FEATURE ARTICLES

The Courage Myth: Why You Don't Have Courage, and Never Will (And That's Okay)

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The title of this article bothers me too. It's even worse than that. I'm not just saying you don't have courage, I'm saying no one has it (or ever had it). How do you like me now?

Like you, I'm bothered by this because I can think of countless people in my life and throughout history who had courage – both physical and moral. Military warriors, civil rights leaders, trauma survivors, intervening bystanders, people who spoke truth to power, the first person to eat an oyster, and on and on. It's hard to accept these people didn't have courage.

But that is what I'm saying. Here's why. We typically frame courage as this magical resource we tap into when the moment requires us to do "the hard, right thing." These moments can range from modest (e.g., the courage to listen, forgive, apologize, persist, admit) to the more epic (e.g., the courage to charge the enemy, accept another chemo treatment, confront a bully, sacrifice yourself for another). The harder the moment, the more courage

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we better have in the tank. If we passed the test, we obviously had enough. If we failed, we needed more of it. Therefore, the argument goes: the thing we need to act courageously is courage. This circular description is where the problem lies, and why this argument is a myth.

Here's the real deal: People don't have courage, because it's not something to have. It's something to produce. Courage is not an input, it's the outcome. It's is not a resource to reach for, any more than "delicious" is a spice on the shelf. Delicious is the word we use to describe what just happened on our pallet. Some other spices actually created that experience. It's the same with courage. We only ascribe the virtue of courage to people after they have demonstrated it. Therefore, Courage is not what helps us take positive action. Courage is just what we call it when it happens.

When we ask the Medal of Honor recipient or intervening bystander, "But what gave you the courage to do it?" we are highlighting the fact that something different facilitated the courageous act. That's the real target. What, then, is actual real ingredient emboldening us to do the hard, right thing? To answer that, we must start with what makes the right thing right.

The Identity Testing Point

As individuals and organizations, we put the flag on the horizon for who we are trying to be. When we sincerely pursue this identity, we also commit to the values aligned with it. These values help us determine what is right and wrong, and define how we should act, regardless of the obstacles. For example, if you commit to the identity of "military professional," there are certain values, virtues and standards of behavior for which you are now on the hook. Similarly, if you want to truly be a "leader of character," "elite athlete," "loving parent," or "person of faith," each identity reflects values and corresponding virtuous behaviors that must be executed. Otherwise, the identity doesn't come to life – it's just talk.

Well that's easy enough, right? Just do the things necessary to demonstrate you truly value what you say, and your identity is brought to life. Not so fast. In the words of a CEO in an executive workshop I conducted, "Values don't mean anything, until they're tested." It's at the testing point we prove we're serious about our talk, and where courage is born. So what is this testing point?

Welcome to the Gap

The testing point for our identity and character is the "Decision-Action Gap", with the left side representing the point where we've decided what should be done

Figure 1
The Decision-Action Gap
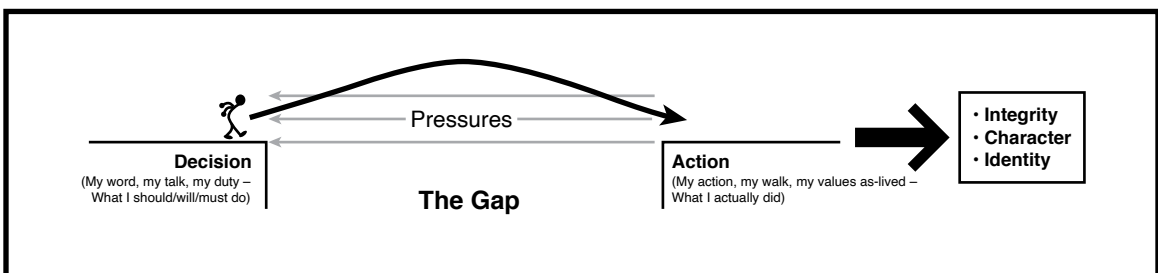
(Figure 1; Basik et al., 2012). By this point, we've already wrestled with critical thinking, moral reasoning, emotions, biases and philosophical lenses, and have concluded, in order to be who I'm committed to being, I should/ought to do this. This side of the gap represents the word we give to ourselves or someone else, the promise made, the standard our duty requires, and the voice of our conscience or our internal compass about what is the right thing to do in this moment.

The "Action" side of the gap is the successful execution of this intent. On this right side, double entendre intended, our identity is being lived out – at least in this moment. It's the "talk" being "walked", the promise kept, the goal achieved, the standard upheld, the values and virtues delivered. We either did the thing or we didn't. Having successfully reached this side, we are one iteration closer to our identity coming to life and showcasing our true character. Rushworth Kidder emphasized this identity-focus when he described moral courage literally as "the courage to be (emphasis added) honest, fair, compassionate, respectful and responsible" (2005, p. 70). The virtues "as-lived" is the ultimate target, whether they are moral virtues or "performance virtues" (e.g., grit, work ethic, self-discipline). As Dr. Peter Rea and collegues argue, "It is not a virtue until we act" (2018; p. 2).

