



The Signature Voice

the quarterly newsletter for clients and friends of Isis Associates

Leadership Courage: Take A Stand

Watching the Olympics over the last few weeks serves as a reminder of the courage it takes to achieve results. There are so many stories of courage highlighted at the Games, such as the Canadian figure skater who skated her way to a bronze medal, just days after losing her mother to a heart attack. Consider Shaun White, having already won a gold medal, demonstrating his spirit for the sport by attempting a new trick on a world stage, elevating the difficulty the sport to a new level. Each of these is a very different example of courage, showcasing what can be achieved by overcoming fears or pain, facing danger, and still taking action.

Courage extends well beyond these expertly trained athletes. Every day we perform acts of courage for ourselves, at home and at work. Courage is the ability to face a difficult situation and take decisive action. Leadership courage can take place in the context of giving an employee tough feedback, telling a client that a project is not going as well as it should, or raising an issue to management that affects the entire company. Whatever the situation, those with leadership courage are able to take action where others are unwilling to step up. The ability to do this takes confidence, a willingness to take a risk and the knowledge to consider all sides of a situation.

There can also be a downside to leadership courage. If you take a stand all of the time, on every issue, your peers, employees or clients may have a different perception of you. You might be perceived as a complainer, a self-promoter, unable to listen to others, or overly negative. Leadership courage, therefore, requires striking a delicate balance between your own voice, taking a stand for what you believe, and having a voice for others. So how do you achieve this balance?

I recently had a client who required assistance with this question. Kristin was a senior member of a project team and up for a promotion. She was facing increasing pressure to deliver more work for a client, and within the same project deadline. Her project team was falling behind schedule with the out of scope tasks and becoming burnt out with the extra demands. Kristin was worried about approaching her boss, for fear that he would think she was complaining, while the team would view her as weak for not speaking up. Using the framework below, we prepared for the discussion:

- **Confront the issue and be able to describe it specifically.** What is the headline?
- **Outcomes.** What is the ideal result from addressing the situation?
- **Understand the context of the situation.** Does it affect only you? The organization? A client?
- **Respect other points of view.** *Listen* to the other party in the discussion. What might they see or know that broadens your perspective?
- **Act.** Contribute possible solutions. Was the end result satisfactory? What obstacles do you face implementing the solution? Are there further steps to take?
- **Gather feedback.** What worked with the approach? How did other stakeholders feel about the situation and outcome?
- **Evaluate and learn from the experience.** What would you do differently next time?

Kristin approached her boss with a crisp description of the problem and two possible solutions. She learned that there were other factors driving the client's demand that were outside of the project team's control. She was able to adjust the project priorities and set more clear direction with her team. Kristin's boss provided the feedback that he was pleased to see that she had a pulse on the team, and could quickly adapt to the changing circumstances. Olympic athletes are well-trained, ingraining physical movements into their bodies, visualizing the actions they will take each time they step up to a start line. This occurs because of rigorous and routine practice. Just like athletes, we can train ourselves through practice, enabling us to ingrain leadership courage as a skill. You may not always have the time to prepare for the situation, as Kristin did, but practice this model for effective Leadership Courage each time you confront a situation, and it will become second nature over time.

-Erin McCants Parker

Quarterly Reflection: Take a Stand

Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.”
-Winston Churchill

Take a moment to reflect on a challenging situation that you currently face – what could you take a stand on now?

1. What will I gain by confronting the situation or listening to others?
2. How will taking action help me? Help others?
3. What's at risk if I do not take action? What first step can I take?

