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Leaders with courage listen, rather than roar

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*The meaning of courage in leadership has changed from “command and control” to joining the dots of the available perspectives as a way to innovate. Now, the key task for leaders is to listen actively. **Yolanda Blavo** and **Grace Lordan** write that, with the acceleration of artificial intelligence, knowledge alone is not much of a competitive advantage and the odds of a single leader having innovative ideas may be diminished.*

The image of a courageous leader has evolved over the last three decades. Previously, courageous leaders were those with **great command and control**: stomping around, making demands and micromanaging their team members in their tasks. They had an idea and their team executed it, no questions asked.

In today's workplace, things are different. The acceleration of artificial intelligence during the fourth industrial revolution has meant that knowledge alone is not much of a competitive advantage, and the odds of any one leader having **innovative ideas** may be diminished. To get a competitive advantage, leaders need to stop roaring orders, and instead leverage the different perspectives available within their team. Their role is to listen actively, keep an open mind and join the dots of the perspectives available to them to innovate, create and give their company an edge over the competition. Never before has there been so much diverse talent available in the labour market, with women and ethnically diverse colleagues smashing through glass ceilings and walls. In addition, there is, for the first time, **five generations working together**. A courageous leader in today's world is in a battle with their ego. Should they succeed, their team will thrive.

Here are seven habits that modern courageous leaders exhibit in the workplace:

1. A courageous leader keeps their ego under control

As human beings, each and every one of us can take actions to satisfy our ego. These actions could include **seeking out information** to support what we already assume to be true and being dismissive to contradictory opinions. A courageous leader is aware that without controlling their ego, they will avoid being challenged by their team members, to satisfy their ego's desire to always be right so they can **view themselves in a positive light**. Worse still, their ego will cause them to surround themselves with people who are similar to them. What better way to stroke an ego, than to be surrounded by like-minded people who agree with everything they say!

It will hurt the ego for leaders to select team members who know more than them and have different perspectives. However, doing so will lead to better outcomes for both the leader and their organisation. Ample **research** has shown that diverse perspectives are advantageous for problem-solving.

2. Courageous leaders speak less and listen more

Courageous leaders keep their ego in check and never dominate the conversation. They never battle to get their point of view heard. Rather, they rest safe in the knowledge that they are the decision-maker. Instead, they make sure

they hone their active listening skills. They also make substantial efforts to demonstrate to others that they are listening to them. **This includes** showing that you are open to their ideas by adjusting your posture, nodding their heads at appropriate times, and maintaining eye contact. Courageous leaders learn to step back and listen to their employees' perspectives, leading to more **optimal decision-making**. By listening rather than speaking, courageous leaders avoid anchoring team members to their perspective. It enables a culture that allows team members to state their opinion, free of influence of the views of the leaders.

To show that you are **actively listening** you can:

- a. Jot down noteworthy points that are made and communicate where you agree or disagree.
- b. Ask follow-up questions for clarification on certain points that were made.
- c. Assure the speaker that you will remember what they said beyond a singular discussion.

3. Courageous leaders invite their team members to engage in dissent

When courageous leaders consult team members to get their perspective, they encourage dissent. They are always up to being challenged and changing their minds. Courageous leaders have no problem pivoting or changing direction entirely. They also exhibit vulnerability and discuss openly with their team members the data and information they received that enabled them to change their minds. When a courageous leader makes a decision, they do not push for consensus decision-making. Rather they pay attention to who has disagreed with them.

Some courageous leaders go further. They keep a record of the names of the people who disagreed with their decision-making, along with their rationale. This record enables courageous leaders to reflect on who they ignored once an outcome from a decision is revealed. This is particularly useful to decipher whether there is a person in the room who is being ignored, who should be more actively included in decision-making.

As a courageous leader you can also embrace dissent by **adopting devil's advocates** in which you invite someone to express a different opinion from what

appears to be the majority opinion. However, if the assigned person does not genuinely have a contradicting belief to the majority, they may not present very strong or convincing arguments. Therefore, it is best to encourage people who genuinely disagree with the apparent consensus. Alternatively, leaders can select some team members to form a **red team** that plays the role of a competitor to a preferred solution. This approach puts the responsibility on more than one team member to identify potential shortcomings of a plan.

4. Courageous leaders admit their mistakes

Courageous leaders recognise that they cannot get every decision correct. They show vulnerability by admitting their mistakes and exhibit a **growth mindset** by discussing their learnings. Discussing mistakes openly increases **trust** and **psychological safety** among team members, as well as creating a healthy environment where mistakes are viewed as learning opportunities. When leaders encourage their subordinates to focus on the process of development, as opposed to failures, it can help to increase **employee engagement** and help employees be more **adaptive** in a dynamic workplace. In this way, when leaders are transparent regarding their mistakes, it can actually support productivity.

5. Courageous leaders invest in psychological safety

When leaders prioritise psychological safety, it can lead to numerous desirable organisational outcomes such as improved problem-solving, team effectiveness, well-being, and creativity. Fostering psychological safety is also critical for employees to **trust** leaders to overcome challenging times. During times of crisis, a courageous leader rises to the occasion by continuing to encourage employees to be their authentic selves at work and express their candid thoughts and feelings. Courageous leaders help to build **employee resilience** by making them feel included, safe to contribute and safe to challenge the status quo, without fear of backlash.

Key takeaway: To be a truly courageous leader, one must dare to leave their comfort zones – but perhaps not in the way they might suspect. They must be confident enough in their knowledge and abilities to acknowledge when they do not have the answer, or when they have made an error, and be open to being challenged.



Notes:

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