spending endless time with HR. There may even be lawyers involved if it gets serious. Might your friend try to save himself by implicating others? Could your job be on the line if you have to decide between devotions?

No easy choices, but if you are reading this book, I think you will do something.

Everyday courage

While you may have early doubts or hesitation, exhibiting courage is good for your self-confidence and esteem. It can be empowering. Notably, it does not have to be a life-changing event or a strategic shift to do so. Here are some ways you can demonstrate courage in a corporate setting:

- Fight your inner-introvert and express your opinion.
- Stand-up for yourself. If you don't, who will?
- Hire people who have diverse opinions, contrasting your point of view.
- Challenge the status quo.
- Say "no" if you need to keep your work/life balance or manage other priorities.
- Assuming it is feasible, ask to occasionally work remotely and demonstrate correlating productivity.
- Push yourself to give a presentation, knowing that you are anxious about public speaking.
- Listen openly to what your critics have to say.
- Continuously learn.

Periodic reflection

In the early days of the Vietnam War, Coach Wooden, a veteran of World War II, believed that individuals had an obligation to serve their country. While not outspoken in his views, he made it clear to his players that he frowned upon their protest efforts.

His view about sending our troops to war later changed when, by chance, he read and reflected upon an article about the cruelties of armed battle and how, in many cases, our young men and women were sacrificed for the causes and means of a few.

While your personal core values and beliefs, by definition, have deep roots, one should periodically assess them, especially as they compare with your organization's values for alignment. Such introspection develops deep thinking, identifies a stronger sense of self, and encourages independence of thought.

How does this compare to Conventional Wisdom?

Play it safe. Stay low. This, too, will pass.

To the contrary, you do not want to be sitting home second-guessing yourself about courses of action that you wish you would have otherwise taken. Your choice is to act or to be potentially acted upon.

Endnotes for Principle 20: Be honest, direct, and willing to risk it all for your beliefs

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