

COURAGE AND FEAR IN LEADERSHIP

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If courage was the absence of fear then most leaders would be cowards. Anxiety and fear are regular companions for many leaders. Their courage lies in how they relate to fear and their willingness to take a stand and act in the presence of their fears.

President Franklin Roosevelt is famous for telling Americans early in the Great Depression that the only thing that they had to fear was fear itself. Many people find this a reassuring message, but I find it confusing. On one level it makes sense to me – don't let your fears get out of control and we will get through this. But in another sense it seems to be dead wrong. Telling people to fear their fear just adds fuel to the real problem – our fear of fear.

Most of us experience fear as a very unpleasant emotion. It involves a very strong surge of energy which often tenses and contracts the body and fogs the brain. Our stomachs often churn when we are afraid and it is not unusual to start sweating. These sensations can be strong enough to interrupt our sleep in the middle of the night. It is common to talk about being gripped by fear. Sometimes fear can swell into individual and collective panic. It is said that some animals can sense or smell our fear, and given the contagious nature of anxiety and fear in human relationships I am wondering if we also have that ability. Fear, of course, plays a constructive role too in warning us about real dangers – I guess that is why animals developed it in the first place.

As I get older I realize that I am a much more fearful person than I ever knew or admitted. All sorts of things scare the hell out of me – dying is the big one, but there is sickness and pain, loss of loved ones or things I value, failure, financial insecurity, being rejected or abandoned. I even fear that I may be the only person like this. I have a tendency at times to judge fearfulness and to equate fear with weakness, and so on occasions I can be quite contemptuous towards myself for my fears. At other times I can be very compassionate – just to give myself a little tick here. More importantly I am starting to realize just

how scared I am of fear. I believe that it is my fear of fear that has led me at times to deny my fears and to run away from them and thus leave myself open to being run by them. My fear of fear has stopped me at times from examining my fears more closely and prevented me from seeing the potential to transform them.

It is possible if you are still reading this article at this stage, and have not distracted yourself by urgently making a cup of coffee, that you are thinking: "Richard there is no need to be so afraid". If that is what you are thinking you may well be on to something, but I invite you to examine who you are trying to comfort. Is it me or is it you?

Many of the fears that I have described previously are existential fears which arise as the result of our human condition. As well as these fears, leaders face some which are more particular to the exercise of leadership. These may include fears about letting down the people for whom we are responsible or to whom we are accountable, and fears about the riskiness or uncertainty of the strategies and changes which we are pursuing. We may fear becoming unpopular as a result of our leadership decisions, or becoming disconnected and estranged from others by going out on a limb. Some of us are worried that others will discover that we are frauds parading as leaders and this fear is sometimes called "the imposter syndrome".

Thankfully, being courageous and effective in leadership does not require us to get rid of our fears. Unattended however, fear can put a brake on our willingness to exercise leadership and to live life larger. It is helpful to get a better handle on our fears when they arise. A good place to start might be to practice replacing our fear of fear with mindfulness of fear. The best way to do that is to focus our attention on the physical sensations occurring in our bodies when we are experiencing fear. Keep shifting our attention from our thoughts to our sensations – no need to change them, or get too carried away with our judgement of their unpleasantness, but just keep noticing them. Bring some curiosity to noticing all the sensations as they arise. Extend some compassion and kindness towards yourself for what is occurring. The more often you do this the more you may build some confidence that you can handle the physical sensations which arise with fear. After all, it is just your ordinary and familiar experience of fear.

Once you have achieved some comfort with the uncomfortableness of the physical sensations, you may give some attention to the thoughts that keep coming up as well. You may notice how certain recurring thoughts add fuel to the sensations. You may notice the catastrophizing in your thinking, or the disturbing way you are framing the situation, or the dogmatic way that you are describing yourself as a victim with no power or choice. Keep letting these thoughts go. When the thoughts slow down, and the feelings start to dissipate, and the fear begins to subside, it may be time to take some responsibility for your thinking. After all it is you who is doing that thinking. There are certain external events and circumstances occurring but to a greater or lesser extent it is your thinking that is scaring you. How could you think differently? How could you frame the challenge more powerfully? What are some of the conditions, expectations, and assumptions that you are holding on to that you could let go? How could you be a bigger person than the one you keep describing to yourself? This is not just a speculative inquiry – this is an opportunity to transform your thinking and transform your relationship to that fear. You deserve peace of mind – be more rigorous with yourself and choose that over your habitual ways of thinking.

Be careful about the timing of this cognitive work. If you try to do it too early while your fear is still raging, you risk getting swept along in your unhelpful thinking and you risk substituting blame for responsibility. Practice mindfulness first and the analysis comes later. One of the best ways to build your capacity to be mindful during the day and in the presence of fear is to practice regular meditation.

I have written more generally about the relationship between leadership and emotions in a previous article titled “Leadership is Emotional”. In the workplace and in senior leadership, anger is sometimes a more acceptable emotion than fear despite all the damage that anger can cause. Milder forms of anger can be irritation, annoyance and frustration, while in its more extreme forms it can be rage or meltdown. If you examine your anger you may notice that it is fear that often precedes or sits behind it. The car approaching you suddenly turns right at the intersection causing you to brake heavily to avoid contact and you get very angry. Your direct report is dragging the chain on implementing your decision and you are surprised by the vehemence of your

angry outburst at her. If you examine your anger in these situations you may notice that it was preceded by a fear of being harmed in the first instance or by a fear that your credibility and informal authority was being eroded in the second instance. Indeed your anger may not have been just about the challenging situation itself, but about being “reminded” of the existence of danger in the world and “subjected” to the unpleasant experience of fear.

All this talk of fear might seem very different from the heroic, warrior myth of leadership or the more modern myth of the rational technocrat. It is – and it is not. What is being described here requires great strength and laser sharp focus too, but it is based on mental strength. It takes dedication and work to build this kind of mental strength. It will be needed, not just to alter our relationship with our fears, but to continue to take stands and to act on our commitments in the presence of those fears. This is the kind of leadership courage which allows and requires us to make not just small, safe commitments which will not rouse our fears too much, but to be bold and adventurous and to change our part of the world for the better despite all our fears.

It is very instructive to watch some of the documentaries on the civil rights movement in America during the sixties. I am in awe of those largely young black citizens who committed themselves to gaining equal access to education, to restaurants, to buses and the rest, and to do it non-violently. Media footage from the time shows the abuse they experienced, how they were being punched in the face, dragged by the hair, bashed by truncheons and baseball bats, drowned by water cannons and attacked by dogs. Documentaries show how these young folk trained themselves for months in advance – they simulated in classrooms all these abuses and dangers – and they built the mental strength to act on their convictions, not to become reactive and to remain non-violent. They trained themselves to be bigger than their fears. In the process they changed their world for the better.

To finish with a more modest and light-hearted example, I once did some parachuting with a static line. I recall all my glands and orifices were working overtime. I didn't know if it was fear or excitement so I chose the latter. I trusted my thorough training and calm instructor when he told me to exit. I found the experience so exhilarating I returned for another weekend of jumps.