But this is called the gap for a reason. In perhaps the biggest understatement in history: people don't always do what they say. As a Behavioral Science instructor at the Air Force Academy, I was asked to help cadets who couldn't jump off a 10-meter platform into the pool 33 feet below—a requirement to pass their required Water Survival class. Each year, multiple students would peer over the edge of the platform and repeatedly yell, "Okay, here I go. I'm going to jump now. Ready…3, 2, 1…" They decided it, proclaimed it, and meant it, but after their countdown, they remained on the platform.

They're good cadets, but were out of integrity in that moment. They buckled at the literal 33-foot gap.

This gap exists in all parts of our lives. As Matt Davidson, Director of the Excellence with Integrity Institute points out, sometimes the gap has moral components (i.e., I am not being as honest, compassionate, fair, patient, honorable as I should be), and sometimes it is more performance-based (i.e., I procrastinate, avoid an important conversation, give up too soon, or bring it weak in my professionalism). People definitely notice when the decision and action don't line up, and perceptions about integrity and character are at stake.

At its heart, integrity is simply about alignment, wholeness, oneness with our word or what we know to be right. It's consistently showing up on the "action" platform. But the gap is not always crossed, and that matters. We should absolutely question the integrity of the hypocritical politician, sloppy drill instructor, selfish self-proclaimed servant leader, the lazy athlete. Integrity with ourselves is at stake as well. If we violate the very values, commitments and standards we know in our gut we should uphold, the "out of integrity" dashboard light should be flashing. But getting to the right side of the Gap not so easy. Something is in the way, which makes doing "the hard, right thing," hard.

The Pressures at the Gap

Our ability to cross the gap is impacted by pressures acting as headwinds, pushing us away from our intended actions and identity. I should speak up, but I don't want to be labeled disloyal. I want leave this abusive relationship, but I don't know where to go. I should get up and work out, but the bed is so warm. I want to be a compassionate person, but this guy is obnoxious. Each pressure represents a type of excuse – legitimate or not – which has the potential to

overwhelm our willingness or ability to demonstrate self-discipline, will-power, honesty or grit or any virtue or promise we espouse.

The struggle is real, compelling and very human. On occasion, the reason we buckle at the gap may be due to time pressures, administrative pressures (e.g., policy constraints, resource shortfalls), ability pressures (I want to do this but literally don't know how), or physical pressures (e.g., distance, fatigue, physical ability, pain). But more often than not, the pressures keeping us from living out our values are more psychological. Specifically, social pressures (How will this impact my standing with this group?), emotional pressures (e.g., insecurity, impact to ego, interpersonal loss) or professional pressures (e.g., concerns about status, opportunity, reputation, percieved lost opportunities) prevent us from acting in alignment with our intent.

If you consider any context where courage is showcased, it is easy to identify the pressures which made courageous action hard. Examples include, the Iraqi citizen boldly standing in line to vote. The sexual assault victim taking the stand. The pilot contining to circle a downed wingman despite low fuel. The entrepreneur deciding to quit her day job. The student confronting his peer about cheating. The spouse apologizing for the damage caused in the relationship. You can continue this list for pages. In every case, there are very real reasons why the person could have chosen not to take the action. But they found a way to conquer those pressures and did it anyway.

Unfortunately, you can also list countless examples of people succumbing to these pressures, doing or tolerating things inconsistent with what they value or know to be right. The pressures proved too powerful, and they stayed on the wrong side of the gap. Even you and I have likely had moments where we were out of integrity with our word (even to ourselves), so there's value in recognizing what kept us back. The prime culprit is a master pressure cutting across all the examples above, and it's the reason we do or don't display courage.

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The Criteria for Courage: Fear

When we think of anyone in history who demonstrated physical or moral courage, we can easily identify the fear they had to push through (to include the first oyster eater). Without fear, there is no courage. John Wayne plainly described courage as, "Being scared to death, and saddling up anyway" (Kidder, 9). There is no courage associated with getting the mail. But place a bear in front of the mailbox, and that word "anyway" becomes pretty significant.

At its heart, courage is taking intended positive action in spite of perceived fear. This definition has a few important nuances. The word intended highlights the importance of deliberate choice or volition (Treasurer, 2008). Accidental courage is not courage. Positive ensures that the choice is aligned with what one has determined to be the right thing. When I ask people to define the *opposite* of courage, they often respond with: cowardice, inaction, selfishness, laziness, and conformity. The courage we're exploring

here is never directed at those outcomes, but instead targets some noble purpose or goal (Schwartz, 2017). The word action simply confirms courage has not taken place unless there is an actual attempt to cross the gap. Success is not a requirement for courage, just action. Intentions are great, but it is not until the terrified cadet's feet leave the 10-meter platform that they get courage credit. *In spite of fear* rounds out the mandate for courage. The reason we exalt Medal of Honor recipients is because they exhibited virtues in alignment with our espoused values, in spite of a level of fear and danger so significant, we would understand if they hadn't done it. But they did it...anyway.

