

Manifesting 'workplace courage,' an important but underrated skill

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A therapist who started her first shift at a hospital ran across what seemed like a simple problem, with a simple solution. There was no hand sanitizer on the floor, and a colleague told her there hadn't been any for days. When she asked why no one had notified the head nurse about it, she was told that everyone was afraid of getting their head bitten off.

Given that we are in the midst of a pandemic, this kind of situation is horrifying enough. But it also made me ponder what kind of workplace dynamic would create it. Here is a supervisor who clearly has a reputation for not being accessible, but just as equally, we have employees who lack the courage to speak up.

It is indisputable that supervisors such as this head nurse should never exist, but the unfortunate truth is that there are many, scattered in workplaces across the country. What this reality means then is that employees have a responsibility to be courageous in speaking up. But being courageous is more than just the correct thing to do. It's also the right action if you want to be viewed as a high-potential employee who has the skills to lead and take on more challenging assignments. Being courageous results in more positive outcomes, but being seen as courageous by others has the added benefit of helping you progress in your career.

Workplace courage is different from the life-and-death decisions you might see police officers and firefighters making. Workplace courage is about taking calculated risks. It is a readiness to make bold moves, but at the same time, being thoughtful about the pros and cons, and deliberate in mitigating the possible negative outcomes.

Workplace courage actually manifests itself in three areas. One, of course, is in speaking up in a potentially difficult or challenging environment, such as the one the therapist faced. It is about being confident enough to say something even if you're afraid that the message might not be well received. It is when you admit your mistakes even though it might make you look foolish. It is standing up for a person who is being unfairly targeted or bullied. The courage to speak up comes from learning and practising assertive language skills – choosing words that respectfully offer your point of view without making the other person defensive.

Another way workplace courage is manifested is in a willingness to step outside your comfort zone and push your personal and organizational boundaries. Sometimes, it is having the courage to try new things, by stepping up to participate in (or even lead) a new initiative, for example. Other times, it is raising new ideas or questioning established norms. When you demonstrate the courage to approach the unknown or revisit the status quo, you are showing the powers that be that you are agile and have the skills to adjust to changing circumstances. So don't be afraid to try new things - just be sure to always evaluate and mitigate the risks.

A third area in which workplace courage is demonstrated is in relying on others. It can be difficult to trust that others will get things done to the standards that you hold for yourself. But thinking you can get everything done on your own is a recipe for long-term disaster. As you progress in an organization, and especially when you take on formal leadership roles, your continued success will come from your ability to rely on others to produce results and deliver outcomes. You have to believe that the others on your team will raise issues, make decisions, and take action. The courage to rely on others comes from intentionally building relationships and learning how to effectively delegate responsibilities.

So seek out opportunities to demonstrate courage in the workplace. Speak up, try new things, and trust those you work with, all while balancing the potential risks.

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