

COWARDICE, COURAGE¹, AND RECKLESSNESS STORIES²

How to Use These Stories

Leadership begins when people exhibit virtues with excellence. Virtues are standards of moral behavior, such as courage, integrity, kindness, and humility. This document focuses on the virtue of courage. When we lead with exceptional courage, we feel deeper satisfaction over what we accomplish, we help and benefit others, and we improve the world around us.

Like all virtues, too much or too little of a virtue is a vice. Thus, when leaders are not courageous enough, people may become too risk averse and stop improving. When leaders are too courageous, people may take unnecessary risks and not consider the possible negative effects of their actions.

Leading with exceptional courage is often difficult. It is difficult to find the optimal expression of courage between cowardice and recklessness. It is difficult because a courageous action in one situation is not a courageous action in another situation. It is difficult because the people who care about a situation often disagree about the best way to exhibit courage, and in many of these cases each person—including you—will be partially right and partially wrong, and we need to learn from each other and work through conflict to sort this out. Even when you figure out how to exhibit exceptional courage, it is also important to communicate what you are doing to others so that they will understand what you are doing.

This document contains stories of people being courageous and of failing to be courageous. (The titles next to people's names are their titles at the time the story occurred and may not be their title currently.) Discussing diverse situations in which people failed or succeeded to live up to their values often helps people to recognize and act on other opportunities when they arise. By discussing these stories in meetings, on teams, over internet or intranet forums, or in classrooms, groups can come up with ideas for leading with exceptional courage, learn each other's perspectives, work through disagreements, and generate ideas. For example, you might read and discuss one story at the beginning of a weekly meeting, post a story on a team forum and ask people to share their thoughts, begin a work shift by discussing a story, use a story in a town hall meeting, or use the stories as fodder for discussion in classroom settings. The following questions may be helpful in discussing the stories. Choose whichever questions are most helpful for your group.

¹ In addition to being used to foster discussions about the virtue of courage, these stories may also be used for discussions about bravery, daring, or valor.

² The stories in this document were written or told by the protagonists. Ryan Quinn edited them and added the reflection questions. The stories are to be used as the basis for class discussion, and not to illustrate effective or ineffective handling of a particular situation. Some protagonists agreed to use their real name, others asked for us to use a pseudonym. The goals of this document include becoming aware of issues, identifying the benefits and drawbacks of taking different approaches, assessing their impact on outcome(s), and learning ways of addressing situations you may encounter in the future.

1. What, if anything, did people do in this story that was courageous?
2. How could the people in this story have been more courageous? How could they have been exceptionally courageous?
3. How might some experiences from your own life be similar to this story?
4. What inspires or elevates you about this story?
5. What disappoints or angers you about this story?
6. What might you have done in this story to overcome your disappointment or anger and help the person who disappointed or angered you to do better?
7. What caused the people in this story to behave the way they did?
8. Who in this discussion disagrees with you? What could you do to understand this person's point of view?
9. How might your perspective on this story be wrong?
10. What ideas can you take from this story and discussion to apply in your own life?

Story #1: Andrea Goulet, Co-Founder and Chief Executive Officer

Women have been uncommon in software companies, especially at the top. As a result, few people in the software industry understand the challenges women face. For example, a digital marketing company where I once worked was kind of indicative of the industry. For example, there was little tolerance for anyone coming in after 9 or leaving before 5. If I had to leave at 4:30 to pick up my child from day care, I felt like everyone was judging me. This was a particular challenge for me after I had my baby because I had this mindset that I needed to do it all. The book, *Lean In*, had just come out. I read all of it, but the message that I got from it was women that need to do everything, rather than the parts where it said women should ask for help around the house. As a result, I tried to be supermom, and that fell apart really fast.

I got postpartum depression really bad. I think a lot of what I experienced was that I had this belief that I had to be perfect, and I was not allowed to fail. I had to walk away from my job because mentally I could not handle it anymore. I was not able to be the mom of a very young child and work for this company with that kind of culture.

By the time my second child was born, I was the founder and Chief Executive Officer of my own company. When my daughter was 10 weeks old, I was supposed to speak at this big national conference, but I was nursing my daughter and it wasn't feasible for me to leave her at home for a week. I did not want to have to choose between going to the conference or being a mother, so I brought my newborn daughter with me. I gave a talk about maternal bias in the software industry while wearing my daughter. It was a very difficult thing to do; I was scared of how people in this industry would respond.

I actually had the most positive experience. I met many people who appreciated what I did. Now, more conferences offering childcare. You can speak out about things that do not fit you, rather than lying down and feeling powerless.

We now have many employees at our company, and I constantly think—on their behalf—about the issues with which I struggled. As CEO I can set policies, and so I ask myself how I can give them flexibility and autonomy. I hire very high performers. There is no reason why we cannot give them autonomy. We let them choose between a 30- and 40-hour work week, and we let them scale up or scale down according to their personal life demands. Sometimes you need more money and sometimes you need more time. Having the ability to choose makes a big difference. I am learning that you can walk away, you can say something is not okay, and you can even change the culture.

Story #2: Oscar Sharp, Intern

Toward the end of my MBA program, as I was exploring potential careers of interest, I met a few times with a hiring manager and was in discussions about joining his company in a sales-related role. Over the course of these meetings, it was clear that we both had interest and there was strong potential that this was a good fit for both me and the company. I was interested in the position, but I didn't feel like I was ready take the position until I finished my MBA program. I knew that I needed to be honest with the manager, but I also did not want to close the door on the opportunity.