Then there is the distinction of perceived fear. Interestingly, fear's strength as pressure is in the eye of the beholder. In his seminal book, *Moral Courage*, Kidder suggested that moral courage is demonstrated where principles, endurance and danger intersect. He later clarifies that the last element is not danger but rather perceived danger, and thus fear. If you don't perceive there is danger, then the action is not courageous, it's obliviousness (What do you mean the building I just went into was on fire?!). Conversely, if someone perceives danger, even if it's not present, then acting in the face of that misperception is still courageous (e.g., the terrified 5 year old checks under his little brother's bed for monsters or a student admits to cheating, thinking incorrectly it will result in expulsion). Fear can be experienced or anticipated, and often shows up in one of the following, interrelated ways:

- **Fear of Pain, Discomfort or Death:** It is always more attractive to accept comfort and safety. But those who choose to accept the opposite and press on, earn the badge of courage. When we tell ourselves, "I don't feel like it," "This is going to suck," or "I'm scared to death to do this," we're giving voice to this pressure. In his book, *Leading with Honor*, Colonel (USAF retired) Lee Ellis, a former Prisoner of War (POW) in North Vietnam's "Hanoi Hilton" for 5 ½ years, defines courage as, "Doing what is right or called for in the situation, even when it does not feel safe or natural" (Ellis, 52). If anyone knows what it's like to feel the pressure of this kind of fear, yet do what is right anyway, it is Lee Ellis.

- **Fear of Consequence (to Include Fear of the Unknown):** Physical, social, emotional, professional consequences can run the gamut, and explain why so many people buckle at the Gap. On occasion, we may be able to anticipate the impact of taking action. In other times, especially in times of ambiguity or uncertainty, the fear of the unknown can keep even the best of us on the sidelines. By taking action, we accept what results follow (e.g., retribution, isolation, unwanted drama, pain, unexpected workload, etc.), which are often frightening enough to paralyze us.

- **Fear of Loss:** In his book, *Exception to the Rule: The Surprising Science of Character-based Culture, Engagement and Performance*, Dr. Peter Rea suggests "The strongest courage enabler is to acknowledge what's at stake" (p. 87). Scientists have consistently demonstrated that people fear loss about twice as much as they value gain (loss aversion; Kahneman, 2011). This can be a loss of status with a valued group (e.g., the cool kids, church group, work/sports team, etc.), loss of income, respect, friendships, employment status, property, and the list goes on and on.

The master pressure of fear is what defines whether courage has been displayed. C.S. Lewis famously stated, "Courage is not simply one of the virtues, it is the form of every virtue at its testing point". His words reinforce that courage is what it looks like when, in spite of fear, the virtues are lived out anyway.
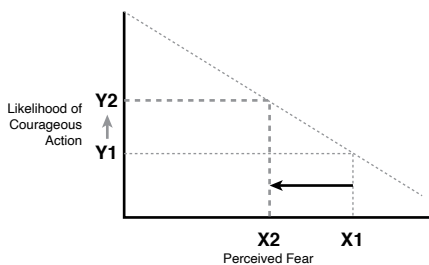
Figure 2

The Fear-Courage Relationship
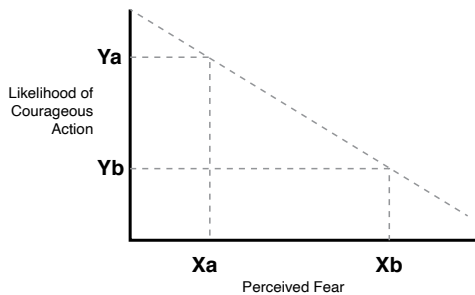
In Figure 2, we see the inverse relationship between perceived fear and our likelihood for courageous action (i.e., crossing the Gap). When fear is minimal (point Xa; e.g., speaking your mind when you're the boss; climbing a small rock wall at FunZone), courageous action is a breeze (point Ya). But as fear increases (point Xb; e.g., speaking your mind against the boss; climbing El Capitan the first time), so too does the pressure, which decreases courageous behaviors (point Yb). The

reason we celebrate courageous action is because we know what fear can do to prevent it.

Busting the Myth: How to Actually Strengthen Courageous Action

If our goal is to increase the likelihood of courageous action (slide up the Y axis), then we have 2 options:

Reduce the Perceived Fear. (Figures 3a and b below): Reducing the perception of fear (X1 to X2) makes it easier for us to cross the Gap (Figure 3a – Y1 to Y2). Imagine what would happen if the 10-meter platform was lowered to 3 feet, or the terrified public speaker discovered that the audience was made of family and close friends. If a soldier knows in advance that the room they are entering is already cleared, then the room is much easier to enter. This, in essence, lessens the headwinds, and brings the sides of the Gap closer together (Figure 3b). Easier jump.

