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Career Journey

**Courageous Leadership in the Post-Pandemic Era:
Advice from Women Business Leaders
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By Merilee Kern

While some contest, or outright refute, whether or not former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill famously said “success is not final, failure is not fatal: It is the courage to continue that counts,” the power of that statement looms large irrespective of origin. Amid the wildly unforeseen fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, this quote is rather prophetic. It speaks to prosperity not being taken for granted and the notion that failure in and of itself isn’t a death knell. Relative to business, it also evokes many questions about the very nature of “courage” - a concept characterized by the demonstration of “strength in the face of pain or grief.”

Of course, it’s presumed that successful leaders can and should inherently be courageous, but in what *exact* regard is courage a mission-critical managerial quality? To what extent should a

leader exude courageousness versus humility? What actions exemplify how courageous - or not - a leader is? Can a wholly well-intentioned show of courageousness backfire and end up doing more harm than good?

We're currently living in an unprecedented and challenging point in time when courage seems to be the order of the day. To gain some clarity on how this is actually defined and perceived when in practice, let's see what a handful of women leaders in the business community have to say on the subject.

Stick to Your Guns

By its very nature courage connotes danger and evokes a sense of fear. Were there not peril, valor need not be required.

Stacy Caprio of Her.CEO offers that "a courageous leader has the ability to look at the data and make decisions, even when these decisions go against the grain of public opinion, the media and general public panic. Not many leaders have this ability, but a true leader is able to make decisions independent of mass fear and panic."

Jennifer McCollum, CEO of the leadership development firm Linkage Inc., further substantiates that courageous leaders stick steadfast to their personal standards. McCollum cites her firm's research findings, which she says are drawn from 100,000 leadership assessments with data from more than one million leaders, revealing specific behaviors that make a leader courageous. One of the three found is "acts in alignment with personal values in challenging, conflicting or ambiguous situations." With courage as a character trait not to be discounted as a key determinant of a leader's overarching achievements, McCollum clarifies, "We know courage is a critical leadership practice that differentiates the most effective leaders from the rest."

Embrace Vulnerability

One business leader who's walking that highly-exposed walk of vulnerability is Mylen Yamamoto Tansingco, CEO of Cropsticks, Inc., a social and environmentally-minded B Corporation operating in the foodservice and hospitality industry. "I do not have all the answers, and I'm not going to pretend I do either," she's refreshingly quick to admit. As case in point, Tansingco publicly discusses what Cropsticks is currently going through amid COVID-19. In her YouTube video titled "[Can my business survive?](#)," she shares her company's small business story in endearing, unguarded and highly personal form. "I'm hoping to keep our community motivated and feel seen during this time. I hope it doesn't become a 'courage fail' after this is all over," she says. Yet she took the leap of faith into that unknown anyway.

Fortune 500 speaker, writer and coach Heather Coros contends that courage is contagious. She emphasizes that curiosity and innovation is only accessible in the brain when a sense of safety is present. "If you're expecting your team to lean-in, then they need something that feels safe to lean against. By being that safe space, you give the gift of strength and vulnerability to the entire team. And as we know, vulnerability is essential to highly preferred skills like transparency,

clear communication and team cohesion.” Perhaps most importantly in this post-pandemic era is Coros’ estimation that “courageous leadership creates a sense of stability amidst the chaos.”

Despite Risk, Remain Steadfast and Maintain a Positive Demeanor

Uniquely drawing on her experiences as a stand-up comedian before entering the corporate world, Jennifer Jay Palumbo, CEO of Wonder Woman Writer, LLC, feels that being a courageous leader is accomplished by having unwavering poise. “You have to believe in yourself *and* your idea no matter how the person in the room reacts or not,” and you need to “trust that you're talented and smart enough to figure it out and still accomplish the task at hand.”

While conveying courageousness certainly takes chutzpah, Women Presidents’ Organization CEO, Camille Burns, cautions that it’s important to exude confidence without arrogance. “I think people often confuse risk-taking with being courageous,” she says. “Taking a risk is a bold move. But it is even more courageous to fail, to accept that something you tried did not have the outcome you wanted or expected.”

Kelly Gillease, NerdWallet CMO, sees an opportunity for courageous risk-taking with frequency. “Great leaders exhibit courage in small ways every day by encouraging risks and bigger thinking or being vulnerable and empathetic when a situation calls for it,” she explains. As for the aforementioned chutzpah, “having a willingness to call out the elephant in the room” is also courageous behavior that Gillease indicates she strives to model.

Attitude is also the name of the game. It’s important to temper said chutzpah so that it doesn’t come across as overly audacious. A haughty demeanor is never one that’s particularly welcomed in business, but this kind of disposition can veritably doom an executive’s image - especially when attempting to navigate a gaffe. “When someone does not acknowledge what they do not know, or the mistake they have made, it is a courage fail,” Camille Burns warns. “Sustained naivety is when you deny the fail, or when you try to blame it on someone else or block out the writing on the walls. If there is no learning derived from failure, there is no achievement. Then, it is a double failure.”

All told, it’s apparent that courageous business practices are guided not just by guts and grit, but also by focused and unwavering guidance that keeps a leader on course.

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