

## Building Organizational Courage in Your Company

By Cathy M. Perme

On a recent bright Minnesota morning, tucked into one of the thousands of conference rooms across the state, a management team sat somberly. Several weeks earlier they had participated in a meaningful retreat with key employees and clients, rediscovering and clarifying their vision, values, and goals for the organization. Spirits were high that day and energy seemed to *crackle* as it moved about the room, fueled by the vision of what they wanted to create. Now however, new developments in corporate politics made the vision seem nigh on impossible, and the group was about to surrender in defeat, once again melting into the mediocrity of organizational bureaucracy.

Finding personal courage is hard enough, but what happens when an entire organization needs courage? Courage is the will to act *in spite of* fear or despair, for the purpose of human growth. Organizations are nothing more than people linked together, intricately connected by a web of activity toward a (hopefully) common end. We organize because we want to accomplish something. And when that "something" beckons us to reach beyond ourselves and join together to become the best that we can be, it is called a vision. The role of courage is to make our vision and values real.

Fostering organizational courage is difficult -- but the key lies in being true to vision and values while *at the same time* embracing current reality, despair, and fears.

### WHAT TAKES COURAGE IN AN ORGANIZATION?

Facing and naming current reality.

This sounds simple but it is extremely difficult to be honest about our current reality. Truth hurts sometimes and therefore we have all developed filters that remove the unpleasant parts, especially if we are party to their creation. When these filters are institutionalized, they can literally blind everyone in an organization to what is really going on, both internally and externally, with markets and management and finances. When people in organizations deny

their reality, it also makes asking for help nearly impossible -- or if done, it is usually under duress while blaming others and too late for anything other than a crisis intervention.

Institutionalized filters can take many forms:

- executives who only want to hear good news and are threatened by negative results,
- management reporting systems that report on the wrong things,
- bureaucracies that distort and fragment information,
- a general intolerance and/or misuse of feedback, and
- procedures and processes designed to "channel" information and omit what doesn't "fit" from the agenda.

In one large corporation the president has been so sheltered from employees and the organization in such turmoil, that the employees themselves started communicating *horizontally* via an unauthorized electronic bulletin board about their concerns, feelings, and perceptions about what was happening. Upper management found out about it and planned to take action to ensure this would never happen again, but the president "stayed the execution" and is silently monitoring the feedback. In another organization, where the business was headed south, the division controller was told that it would be political suicide to forecast anything other than a "make" on year end numbers.

It takes courage to tell people, as openly and caringly as possible, what they may not want to hear. As an employee, it takes even more courage to give that feedback because all too often you can be "shot" or written off as a whiner, a troublemaker, or worse yet -- a poor performer.

It's much easier to live in a fantasy world and pretend that everything is OK and under our control. The latter is especially important in traditional management, whose function is dedicated to plan, organize, measure, and *control*. The underlying assumption is that we *have* control over the world around us, when we really don't. The only control we have is over our own actions.

### Living values and vision.

No matter where you are in an organization, there is risk involved in living values and vision. Granted, it is easier for an executive to demand accountability from others in this, but he or she must also live the vision and values and be willing to be held accountable for them. It takes courage to tell people what you believe in, ask to be challenged if you do not live up to it, and then *really listen* when someone gives you feedback!

In one example, a merger of two companies was heralded with much fanfare, and the new executive team made a point of creating and sharing their vision and values with the new organization. It was an uplifting experience, beautifully done. They used all the right words, and the pride and hope on people's faces was evident. What a pity that the executives did not hold *themselves* accountable to their values for superior customer service and quality; it showed in how they managed and treated their people, who they even referred to as "the help." Within three months anger and bitterness replaced the hope and pride as people felt confused and misled. Needless to say, customer service and quality declined.

### Making choices and setting priorities.

Especially in an age of "Do it all, *now!*," it takes courage to set priorities and make strategic choices. Just the act of telling your boss, your customers, your employees or your constituents that you are going to focus your attention on several key issues (as opposed to the normal slateful) is difficult. *Doing* it, is harder. We are used to hearing ourselves and others talk about priorities, and then get distracted with a myriad of other issues that seem easier or safer or more immediate. Meanwhile the "priorities" continue to water down until even reciting them becomes a joke. Maintaining focus takes courage, because it means making choices about how to spend your time and energy, often in new and different ways; and not everyone may be happy with the choices.