We Change the Slope of the Relationship. (Figures 4a and b): Even if fear remains constant and strong (Figure 4a, point X1), having additional strength to push through that pressure (from a to b) makes it easier to take courageous action (Y1 to Y2). Someone asked to run into a burning building may be overwhelmed by the fear, but when they realize their child is inside, the danger (which hasn't changed) is no longer enough
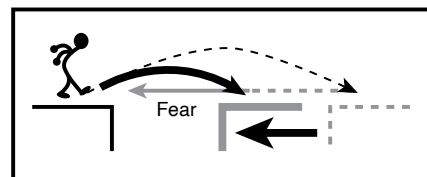
Figure 3a

The Consequence of Reducing Perceived Fear

Figure 3b

The Consequence of Reducing Perceived Fear

Figure 4a

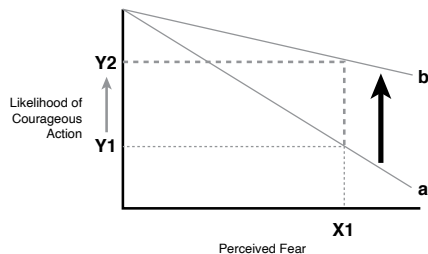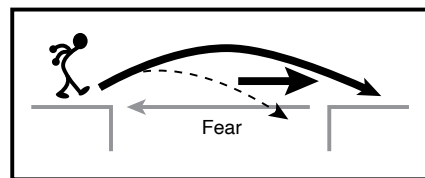*The Consequence of Elevating the Slope*

Figure 4b

The Consequence of Elevating the Slope

to keep them from running in. This equates to giving the person crossing the Gap better jumping horsepower (Figure 4b), even for a large Gap.

Obviously, any combination of these two factors compounds the goodness. If perceived fear is reduced, *and* the Gap-jumping horsepower is increased, the likelihood of courageous action is even more significant.

The Three Courage Catalysts

We now arrive at the secret sauce that allows people to push through the physical and moral pressures to act courageously. These "catalysts" are the answer to the question, "But what actually *gave you* the courage to do it?" Each of these factors increases the likelihood for even normal people like us to confront fear in whatever form it takes, and more consistently bring our identity to life. Of course, if we combine them, the effect is even greater (as discussed above).

Catalyst 1: Competence

Ask any Medal of Honor recipient how they were able to do what they did in the face of Herculean pressures (pain, fatigue, uncertainty, loss, resource constraints, etc.), and they will very likely say with the utmost humility, "I was just doing what I was trained to do. It was almost second nature." Believing you

have no ability, plan or tools to succeed leaves fear to dominate the Gap. Conversely, even if it is inaccurate, the perception, "I can do this. I know how. I have a path through this that I can execute" explains why people take action, in spite of fear. Note: actual ability may determine the success of the attempt, but the *perception* of competence explains why they took courageous action. Here are just a few important ways we can strengthen confidence and reduce the force of fear.

Go Get the Tools. If you're buckled at the gap because you don't know how to do what is needed, this is where training, mentoring, interviewing, reading, observing and coaching can deliver tools to boost confidence. Talking to someone who has successfully done what you're struggling with can offer mindsets, methodologies, tips, action steps or even affirmations to dial down fear. Find those who have succeeded bringing to life the identity you pursue, and they'll probably have some 'life hacks' to help you through the internal and external pressures you both face. Imagine how useful it would be for a committed young athlete to hear what football legend Jerry Rice (known for his amazing work ethic) would tell himself when he didn't feel like pushing himself through his painful workouts. Dr Carol Dweck's (2006) work on Growth mindset

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encourages us to shift our approach from "Can I do this?" to "How can I do this?" and hunt for the fear dampening tools you lack.

Anticipate and Pre-Empt. We can often anticipate the types of challenging courage moments we will face, and what form the fear will take. Deciding in advance how you should and will respond can short-circuit the internal wrestling match and rationalizations that cause us to buckle. For those of you striving to be leaders of character, the Gap will challenge you with adhering to standards, holding yourself/peers/others accountable, honesty, loyalty, selflessness and so on. If the identity you pursue is 'elite athlete', you're going to battle (among other things) fatigue, pain, discipline and self-doubt. If 'loving spouse' is who you're trying to be, you'll battle in moments when you need to listen, be patient, admit mistakes, and acknowledge you chew to loudly when you eat chips.

Whatever your identity, you can pre-emptively decide how you would like to respond when faced with these tests. Think of it as an "If-Then" checklist aligned with your identity context. "If someone says something inappropriate in a staff meeting, then I'll talk to them before the end of the day." Done. "If I test positive for COVID, then I will notify everyone I'm supposed to, regardless of what they might think of me." Done. "If I think I may have overcharged a client, then I'll bring it to their attention, even if they agreed to the price." Done. Even if it's not that specific, deciding how to confront the likely rationalizations and excuses will steal their power.

Create & Collect Scripts. So often people don't take action because they don't know how to have the uncomfortable discussions effectively. In her remarkable *Giving Voice to Values* book and approach,

Dr. Mary Gentile demonstrates the power of crafting and rehearsing the language useful for navigating tough values-based conversation (2012). If someone has realistic language they can deliver (e.g., "I can actually say, 'Hey boss, I'm concerned about something and could use your help...' or 'Jenna, I want to make sure you realize how this might look to others'"), they feel armed for success when it's time for the actual dialog. The beauty of scripts is they can be shared and borrowed. Mentors, peers, authors, etc., can easily share their approach to similar pressures (e.g., "Here's what I say to myself..." or "When firing someone, begin the conversation this way...."). Trusted peers and colleagues may even be able to offer recommendations from the perspective of the other party ("Here's what I'd want to hear you say..."). Knowing and practicing what to say reduces fear and makes identity-aligned action more doable.

