



Fearless Leadership

Organizations are only as good as the people inside. Yet the organizations and the people are under increasing stress. Do more with less. Cut costs. Do the same work with fewer people. Order supplies "just in time." Skip training – there's no time or money. Check your email, texts, and social media 24/7. We have entered a time when managers can be asked repeatedly to cut costs, people, and resources without loss of quality.

Many people in organizations that I work with can no longer tell me when the workday ends or even when the workweek begins. The main behavior at lunch or in meetings is the head bent down to check the latest electronic message. The pressure increases as boards and agencies create unfunded mandates and demand measureable results in shorter timeframes. Complexity increases as decisions made across the street and around the world have equal impact on operations. Forget what you know about employee engagement, the value of training and development, about making decisions from core values. Just get it done.

In the face of pressure and uncertainty, leaders want to solve, fix, and inspire. Many believe that if only they work harder or learn the latest management techniques, they can address the difficult challenges. They act from a genuine desire to help, to save the system and people around them. They fight the urge to revert to command and control management. But they end up exhausted by demands from above and dissatisfaction below.

But there is a choice: to be a fearless leader. Fearless leaders start by acknowledging the realities around them. They confront the facts. Then they become curious. They ask questions like these: Who is a part of our organization? What strengths and skills do these people have? How could they be invited to participate and contribute to our work? What insights do they have, that if shared, would make a difference in our work? How can we create a network of mutual accountability and support?

Fearless leaders remember that people engage and commit when their thoughts, beliefs, and feelings are valued. They know that people actively support and willingly build things they've help to create. They trust their people, knowing that motivation begins with meaningful work and autonomy. They let go of their need to know everything and control everyone.

Fearless leaders don't ignore their organization or blindly trust people. Instead of telling people what to do, fearless leaders use their position power to connect people. They shift their focus to:

- create good processes for people to use
- offer the scarcest resource – time
- insist on people sharing and learning from experiences and best practices
- support appropriate risk-taking, designing experiments to learn what works and what does not
- act as a human shield – keeping bureaucracy at bay
- develop relevant measurements of progress
- give meaningful, useful feedback on progress – making the achievements visible
- value the genuine spirit of connection that comes from meaningful work, well-done

Fearless leaders stay the course. They understand that command and control only leads to more chaos in a system. (Think about heating and putting greater and greater pressure on a closed pop can.) They know that the only way that work can be done and problems solved is through everyone's active participation. They ask people who were disengaged or at-odds with each other to turn their energy toward being a part of the solution. They host groups where questions and conversation lead to horizontal connections and shared accountability.

In the end, fearless leaders discover what has been present from the beginning. The people who make up their organization are human beings with ideas and insights. They want to contribute and feel connected to each other. They are all human beings who want to make a difference in their organization, their family, and their community.

Fearless leaders are those who dare greatly. They have learned that they have a choice between trying to control what cannot be controlled and wrestling with a complex tangle of circumstances and demands. They fearlessly chose uncertainty.

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat. (Theodore Roosevelt, from speech "Citizens in a Republic")

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Kathleen can be reached at kkfriesen@friesengroup.net.

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