

# Ennobling leadership

## The courage to face tough issues straight-on

by MEROM KLEIN, PhD,  
Director, The Courage Institute ([www.courageinstitute.org](http://www.courageinstitute.org))



"I haven't slept all weekend," the CEO of an international pharmaceutical company confided when we touched base Monday morning. He dreaded the tough conversation he anticipated with his Chief Business Officer, but the CBO simply didn't get it when others told him that his personal involvement wasn't adequate to help his business development team overcome the objections that a much-coveted development partner raised. The CEO knew that he had to bring the issue to a head and insist on longer hours, harder work and less bravado and grandstanding on the part of his CBO.

Assuming that CEOs and other top managers don't lose sleep before bringing tough issues to a head is akin to believing in the tooth fairy or still assuming that your parents are flawless and omnipotent. It may be a nice fantasy, but, with maturity, we discover that it isn't true. Even at the top, people bleed red and get angst before they steel themselves to face tough issues that they would rather avoid.

### How can you tell when it's worth bringing tough issues to a head?

Negative emotions and worst-case scenarios can distort your judgment. Your heart may be pounding in your throat and you may be consumed with anger, fatigue, disappointment or frustration. The other person's defensiveness and the battle of wits that could ensue might be unpleasant. S/he might threaten to turn to friends in high places and politicize the issue rather than taking the feedback to heart. Or, you may have to put aside loyalties and put a friendship on the line. Courage isn't about denying these emotions. It's also

about the ability to transcend the threats, real and imagined, and look past your fear and frustration to make an astute business decision and do what has to be done. It's about putting performance and ethical standards ahead of your discomfort, ego or anger and moving ahead – with appropriate caution, skill and with support at higher levels so you aren't going in like a lone ranger, with both guns blazing.

### Is there an artful way to bring tough issues to a head?

Leaders with courage don't just overcome their own fear or reluctance and act when the going gets tough.

They also build the courage to act in others. The CEO understood that it wasn't enough for him to get what's holding the company back off his chest. He also had to ennoble the CBO to take feedback he'd rather not hear, embrace his new challenge and act on the feedback.

**Leaders with courage don't just overcome their own fears. They also build the courage to act in others.**

The 5 Courage Factors are a roadmap for managers at all levels to raise difficult performance or ethical issues in a way that ennobles the other person to get past their initial surprise, outrage or defensiveness – so they accept the challenge and lift their performance. The formula is simple, but it takes practice and planning to approach tough conversations like this with...

1. **Candor.** Approach the other person in a calm, matter-of-fact way. Chill yourself out and reign in your frustration so, "I'd like a word with you," telegraphs, "I'm on your side and want to help you succeed," not, "You're in trouble and I'm justified taking your head off."
2. **Purpose.** Look forward, not backward. Focus

on the outcomes you need to achieve in partnership with the other person, rather than looking at his/her character flaws or the mess you want him/her to clean up. State, "Here's how we need to do better;" then ask the other person to explain why improvement is mission-critical.

**3. Will.** Affirm the strengths that you see in the other person, why you want him/her on your team and why you're confident that s/he has "the right stuff" to rise to the challenge, persevere and get the job done. Build pride and confidence.

**4. Rigor.** After you have a foundation of candor, purpose and will, you are ready to tackle the obstacles, marshal resources and identify best. Don't settle for "I'll try harder," or vague quasi-commitments that deflect the heat. Nail down the plan by specifying who will do what, how and by when – and make it "stick" by asking the other person to put the plan in writing.

**5. Risk.** Empower the person to execute. Follow-up without micro-managing and coach without second-guessing. Invest emotionally in his/her success. Be willing to spend some of your political capital providing air-cover and showing your confidence is the other person's fresh start.

## Why do we call it, "ennobling?"

It's natural to avoid unpleasant or tough issues, and enable the other person to duck responsibility by indulging your fear, avoidance or procrastination. When you decide "enough is enough." It's also natural to lash out and disable the other person by indulging your anger, frustration and venting when you feel that you've been taken advantage of. Enabling shows a

lack of courage; lashing out and disabling inhibits the courage that a leader needs to inspire to mobilize the other person to act.

**Enabling and disabling may feel natural. But neither is effective. What's effective is ennobling, appealing to the pride, honor and positive motives that teammates bring to their professional work**

Enabling and disabling may feel natural. But neither is effective. What's effective is ennobling, appealing to the pride, honor and positive motives that teammates bring to their professional work

– and using the power of being held in high esteem to mobilize and lift the person you are confronting to a higher level of candor, purpose, will, rigor and risk by exhibiting those 5 Courage Factors yourself.