Build Courage Endurance. There's no better competence builder than experience. We also build courage competence by seeing how we act in testable moments, and fortifying our weak spots while noting our strengths. But if we don't reflect on the lessons learned after the episode, we miss opportunity to get stronger. For example, the first time I had to hold a student accountable for cheating on a test, I was shocked at how quickly I started trying to rationalize my way out of it. I had to reflect on how my to loyalty to the person almost superceded my loyalty to my (and the institution's) values, and created a plan to be stronger next time.

The pressures at the gap can be exhausting, especially if the identity test is significant. Legendary football coach Vince Lombardi said, "Fatigue makes cowards of us all," so we must have stamina against fear. But you don't get fit all at once. To build courageous endurance,

we need "reps" that add up over time. Even small moments of truth-telling, self-discipline, humility, resistance to peer pressure, and appropriate risk-taking can create competence to strengthen us in the future. But we know, repetition can create good and bad

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habits. Individuals and organizations through repeated rationalization, excuse-making, lack of accountability and conformity can experience moral drift (Labuz et al., 2020) and habits that pull them away from their identity. If we fail the little tests of courage, we're building the habits to fail the big ones. One important criteria for successfully building moral fitness is the awareness that "this moment counts" toward bringing our identity to life. Strengthening competence has the undeniable effect of reducing fear and pulling the sides of the Gap closer together. Less fear...more courageous action. But there's another way to do the same.

Catalyst 2: Confidence

"I felt like I could pull it off. Anyone in my seat with my background would have at least tried" (Stone, personal communication, 26 February 2016). That's what (then) SSgt Spencer Stone said gave him the courage to charge a heavily armed terrorist on a French train in 2015. Spencer was a big guy, had military training, was seated on the aisle next to his two buddies and had a background in jujitsu. But one bullet from the terrorist could nullify all that. Twenty five passengers on the train didn't move, but Spencer did. Why? He felt he could "pull it off."

Obviously, confidence and competence are closely tethered. "Been there, done that" brings confidence that slides fear downward. But confidence also has some unique features that, if addressed, go beyond just knowing how to take action. Just as increasing competence helps strengthen, "I know how to do the right thing I want to do," then elevated confidence promotes, "I can do it." As any kid with a bike and a ramp can attest, when you think you can make the jump, you're more likely to take flight (despite what your mom and the laws of physics might be screaming at you).

With confidence, the battleground is the mind. Many of the ways to build confidence are about challenging the assumptions which cause us to buckle. Imagine any moment where courage is needed, and you can probably hear the internal voice whispering these fear-inducing classics:

- This is unlike anything I've dealt with before.
- Someone like me can't do this (I have to be something I'm not).
- I'm wrong for struggling with this the way I am.
- What is required is too hard for me to pull off.
- The stakes/consequences are too high.
- I've got to do this alone.

So often, these assumptions are inaccurate, but since perception is reality, we need to do things to challenge these assumptions. Here are some ways to strengthen confidence for courageous action.

Reframe the Moment. Maybe the fear isn't as bad as we initially perceive. We often convince ourselves that the moment at hand is unique and dramatic, when in fact, it may be pretty common, especially for the context we're in. If we normalize the fact that holding people accountable, bringing up ethical concerns, facing dishonesty temptations, and struggling with

fears are part of life and leadership, it may feel less daunting. Knowing people commonly struggle with these tensions, we can feel encouraged that there is a way through this. I spoke to one entrepreneur who said, "It was so reassuring when I found out how many other business owners struggled with letting go of a toxic high performer." I'm not sure why it resonated so much with me, but an advisor in my PhD program reminded me, "When you think you can't do this, remember – dumber people than you have figured it out." I was encouraged to think (a) someone might be dumber than me, and (b) this was doable.

Connect the Dots. Confidence comes from realizing how the current situation compares to ones in which we've previously succeeded. We can remind ourselves and others about the strength we/they have when we point out, "If you made it through that, you can surely make it through this." Fear in combat is not exactly like fear in high school football, but something may transfer. An abused spouse who thinks she can't leave the relationship may find confidence in remembering she started a new life after college. Our experiences, abilities and strengths may translate well to this new test.

Build Momentum. The big courage test is not so frightening if it's just a little bigger than the last successful one. When I worked with the cadets on the 10-meter platform, we did 15 jumps exactly the same way off the 1-meter, then 3-meter, then 5-meter platforms. They walked with the same cadence, stepped off with the same foot, entered the water in the same position, and even did it to the same music. By the time the 10-meter showed up, they had muscle memory, habits, and experience, so the extra 5-meters didn't seem too frightening. Momentum builds confidence and self-efficacy, especially when we focus

on and acknowledge what went well. Take inventory of your victories, even small, quick ones, since they serve as evidence you can successfully battle fears.

