



## Issue 199 - October 2019

Like a spotlight cutting through darkness, courage shines brightest in the presence of fear. It's easy to boldly march forward when we're filled with confidence, and the way forward is fairly smooth. It takes real courage -- and strong leadership -- to navigate our way when we're full of negative fantasies and everything seems to be against us. True courage is to master, rather than be mastered by, our fears.



Victory in difficult circumstances starts with our own victory over self. The best way out of a tough situation is by working through it. Thucydides, the ancient Greek historian and the author of the *History of the Peloponnesian War* (covering the battle between Sparta and Athens from 431 to 404 B.C.), declares, "But the bravest are surely those who have the clearest vision of what is before them, glory and danger alike, and yet not withstanding go out and meet it."

The word "courage" is a Middle English word derived from an Old French word for "heart." Aristotle taught that courage is the foundation of all human virtues because it makes the others possible. It starts with accepting we're free to choose our life. We have the freewill to define who we are. We aren't stuck with our circumstances. We may not choose what happens to us, but we choose what to do about it.

Freedom isn't easy. It requires us to take responsibility for our actions. Sometimes we want to escape from freedom. It can be hard to accept responsibility for the life our choices have created. It's easier -- and popular -- to blame fate, luck, or others for where we are. We can create elaborate defense and avoidance mechanisms to hide from the tough issues and sidestep making the changes we know deep down we should be making. But that's just existing. It's not really living. We can become a prisoner in a jail we've built.

This month's issue focuses on courage. This counterbalances last month's focus on fear. Courageous leaders face their fears. It's difficult -- if not impossible -- to build a values-centered team or organization in a culture of fear. Courageous leaders stand up and speak their truth. Courageous leaders also sit down and listen.

Courageous leadership can be as simple -- and as difficult -- as initiating a tough conversation rather than sending an e-mail or text. The sparks of minor conflicts, feedback, and smaller issues can be fanned into roaring fires by electronic exchanges that should have been personal conversations. Courageous conversations are difficult to have -- especially if they've been uncomfortable or unsuccessful in the past. It often takes courage to have tough discussions instead of sending a text or e-mail. But the price of typing rather than talking can be misunderstanding and damaged relationships. And it erodes our courage foundation.

As Waylon Jennings sang, "Some things come in small packages; Sometimes heroes do too; If you have the courage and you have the heart; The hero just might be you."

## Courageous Leadership: What Are You Waiting For?

In Samuel Beckett's play, "Waiting for Godot," two tramps are waiting by a sickly-looking tree for the arrival of M. Godot. We never learn who Godot is or why he's important. The tramps quarrel, make up, contemplate suicide, try to sleep, eat a carrot, and gnaw on some chicken bones. Two other characters appear: a cruel master and his slave. The master claims to own the land they are on and has his slave entertain them. A young boy arrives to say that M. Godot will not come today, but that he will come tomorrow. The play ends with one tramp saying to the other, "Well? Shall we go?" "Yes, let's go," replies the other tramp. They don't move. The curtain comes down.



It's easy to wait for someone else to act. It's tough to navigate through difficult change and adversity. Strong leaders find the courage to face management crisis and technical issues, pulling them down into the minutiae of details. It is especially about having courageous conversations. That means having the courage to talk about sensitive issues we've been avoiding and having the courage to listen to what we don't want to hear.

Poor time management and overwork -- too many e-mails, voice mails, and meetings -- are often the result of not enough courage to face issues -- either at work or even at home. So, we avoid them by burying ourselves in our busyness. For many less-effective managers, volumes of e-mails, voice mails, phone calls, and meetings are a twisted type of status symbol or personal measure of self-worth proving to them and others just how busy, important, and indispensable they are.

I used to mouth the phrase "embrace change." I've changed my perspective on change. Now I realize that "embrace change" is a useless platitude mouthed by someone who hasn't thought about its full implications or is a masochist. Many changes are impossible to embrace. This list might include loss of a relationship, a loved one, health, job, money, and such.

We rarely choose the adverse changes that spring up. But we always choose how we respond. It's common to wait in [Following Mode](#). We're sitting on the fence to see what happens or passively waiting for someone else to do something. There are times when waiting and not acting immediately is quite wise. This might be when we need more information and have to do some research, or to see whether a change is going to become a trend, or which way the new boss, government, etc. is going to go.

But [Leading Mode](#) is home base to courageous leaders. We're trying to capitalize on the problem or adversity. Or we may be at least trying to figure out how we can make the best of a bad situation. Like the best ship captains of old, courageous leaders know that we can't control the wind and currents, but we can adjust our sails to make the best use of the conditions to move toward our destination.

The most dangerous -- and cowardly -- approach is [Wallowing Mode](#). This means giving in to our fears and playing the victim. We're bitter, helpless, and feeling like 'they' are doing it to us. A list of usual suspects includes "the government," "my boss or senior management," "other departments," "customers," or "workers."