I decided to ask the hiring manager if I could revisit this job opportunity with him in four months. Because it was a sales role, I thought the company was likely to still need salespeople then. Therefore, I asked myself how I could position myself in the final interview to keep the door open without committing. I thought through the hiring manager's perspective. I could see his response going either way. I knew that I needed to be prepared for his response either way.

During the interview the hiring manger and I talked through a few specifics related to the role and then we talked about next steps. He made it clear that they were interested in hiring me. He expressed a willingness to hire me after I finished my MBA. I said that I still needed some time to process things considering that it would be four months before I could actually begin the role. I asked him if we could revisit this discussion in a month because I knew that I needed to really think through things and not just jump on the first job that came my way. I could sense that he appreciated my honesty and openness in this process and that I wasn't rushing into anything. I knew what I was asking was a bit out of the norm, but because of the approach I took, I feel like he empathized with my position. Ultimately, he agreed.

Story #3: Gabrielle Hogan, Inspector General

As I was sitting in my office finishing up an email I was drafting, I overheard one of my coworkers, Ben, increasingly getting louder in the office next door. I assumed he was on the phone because I could not hear the other side of the conversation. Finally, I heard him yell, "No, F' you!" I heard him slam the phone down and bolt out of his office.

I went into the hall to make sure he was okay. A coworker, Jamir, said that Ben was on his way upstairs. He had been on the phone with Kai, one of our peers, who must have set him off. Jamir is fairly new to the office so he did not understand the severity of the situation.

To say Ben has a horrible temper would be an understatement. I was actually afraid that he might physically assault Kai, so I took off in a mad dash toward the stairs, trying to beat Ben to Kai's office. Unfortunately, Ben is fast when he is upset. By the time I got to Kai's office, Ben had his finger in Kai's face, and they were both screaming and cursing at the top of their lungs.

Without thinking, I jumped between Ben and Kai and started to push Ben out of the office. I am a 6' 2" (1.88 m) woman, but I only weigh a lanky 170 pounds (77.1 kg) on a good day. Ben is 6' 4" (1.93 m) and weighs about 240 pounds (108.9 kg). Ben pushed back steadily, trying to get back into Kai's office. Everyone else in the office just stood there in shock. I was in between two screaming men, starting to wonder if Ben was going to push his way right through me.

Fortunately, there have been some situations in the past in which I had been forced to discuss Ben's temper with him, so I knew a little bit about where his anger came from and what, in the past, has made that anger subside enough for him to think rationally again: His wife and son, Josh, are his "pressure release valve." Therefore, as I continued to push him, I managed to whisper in his ear, "How are you going to explain this to Josh?" He stopped long enough to look at me. That was the break I needed to get control of the situation.

Another coworker entered Kai's office, and I told that co-worker to shut the door. I did not want Ben to hear Kai say anything else. I pushed Ben toward the hallway until he finally turned around and started walking on his own. One of our directors was standing in the door of his office. I escorted Ben into that office and made my exit. I had done my part. Now I was cool with letting the boss deal with the rest. Fortunately, no one got hurt, information about the event was not passed to other buildings in the organization, and both parties got to keep their jobs, so I think it went pretty well.

Story #4: KC, Management Consultant – Enterprise Solutions

Leadership in my department decided that my team needed to become "agile." This meant that we would no longer have assigned desks. Instead, our team would have an assigned space where we could come and go as we please. Additionally, we moved from one of the organization's highly esteemed locations to a less esteemed location. On the positive side, we would be more flexible, maximize space, and reduce costs. On the negative side, managers made this decision with very little input from the associates in our department. My co-workers complained that we were a tight-knit team because we saw each other in the office so much. They also argued that we simply worked more fluidly and productively during face-to-face meetings than in virtual ones.

Our managers announced this in our monthly staff meeting. Most people were afraid to say anything or have an open dialogue because the decision had already been made. I found it extremely uncomfortable that so many of my colleagues who had expressed dissatisfaction to me privately were afraid to express their feelings publicly and, more importantly, to our managers. I mostly listened to the dialogue and did not speak up during the meeting. I was surprised at how much fear there was in our team, given their brainpower and experience, which had always impressed me so much.

I felt like I needed to speak up, which is not something I normally do. I made a blog-style post to our company's internal social media site expressing the way I felt and why I felt that way. These posts are public, with names attached, so everyone knew I that the post was mine. I took time to craft my response in a positive, conversational style, so leadership would not feel I was attacking them, but also to get the point across that many on the team had hesitations about the move. I ended the post with something along the lines of "I trust leadership that this move is the right direction for the team, but I have also heard the team ask for transparency, which is the point of this post. Thank you for taking the time to read it."

The post ended up igniting a great discussion. Several people commented and, to my surprise, all of the managers "liked" the post. Many people also complimented my post to me in person. They said they knew the decision had been made, so they did not want to fight a losing battle, but they were glad that someone expressed their sentiment. The post won't change the decision, but I am glad it lessened that "aura of fear" that I felt was prevailing. Also, I got invited by the managers to be a part of a small team that will "lead the change" in going agile.