See Yourself in Others. It's easier to see the Gap is crossable if someone like you has done it. Just as exemplars and role models can offer tips and tools to elevate competence, seeing their example of success can build confidence as we confront similar fears. Jackie Robinson gave young black athletes an undeniable example of what was possible, in spite of bigotry and racism. As the only math-loving girl entering her first high school engineering class, my daughter's fears about competing with the boys were squashed when the teacher – a woman engineer – entered the room. "She's me, just older. I can do this." The reason we are inspired by others is because they remind us of what is possible.

Notice Alternative Paths. The courageous act may feel overwhelming if you buy into the assumption there is only one, epic way to through this ordeal. Instead, it may be possible to break up what needs to be done into smaller, less daunting steps. Also, realizing there may be alternative paths can highlight paths with lower fear pressures. For example, if you feel the only way to address a toxic boss's behavior toward a co-worker is to have a 1-on-1 confrontation, the fear can be paralyzing. But if you realize you can achieve the same outcome by conveying your concerns through a mutual mentor or an anonymous notification process, these paths may feel much more achievable. Challenge the assumption that you must face your courage moment in some epic fall-on-your-sword, Mel Gibson "Braveheart" fashion, if that's not you. Not every machine gun nest needs to be charged. You may have air support. Identify the things you can and cannot control, and take confidence from controlling what is in your wheelhouse.

Find Wingmen. One of the most flawed assumptions in courage moments is the belief we have to do this alone. Typically, people around us also want to do the right thing, and may even share our values, commitments and identity goals. Having someone helping pull us across the Gap can be a huge confidence builder. Their encouraging presence, perspective, tough love ("come on, you're better than that"), or even shared struggles can strengthen our resolve. There is a reason accountability partners, teammates and coaches are so effective. When the physical, social, emotional or professional pressures cause us to drift from who we're trying to be, it's empowering to have other people invested in helping us face the fears.

Have Faith. This may be religious faith, optimism, a just-world hypothesis, or some other belief that still uncertain factors will work out, but our willingness to leap when we still aren't sure explains many courageous acts. There are always going to be things we can't control, so having some semblance of faith that those will work out gives us confidence to take action.

Both competence and confidence help reduce the strength of fear, and move the sides of the Gap closer together. If the leap is not so far, we're more likely to attempt and succeed in going from decision to action. The third courage catalyst increases our leaping ability, and gives us the force to push through even the most significant fears.

Catalyst 3: Commitment

The whistleblower speaks up, despite having little competence in doing so and not knowing if this will end well. Why? "Because it was the right thing to do, and I couldn't look at myself in the mirror any more if I didn't act." An executive accepts financial catastrophy by pulling dangerous products from inventory. Why?

"Our values are clear – we put the safety and needs of our customers over financial gain" (see Johnson & Johnson's "Credo"). The alcoholic finally puts down the bottle and joins a support group. Why? "Because I'm better than this, and I want my family back." The warrior goes back into the firefight despite the danger and fatigue. Why? "Because we never leave a soldier behind." The amputee does one more rep despite the crushing pain. Why? "Because I'm going to dance at my daughter's wedding." Think of any act of courage, and one thing shines through – they felt it was worth it.

The most powerful courage catalyst lies in how we connect this moment to what we believe matters. Even in moments of low competence and confidence, the fuel of commitment to our values, virtues and identity can be enough to drive action in the face of almost any fear. So how do we strengthen this critical resource?

Clarify. Unless there is clarity on what identity we pursue – what values and virtues we commit to – we are adrift, and can't stand up to the pressures. It is important to make the implicit, explicit, and unpack in detail what we mean by "what we stand for." Broadly stated core values are merely bumper stickers unless they're translated into what those values look like in the real world. As leadership and coaching expert Kari Granger says, the question is not, "Are you a warrior?" but rather, "What are you a warrior for?" (need citation) This is not some academic exercise, but instead is an emotional, heart-on-the-line reflection and declaration about "Who I am/we are," and "What do I/we want to fight to bring to life." It's got to be emotionally salient, because the testable moments will challenge us to prove we're serious. One way to elevate this connection is to identify what's at stake if you do not live out this identity. For example, would it bother you if you are seen as someone who is not honest? Not

professional? Not willing to defend someone else? If this is unacceptable, own it and fight for the identity.

That's why fear of regret can be a powerful motivator. It is fundamentally human for us to avoid being less than we could have been. Similarly, people are often strengthened in their resolve through the commitment to proving others wrong ("I'm not the loser they said!"). Think of how many people accomplished heroic things and endured amazing pressures, just to show the naysayers that they were not who they said.

Define the No-Go's. It is important for people and organizations to not only define in detail what they stand "for," but also what they stand "from". What values, habits, attitudes, language, and actions are considered inconsistend with who I am/we are trying to be? Part of this process should also include identifying the rationalizations and excuses inconsistent with the identity we pursue. For example, when we entertain logic like, "That's good enough," "They didn't say we couldn't do that," or "No one's ever going to find out," we accept the very mindsets that cause us to buckle at the Gap. Defining the non-negotiables creates red-line threshholds about what is out of integrity.