These problems can make our life difficult, but what matters is how we frame them. Courageous leaders face these issues head-on by focusing on what's within their direct control or influence. They figure out how to let go of, or at least not 'awfulize' and give more power to problems or issues that can't be controlled or changed. Leaders know that the best thing to do when it's raining, is to... let it rain. So, leaders get busy figuring out how to work in the rain or adjust their sails rather than cursing the weather and moving to Pity City.

Maybe you know a few people who live in Pity City? Once a workshop participant blurted out, "Live there! My husband's the mayor."

Pity City -- or its suburb, Frown Town -- can be a therapeutic place to visit. We all need to grieve or ventilate frustration when faced with major losses or setbacks. But we don't want to live in this toxic place. Residency leads to deepening cynicism, despair, and inaction. It's certainly not leadership territory. But it's so easy to get on the Bitter Bus rolling on down Helpless Highway to Pity City because that's where so many people are going.

Life isn't fair. Lots of unfair and unjust crap happen to undeserving people. Whatever hits the fan won't be evenly distributed. But it's our choice whether to stand in it or not.

Leaders make it happen, followers watch it happen, and wallowers ask, 'Why does this always happen to me?'

Are you on the Better Bus or the Bitter Bus? Are you at the front of the line at the bus stop? Because if that's where our organization is going, do we want to get a good seat?

## Thoughts That Make You Go Hmm on... Courageous Leadership

*"The courage to look hard realities in the face is essential to effective leadership."*

Winston Churchill

*"Laugh at yourself, but don't ever aim your doubt at yourself. Be bold. When you embark for strange places, don't leave any of yourself safely on shore. Have the nerve to go into unexplored territory."*

Alan Alda, American actor, director, screenwriter, and author

*"Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgment that something else is more important than fear."*

"Ambrose Redmoon," pseudonym for James Neil Hollingworth a disabled beatnik, hippie, author, and rock band manager

*"Moral courage [is] the courage of one's convictions, the courage to see things through. The world is in a constant conspiracy against the brave. It's the age-old struggle -- the roar of the crowd on one side and the voice of your conscience on the other."*

Douglas MacArthur, American Five Star General who played a key role in the Pacific during WW II



*"Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage."*

Anaïs Nin, French-Cuban diarist, novelist, and short-story writer

*"A leader does what he or she believes is right, does not compromise, and sees the issue through to the end without waffling. In the long run, far less hostility accrues to the leader who does this than to the one who compromises his or her integrity in the search for accommodation, compromise, or popularity. No one will finally respect a frightened, pulse-feeling kind of leadership."*

John Shelby Spong, *Here I Stand*

*"I believe that courage is all too often mistakenly seen as the absence of fear. If you descend by rope from a cliff and are not fearful to some degree, you are either crazy or unaware. Courage is seeing your fears in a realistic perspective, defining it, considering alternatives, and choosing to function in spite of risks."*

Leonard Zunin, physician and author

*"I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear."*

Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*

*"The day we see the truth and cease to speak is the day we begin to die."*

Martin Luther King Jr., American civil rights leader

## Tweet Reading: Recommended Online Articles



This section summarizes last month's LinkedIn Updates and Twitter Tweets about online articles or blog posts that I've flagged as worth reading. These are usually posted on weekends when I am doing much of my reading for research, learning, or leisure. You can follow me on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/JimClemmer>

My original tweet commenting on the article follows each title and descriptor from the original source:

A good summary of seven ways courage plays a vital role in leadership.

[What's Courage Have to Do with Leadership?](#), Dagmar Meachem, *Thrive Global*

*"Courage may separate out the effective leaders from ineffective leaders and can be the differentiator whether a leader has influence or not over those they lead."*

A three-minute practical read with a two-minute video on five difficult conversation mistakes.

[How Courageous Conversations Make You a More Resilient Leader](#), Sonia McDonald, *Richtopia*

*"It's time to be brave...start being open, transparent, and honest, and have the courage to say what needs to be said."*

Drawn from Brene Brown's bestselling book, *Dare to Lead*, these are vital leadership skills.

[Four Skills You Need for Courageous Leadership](#), Jenn Lofgren, *Forbes*

*"The most important aspect of courageous leadership is choosing how we respond to fear. Will you go autopilot and protect, control, or people please and appease?"*

## Read *The Leader Letter* in Weekly Installments



The items in each month's issue of *The Leader Letter* are first published in my weekly [blog](#) during the previous month.

If you read each blog post (or issue of *The Leader Letter*) as it's published over twelve months, you'll have read the equivalent of a leadership book. And you'll pick up a few practical leadership tips that help you use time more strategically and tame your E-Beast!

## Feedback and Follow-Up

I am always delighted to hear from readers of *The Leader Letter* with feedback, reflections, suggestions, or differing points of view. Nobody is ever identified in *The Leader Letter* without their permission. I am also happy to explore customized, in-house adaptations of any of my material for your team or organization. Drop me an e-mail at [Jim.Clemmer@ClemmerGroup.com](mailto:Jim.Clemmer@ClemmerGroup.com) or connect with me on [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), or my [blog](#)!

Live, learn, laugh, and lead -- just for the L of



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