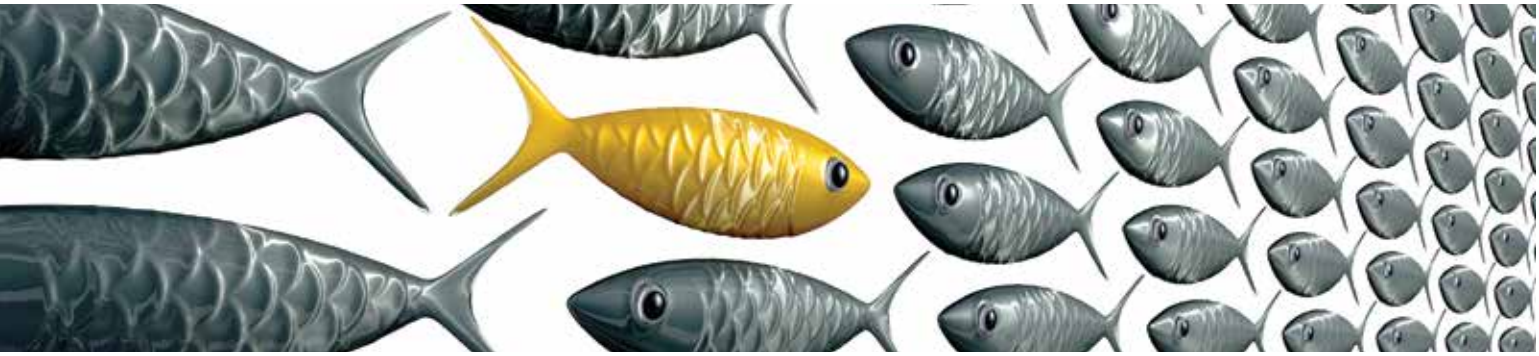
Leadership and Virtues—Courage

By Joe Whitefield



Today, I want to continue the conversation we began in the previous article concerning the role of virtues in leadership. I asked you to consider that the character of a leader should consist of more than a simple set of values that are promoted and adhered to on a situational basis. In a sense, some of today's most popular values often compete with one another—individual privacy versus local or national security, personal freedom versus health, freedom of expression versus freedom from offense, and so on—setting up a morality minefield for our organizations. With that, I put forward an old idea that the cardinal virtues are superior to and more stable than our modern-day values and that they could be useful to us once again. After discussing the nuanced and important aspects of prudence, it is time to take up the next forgotten virtue: courage.

Before we get into the specifics, ask yourself this question: What is the most courageous thing you have ever done? Think about it. It is one of the most penetrating questions I have ever considered. You may have military experience, or you may have faced an illness or another personal situation requiring decisive action or resolve in the presence of fear and uncertainty. You may have walked through uncertain situations with a family member or close friend. If so, you know what courage is and how it can change your perspective and even your life.

If you don't have a great answer for this question, why not? Either you haven't been placed in a position requiring much courage, or perhaps you have shied away from a fearful situation. Whether you have acted courageously in the past or not, there will be future opportunities demanding it from you.

GO FEVER

Let's consider courage in the professional arena. No doubt there are a number of risks facing your organization right now. Most have financial implications. Some may even include threats of job loss—real risks and real consequences. How are decisions made in this environment? Many people avoid making decisions so that they cannot be blamed if something fails. Organizations feed this environment with an ever-present fear of failure that paralyzes their people. This is a common picture of many organizations. It definitely requires courage to overcome this environment, scuttle the status quo mandate, and produce great work.

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There is another picture to consider, representing the other end of the spectrum. It is the opposite of the status quo mandate, but is equally as dangerous. It is called "go fever." Go fever is the condition when a project has so much momentum that no

one wants to say or doing anything to slow it down for fear of being labeled a naysayer or a poor team member. In *Think Like a Freak*, Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner write about a well-known project that suffered from go fever—the space shuttle Challenger mission.

Many of us remember seeing the Challenger blow apart on our TV screens within two minutes of the launch on January 28, 1986. We may also remember the beloved astronaut and civilian school teacher who was aboard the shuttle, Christa McAuliffe. But do we remember the cause of the accident? O-ring failures on shuttle boosters allowed the gases to escape and ultimately ignite. If only someone had suspected the potential for failure and recommended delaying the launch.

As it turns out, someone did. Allan McDonald of Morton Thiokol saw the potential for O-ring problems given the subfreezing temperatures predicted during the launch window and recommended delaying the launch. His recommendation was rejected and when he refused to sign off on the decision, his boss signed off, approving the launch. Why was McDonald overruled? He describes a situation in which the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) had a serious case of go fever for this launch. Given the press coverage, the unique crew, and the other delays that had occurred, there was serious pressure to launch. Anyone giving reasons to delay at this late stage was apparently viewed as an obstructionist. According to Levitt and Dubner, "Once a boss gets 'go fever,' it takes a lot of courage to focus on potential failures. Institutional politics, ego, and momentum are all conspiring against you." That certainly seems to be true for the Challenger mission.

FINDING COURAGE

Perhaps you are involved in a project or initiative at your institution or organization that has a serious case of go fever. I know many institutions who are fully engaged in projects suffering from this condition. The first step in dealing with this problem is to recognize it. Seek to define the problem(s) in terms of impacts to the institution as a whole. Develop alternatives. After that, you may need to find the courage to state your concerns and objections to the appropriate people.

These concerns should be supported with as much information as possible. Since you may be the local expert on the specific subject, you may have to go to great lengths to translate the problems into language your audience can understand. Remember, you are probably fighting politics—choose diplomacy. But don't back down—it will take courage to risk going "against the grain"—but it will be worth it.

Leadership today demands character no matter how talented or intelligent the leader. I submit again that character should be more than a simple set of values that are promoted and adhered to on a situational basis. Virtues are at a higher level than situational values. But if you decide to embrace them and stand up for your convictions, be prepared. It will definitely require some courage.

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