Get to the Core. Sometimes the moments for courageous action are filled with noise obscuring what's really at stake. When we remove those distractions, we more clearly see that the moment at hand is more strongly tied to our values than we realized. A student who is considering cheating on a seemingly inconsequential quiz may approach it differently if he sees this as a test of his character. I know as a parent, I've been distracted in moments where I modeled

lazy or low-character behavior when, if I saw the instance as a chance to be an example to my kids for virtues of work ethic or honesty, I would have acted differently. If we realize how others will be impacted by our action or inaction, it can further remind us of what is really at stake. This is one of the reasons the protesters for social justice resonate with the chant, "Say their name!" It is an attempt to remind all of us of the human consequences to the actions we take (or tolerate).

> *Sometimes the moments for courageous action are filled with noise obscuring what's really at stake. When we remove those distractions, we more clearly see that the moment at hand is more strongly tied to our values than we realized.*

Define Your Tribe. Who we are is largely defined by who we stand with. Having wingmen who also commit to the values and identity you pursue can create a courage-strengthening cohort. Renown psychologist Angela Duckworth points out in her research on grit, if you wan't someone to be "gritty," put them on a gritty team (2016). People will modify their behaviors to maintain membership in a group they value, so we might as well immerse ourself in formal and informal groups where members reinforce how important it is to cross the Gap.

Share Your Commitments. When we articulate to others what values and virtues we're trying to bring to life, three things happen. First, we create an accountability mechanism that encourages us to lean across the Gap. There's positive peer pressure to make

Figure 5

The Impact of Confidence, Competence and Commitment on Courageous Action
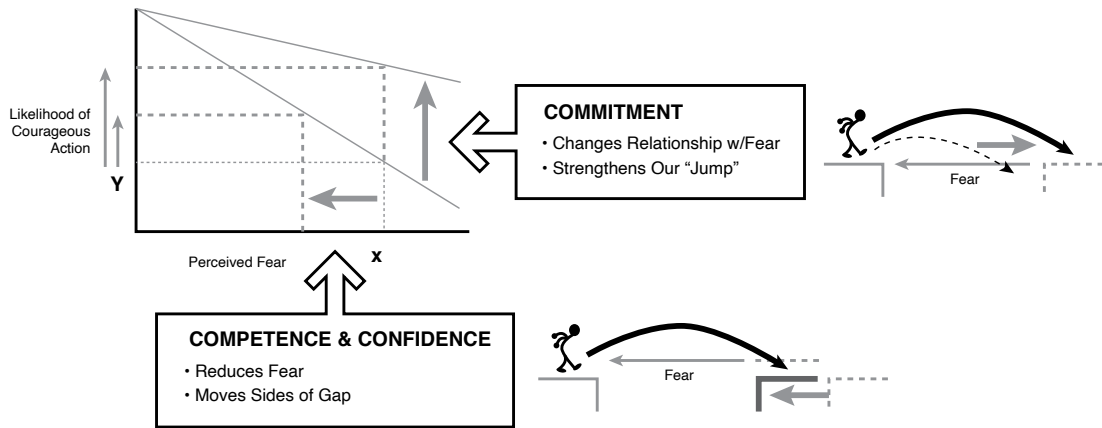
good on your word to avoid being a hypocrite. Second, we invite others to help us be who we're trying to be. In turn, when we hear others' commitments, we may see opportunities to help them confront and overcome pressures they're facing. Finally, sharing commitments reminds us of what matters to us, and deepens our commitment even further in a self-reinforcing way.

But what gave you the courage to actually do the hard, right thing? These three catalysts are the real ingredients for courageous action (Figure 5). Increasing competence and confidence reduces the fear factor, and pulls the sides of the gaps closer together. Easier jump. Strengthening commitment changes the nature of the relationship between fear and action, giving us more strength to act courageously. Stronger jumping.

When put into practice, these three factors explain why someone took action, in spite of fear, to cross the Gap. If we want more courage, we'll need to dial up one or more of them. If we see someone, including ourselves, not demonstrating courage, we can connect

the dots back to one or more of these three elements being weak.

Creating a Courageous Culture

Leaders absolutely have a role in increasing the potential for courage. As individuals on their own character journeys, they need to tend to their own competence, confidence and commitment. But because they are leaders, they also have the responsibility to develop the three catalysts in others, and foster a culture where doing the hard, right thing is 'the way we roll.' Leaders working on their own courage actually pays off in two additional ways. First, they are modeling the type of self-development others should follow. Secondly, their influence as leaders in a team or organization signals the importance of the values and virtues the organization professes. Courageous mindsets and actions are contagious, especially when the one infecting others is the leader. It's no surprise that the 2020 Global Business Ethics survey finds that in organizations where leaders are perceived as committed to organizational values and ethics, followers feel compelled to align their

actions as well (2020, p. 8). But never forget, one of the strongest drivers of negative moral and ethical drift in organizations is also leadership. If the boss buckles to pressure when it's time to do the right thing, don't be surprised if the rest of the tribe follows suit. Here are some other specific actions leaders can take, beyond just their own role-modeling, to create a courage-strong culture.