### Sustaining spirit.

How often have you felt literally beaten down by "the system?" I have heard employees, managers, and CEOs *from the same company* lament their powerlessness to deal with "the system." That is because it takes an incredible amount of energy to overcome system barriers that are actually organic in nature -- they fuel their own growth. After a while it takes too much effort to be creative and even organizational "champions" lose their spirit. The key lies not in pushing harder but finding the leverage points necessary to create change. But it takes real courage to fund the energy to do this when what you feel is complete despair that anything will help.

### Facing fears.

Fear is a "four letter word" in organizational life. We don't want to talk about it, and we deny we even feel it. We've been taught all our lives not to be afraid, so to admit fear is to admit weakness and failure, and the *last* place we want to do that is in our jobs or businesses!

Yet fear feeds on itself and grows in darkness; it can ultimately paralyze an entire organization. Fear is *normal* and OK to have. Courage means walking *with* fear. Naming and embracing the fears that you and others have about your organization or your future is vitally important. Until fear is brought into the open, it takes control of us and we cannot make appropriate choices. If we can acknowledge our fear, it loses its grip and we can choose to progress *despite* it.

## **WHAT IS COURAGE?**

*Courage is the will to take action in the face of fear or despair in order to enhance human growth.* The motive for human growth is what makes courage special. It means that you have a genuine concern for the development of human potential with an appreciation for the interconnectedness of all living things. Organizations are nothing more than people linked together by a web of activity toward a common end. We organize because we want to accomplish something. And when that "something" beckons us to reach beyond ourselves and join together to create something worthy of us, it is called a vision. The role of courage is to make our vision and values *real*.

*Courage demands a personal vs. unexamined commitment.* When an organization simply "sells" the vision and "socializes" employees it does not foster a personal commitment to deeper values and meaning. The introspection needed to personally commit to an action or idea is not performed by the vast majority of people, and is not encouraged in organizational life. If one does take the time to reflect on the deeper meaning of an issue, the resulting values and actions will often fly in the face of currently established norms. Courageous people raise questions that others would not even think to ask. Remember the management team mentioned in the introduction? What each of them was struggling with was personal commitment -- for the first time, they were faced with examining the meaning of the vision and the potential impact on their lives.

*Courage demands being centered in values and vision.* In many organizations, the vision and values, if stated, are rhetoric nicely framed on the wall or stuck in desk drawers and hauled out once a year for the annual report. Being "centered" in the vision and values means being continually focused and in dialog about them throughout the organization.

*Courage means facing fears, living with anxiety, and letting go of results.* I have watched people at every level of an organization wait patiently to "be empowered" from above, including a president who wanted to "be empowered" by the board. Courage is the power in empowerment. When we strive to create our vision, the results aren't predictable. To worry and obsess about them and try to control the outcome of our efforts before we even start will paralyze us.

Unfortunately many organizational processes not only encourage but promote this "analysis paralysis" and penalize heavily for mistakes made along the way.

## **WHAT CAN YOU DO TO CREATE AN ORGANIZATION OF COURAGE?**

Where ever you are in the organization:

### **1. *Empower yourself first.***

It is critical to clarify your own vision and values before signing up for someone else's. Most adults have not thought about their values since they were teenagers; and yet our personal values shape our actions and responses to life. No matter where you are in an organization, you need to know what you stand for *first*. Then you can decide if the vision and values espoused by the organization are something you want to embrace. There will be no joy in working for an organization which you cannot fundamentally support. If vision and values have not been clarified or are out of focus, you have an opportunity to help shape them.

Start working in your "own back yard." No matter if you run a business, manage a department of 70, or simply manage your own desk, you can start to create the kind of organization that you want to work in. Are you committed to outstanding customer service? Then start giving it to everyone who you work for and who works for you, rather than complain about poor service from others. By doing so, you will become much more centered in what customer service means and *by your actions* you will begin to show others how to follow suit. You can start a multiplier effect simply by acting on the vision and values to which you are committed, and have a powerful impact on the organization without needing a fancy title or positional authority.

### **2. *Help the organization find its touchstones and anchors.***

An organization's vision, mission, and values are its core, its anchors during turbulent times. They reflect our highest call to make a difference, feel useful, and be part of a successful and worthwhile organization -- but we need to translate that call to everyday action, and sometimes we need help in doing that. A touchstone is a symbol, idea, mental picture, or story that brings us back to what's important, to rapidly call us back to the vision and values when we seem adrift and confused. No matter where you are in the organization, you can help people define their touchstones and enrich the culture with stories and symbols that provide guidance during difficult times.