Quarterly Selection: Undercover Boss

What dog-eared, highlight-filled books are on our bookshelves that we find ourselves turning to time and time again and frequently recommending to others? What films or documentaries do we find filled with leadership lessons? What do we listen to on our iPods? Here's our selection for this quarter:

Undercover Boss
Airs on CBS on Sunday nights

This quarter, we feature a new CBS reality television show (yes, we said reality tv!) which you can find out more about at: http://www.cbs.com/primetime/undercover_boss/

The premise of the show includes real-life CEO & Presidents of organizations such as Waste Management, White Castle, and 7-Eleven, who go undercover in their own organizations, to really understand the day-to-day realities of their managers and front-line workers. In one of our favorite episodes, President and C.O.O of Waste Management, Larry O'Donnell, works side by side with his employees sorting waste, collecting garbage from landfill, and even cleaning port-a-potties. He returns from his experience not only with greater humility but with a much broader perspective for work done in the organization. He also gains new appreciation for the impact of productivity policies he mandated and learns how even policies with the best of intentions can have unintended consequences. If nothing else, the show, is great fun to watch and a reminder to senior leaders the importance of being visible, getting out into the field, listening to employees, and staying close to the business at the ground level.

-Amy Jen Su

From the Coach's Corner:

From the Client:

"I am a functional leader within one of the business units of my organization. As you might imagine, sitting on the leadership team means that I spend a critical amount of energy managing relationships with and influencing other functional peers while balancing the multiple agendas at play. I am pretty adept at doing all of the above. That said, I have one particular challenge I'm facing: the passive aggressive peer. There is another functional head who sits on the leadership team who is challenging to me because of his passive aggressive nature. Not only is it difficult to drive to results with this person but it is also taking a personal toll on me. How do I deal with the passive aggressive peer?"

From the Coach's Corner:

It is not easy to deal with passive aggressive behavior whether at work or otherwise. This type of behavior can feel like it is derailing all your efforts to drive to results. And, working with peers can be a particular challenge because of equal level of authority. I'm assuming that you've tried giving your peer effective feedback and it hasn't worked. If you haven't given him feedback, start there! Tell him what you observe and the impact it's having and give him suggestions as to how he can approach the situation differently. That said, there are a few things you can focus on to help minimize the noise this peer relationship is causing for you.

1. Focus on the Problem not the Person.

You seem quite consumed by your peer's traits. Be honest with yourself. Has your past experience with him now negatively tinted every interaction you have with him? If so, recognize that this may be contributing to the difficulty of the relationship. Stop focusing on his personality and everything that bothers you about it. You can not force him to change. What you can do is focus on the actual work issue at hand and problem solve for how to achieve the deliverable despite your peer's style. This will help engage you in figuring out ways to move forward given the current circumstance rather than based on a hypothetical more ideal situation. Wishful thinking that your peer will change overnight and that the path to results will be automatically paved with ease is fruitless. Focusing on the person instead of the problem is a slippery slope for certain.

2. Don't take it Personally.

This is a simple one: stop thinking it's all about you. The chances that your peer is passive aggressive with almost everyone else as well is high. But don't take my word for it. Observe him in action (or lack thereof) with others. You'll notice that he probably does the same thing he does with you with them (ie, commits to one thing in the meeting but afterwards takes a different stance.) Look familiar? So if his behavior is pervasive with others and not singularly addressed to you, stop taking it personally. This step alone will relieve you of the personal toll you're experiencing from dealing with this individual. You need all the energy you can fathom as a corporate leader - - don't waste one ounce of it trying to figure out why he is this way with you. It's not about you.

3. Focus on Follow Through.

Remember that you sit on a leadership team - - not alone in a silo. That being the case, there is huge strength in leveraging your team in dealing with your peer. No, I'm not suggesting that you gang up on him! Rather, engage the rest of the team in confirming agreed upon expectations and follow-through on next steps. For example, if you're in a meeting discussing next steps, make sure everyone articulates what they heard as next steps and verbally communicate what they commit to. This will accomplish two things: (1) your peer will openly declare his commitment to follow through and (2) the rest of the team will expect follow through. The key here is to ensure there are ways to solidify expectation setting and follow through across the team.

Practice these steps. They may not stop your peer's approach but they certainly will help buffer some of the noise this situation is causing.

-Muriel Maignan Wilkins