Creating a Courageous Culture -- Competence

Show Them What Right Sounds Like. Leaders can make the implicit explicit by sharing out loud how they properly think through moral decisions, how they have tough conversations, and how they talk to themselves when they're buckling at the Gap. In addition, it can also be helpful for leaders to offer some guidance on how people can best raise concerns and offer criticisms in ways the leaders will most positively receive.

Define the Criteria. If risk-taking is an expectation in your organization, people may be afraid of the consequences, should the outcome not go well. Help add to their competence by sharing the criteria for a "good fail" – where you'd still give them a high-5 for even a faulty attempt.

Push People to the Gap. Since experience is the big teacher, empower and delegate decisions which cause employees to struggle with the pressures of fear. You can still support and coach them, but only through the struggle do people see how they really respond. Then, harvest the insights to add to their toolkit.

Creating a Courageous Culture -- Confidence

Lock in the Right Behaviors. Leaders can build courage confidence if the thinking and behavior associated with it is reinforced. Hunt for and celebrate when people do the hard, right thing when no one is watching, when everyone is watching, or if just the customer is watching. Any opportunity to signal, 'That's what we're talking about!' is golden. Recognizing even the small victories signals this matters, and increases the likelihood the behavior endures.

Lock Out the Wrong Behaviors. While it should be safe to make mistakes and bring up bad news, when people willfully violate the organizational identity, the response should be clear and swift. What leaders tolerate will endure, and what they model will thrive – especially the bad examples. Hold accountable unhealthy Gap language, rationalizations, and excuses. When leaders demonstrate they are serious about confronting violations, those trying to do the right thing will feel confident they'll have support if they act courageously.

Name the Pressures. Organizations that talk openly and consistently about the pressures persistent in *what we do* not only normalizes them, but create a safe way for the community to create and share solutions. For example, if my team acknowledges temptations to cut corners exist, we can help pull each other across the Gap to uphold the standards.

Get Trust Right. There is a reason low trust organizations have higher levels of misconduct and lower performance (Mo & Shi, 2015). People are less willing to be vulnerable if they feel their risk will not be honored by teammates or leaders. Conversely, fear is lower in a culture where people know it is safe to lean on others, feel empowered by leaders, and can depend on others to do what they should. To strengthen trust, leaders and teammates must be seen as competent, caring, and of highly consistent character (Davis, Mayer & Schoorman, 2007).

Creating a Courageous Culture -- Commitment

Define the Stand. Organizational members must be clear on "who we are and what we stand for" beyond just the bumper sticker core values. Leaders should invite employees to discuss what the right and wrong behaviors looks and sounds like in their context. Part of that discussion should also involve who is impacted and what's at stake when they don't deliver on their identity promise.

Beat the Drum...Constantly. Discussions about identity, values, virtues, ethical standards, how to push through the pressures at the Gap—all of these should be constant and organically infused in the culture. The Special Operations Forces community identified as one of it's "Ethical Truths" the fact that, in order to minimize moral drift, the culture must be "an environment where conversations about ethical decisions, good and bad, are a natural occurrence"(Labuz et al, 2020). Much like Harvard University is with intellectual curiosity, organizations should strive to make values and character courage "the air we breath."

Make it Personal. The key to commitment is that it is personal. I can't want it for you – you have to want it yourself. Perhaps the best way to strengthen commitment is to have people interpret how and why they care about the organization's values. Go heavy with stories. Bring in customers to share why what you do matters. Have people share their commitments, and ensure leaders join in. When people truly commit to the culture, they will do the hard work to honor that commitment.

Revisit and Reflect. There will be hits and misses in living out the organizational values. Just as it is important at the individual level, organizations must take the time to reflect on how they're doing living their values. Discussions about why things went well and poorly can reinforce the importance of the topic, and signal it is safe and expected to keep improving in the ability to cross the Gap.

Conclusion

Medal of Honor recipients, astronauts, civil rights leaders, elite athletes, trauma survivors – you name it – every single one of them acted courageously. But none of them did what they did because they had courage. They had competence, confidence and commitment to battle through the fear and stand in integrity with the values we applaud. Because of that, we all have hope. When faced with the testable moments of life, we too can look across the Gap and either use or strengthen the actual things that allow us to be labeled as "courageous." In the words of the renown ethics scholar, Arthur Schwartz, when our actions produce moral courage, "we become our best possible selves" (Schwartz, 2017, p. 88).

Today, more than ever, we need people to actually live the values they so casually espouse. When we see alignment between values and actions, we are inspired by the integrity and character it represents. Life will present each of us moments where we stand at the Gap and face the pressures that challenge us to be who we aspire to be. When those moments challenge us with fear, we need to tap into something in order to exhibit courageous behavior. And we can get better and better at it, building courageous muscle memory and habits of excellence within ourselves and those we lead. We don't have courage, and that's okay, as long as we display it when the moment comes. If the oyster guy can do it, so can we.

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