## As an executive or manager

### 1. *Examine and acknowledge your own fears first.*

When working with the concept of organizational courage, it's important that we start with ourselves first. Fear is a normal human emotion. It can be rational or irrational, it doesn't matter. What does matter is that suppressing it makes it grow because we've never brought it into the light for a good, hard examination. So we just continue to feed the fear and justify its existence.

What are executives and managers afraid of? Beyond the obvious business and personal survival fears, common fears are those of not being good enough, not being needed, losing control, disappointing others, and being "found out" (that one isn't as good as he/she projects.) What's interesting about fear is that it makes us all believe that we are the *only* people who have this problem.

Before you can help your employees move past their fears, you must work on yourself first. This requires probing gently and honestly into the depths of your own fears. One technique is to map them down to the deepest possible level, and examine what you are *really* afraid of and why. For example, one business owner mapped hers this way:

*What are you afraid of?*

Not having any customers.

*Why are you afraid of that?*

My business will fail.

*Why are you afraid of that?*

1) I'd have to sell everything  
and start over again.

*Why are you afraid of that?*

It's so hard to do.

*Can you do it if you need to?*

(pauses) Yes.

2) People will laugh at me.

*Why are you afraid of that?*

I will be ashamed of myself.

*Will you honestly be ashamed of doing  
what you truly loved and wanted to do, as  
best as you could?*

(pauses) No.

The deepest fear for this business owner was being ashamed of herself. Until she realized it, it paralyzed her from making critical business decisions; and as the owner, she imbued the organization with the fear of making mistakes.

### 2. *Look at what you do that communicates or reinforces fear.*

Executives especially can look totally impenetrable to the rest of the organization.

Human frailties are masked over by position and title. If you have a strong personality, as most entrepreneurs do, your mere presence can intimidate people and your slightest comment taken as a firm command or reprimand to the affected parties. You may not

even *know* what you do that strikes fear into the hearts of your employees, but fear you they will. So it is up to you to understand how you come across, show your own humanity, and change your behavior. Do you bark orders at your staff? Do you find only mistakes in the work presented to you and forget to praise their efforts? Do you constantly remind them, even in subtle ways, who pays the bills and what they can do if they don't like it there? Do you shame them for making mistakes? You probably have legitimate concerns about your business but how you *communicate* them will dictate the level of fear in your organization.

3. ***Help your organization to name and acknowledge its fears.***

A lot of fear in organizations is caused by events -- major changes, economic downturns, automation, job changes, takeovers, layoffs, etc. It is critical to get people to verbalize their fears and understand that it's normal and OK to be afraid. How we act on our fears is what's important.

Talk to your employees about your own fears and your own choices based on your vision and current reality. Ask them to share theirs. Acknowledge that it is a fearful time and that it is OK to be afraid. Remind them that fear is a normal emotion and that courage means walking *with* fear, not being *fearless*.

Give your employees as much information as possible about current reality-- even if the outlook is not great. Holding out on them only feeds their fears because they will be convinced that the situation is worse than it is and act accordingly. Treat your employees like adults who can take care of themselves vs. children that you need to protect, and you will get a workforce that acts like adults.

4. ***Be personally courageous -- modeling courage is the best way to promote it.***

Do you have a management team that can't seem to get the courage to do what needs to be done? Then you need to show them. Be voracious in your quest to acknowledge and embrace current reality: request and listen to feedback, get a diversity of views, challenge your own filters, and admit your own fears. In front of your team, choose and rechoose your vision everyday. Every meeting, ask what you need to do, *that day*, to help realize the vision. Then do it, and finally, let go.

Even if the results of your actions are not seen on a daily basis, employees watching you be honest with yourself (and them) and then take appropriate action *in spite of fear* will be called to act a little more courageously themselves. True courage shines like a beacon

and lifts up our spirits, reminding us that we are bound to each other in common humanity.

Organizational courage is an elusive, yet wondrous power. It is a quality that is critical to giving our lives and organizations meaning, and to move us through the upheaval of the 90's.

Organizational courage is attainable, but it's an inside out job!

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# MANAGING YOUR FEAR

1. Acknowledge it, accept it.  
*What are you afraid of? Why?*
2. Rechoose your vision.  
*Do you still want it?  
If you could have it today, would you take it?*
3. Make your fear a part of your current reality.  
*"I choose to \_\_\_\_\_ and right now I feel very scared of \_\_\_\_\_, and that's OK."*
4. Stay in the present.  
*Ask, "what do I need to do today to help me realize my vision?"*
5. Do it.  
*"I am afraid, and I am doing this anyway."*
6. Let go.  
*"I cannot control the future. I can only control my own actions, today."*