



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H05LYV
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
MAY 12, 2020

ARTICLE **DECISION MAKING**

How to Find and Practice Courage

by Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries

DECISION MAKING

How to Find and Practice Courage

by Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries
MAY 12, 2020



BRENDON THORNE/GETTY IMAGES

One of my former students, the CEO of a large, diversified industrial company recently sent me an email to say that he believed “the pandemic was the moment to show the people in the company that management really cared.”

That was why, he told me, that in spite of the serious financial implications and the opposition of some of his key shareholders, he had made the decision not to furlough anybody and had asked his senior executives to take a reduction in salary, in exchange for shares that would be bought back at a later date by the company at the issue price. In addition, he had offered credit to all of his suppliers

that were in trouble and, with the help of his top team, he also arranged an airlift of personal protective equipment for the hospitals closely located to the company's main premises. He was very proud of the fact that in a few days the top executive team, supported by other employees of the company, had successfully raised a substantial amount of money for that purpose.

He admitted that at the onset of the crisis he had been “set on a quite different path” but that he managed to “find the courage to do what was right.” He ended the email by saying that “the response from my people because of these actions has been humbling.”

I was touched by this note. Here, was a relatively timid, rather anxious CEO who had been brave enough to take actions that a number of his shareholders had disagreed with. He had clearly thought carefully about what the right thing to do in the circumstances would be, and he had found the courage to act on his conclusions in the face of opposition and difficulties.

But what was it that made him courageous? Was he always courageous or did he learn to be? This is not an easy question to answer, because courage, like personality, is a product of both nature and nurture, of both the individual and her society, of both the person and the situation.

From Nature to Nurture

Nature certainly plays a role in determining who has courage. Research in neuroscience shows that some people have a thrill-seeking or “[Type T](#)” personality. The brain structures of these sensation-seeking people seem to be somewhat different from the brain structures of people who avoid risks. The regions of the brain that determined decision-making and self-control had a thinner cortex, the brain's wrinkled outer layer or “gray matter.”

Type T individuals may have fewer [dopamine receptors](#) in their brains to record sensations of pleasure and satisfaction and as such, may require higher levels of stimulant and endorphin activity in order to feel good. Their higher level of testosterone, a hormone that seems to correlate with uninhibited behavior, may also lead to a more risk-oriented lifestyle. A neurological architecture predisposed to risk taking, combined with a strong value set determining what they perceive as right or wrong, could make it more likely, when the situation requires it, that Type Ts will act in a courageous manner.

But even if some people may be genetically predisposed than others to have a greater capacity for risk-taking, it doesn't mean that they will necessarily show more courage. Along with [Stanley Rachman](#), author of a classic [book on the topic](#), I believe that non-biological factors — specifically, a person's psychological makeup, values, and beliefs, along with conditioning by early role models — can compel us to act at risk to ourselves in the interest of protecting other people. Your brain chemistry might make you readier than my grandfather would have been to take a bungee jump, but would it have made you readier to shelter Jewish refugees as he did, living in German-occupied Holland during World War II?

From Individual to Context

There is plenty of research linking the ability to act courageously (or otherwise) to measurable — and controllable — personal traits. To begin with, there is our level of what [Albert Bandura](#) has termed *self-efficacy*, the confidence we have in our own capacity to confront the challenges ahead of us. A belief that “we can do it” will make a difference when the time comes for courageous action. There is also our *self-esteem*, a more familiar and at least partly a learned psychological factor, that can also affect our assessment of our ability to successfully overcome challenging, risky tasks, as does the presence of *anxiety*. The degree of *openness to experience*, [one of the five dimensions in the Big Five personality trait theory](#), may also be factor: people who possess this quality may be more likely to act in a time of crisis. All these characteristics can be developed and shaped with practice and help. Low self-esteem and anxiety, for example, can be worked on through therapy. And much can be done to develop a greater openness to experience.

Of course, the environment and context in which you are operating will also make a difference. Like biology, however, the environment is more difficult to work on. It’s always easier to act if what you do reflects shared normative beliefs on what we consider to be the right or wrong. That was certainly the case for my grandfather. The invaders in Holland were not exactly welcomed, and it was likely that sheltering Jewish refugees would have been considered by my grandfather’s social group as an act of defiance to be praised. It is doubtful that he would have received social support in the event that he had intervened to save a German from being assaulted by a mob of Dutchmen bent on revenge. This demonstrates that there are situations when we can easily produce courage and others where we cannot. All too often, in these “difficult-to-produce-courage” situations, we succumb to fear, peer pressure, groupthink, or deference to authority figures.

Learning Through Practice

Perhaps the best way to think of courage is to treat it as a muscle. Some people are born with better muscles than others, but everyone can improve their muscles through training and practice. My ex-student, for example, told me that he had learned that he needed to address his relatively low self-esteem and anxiety, thanks in part to the support of his fellow CEOs on the leadership course he had attended with me. What had also helped him was having good counsel — a supportive partner and a number of good friends who encouraged him to take these courageous steps.

Over the 50-odd years that I have practiced as a psychoanalyst, psychotherapist, and executive coach, I have found the following techniques especially useful in helping my patients and students find and practice their courage:

- **Create scenarios:** I ask people to imagine both the worst that could happen to them if they take a given action and what the outcome would be if they didn’t act. By identifying the risks they are taking, people can build immunity to their fears.

- **Recognize the negativity bias:** Many people are prone to attend more to negative than to positive outcomes. By making people aware of the research around this, you can help them correct for the bias. You should also make sure they spend as much time considering the positive scenarios as the negative ones. And when you do consider negative scenarios, try reframing what may appear as dangerous situations in a more constructive way.
- **Talk out the fear beneath:** People who are afraid to act often have little or no confidence in themselves, and this lack of confidence manifests itself in many ways — through procrastination, perfectionism, the [imposter syndrome](#), and such. To open up about one’s self doubt, to expose one’s vulnerabilities, can have a positive empowering effect. By identifying what we are truly afraid of, we reduce our fear of the situation, which gives us the courage to act. We can also benefit by looking at the experience of other people who have conquered their fears.
- **Practice going out of your comfort zone:** Consciously and consistently practicing small acts of courage can have a cumulative effect. For example, I suggest people to try to speak up when they believe something is not right in their everyday life. To challenge themselves to take a stand for seemingly little things can strengthen the habit of making truly difficult and courageous decisions.
- **Manage your body:** Fear is physically draining, and these physical effects compound the mental ones. Anyone having to act in stressful times needs to make sure that they go into the challenge in good physical shape. In a crisis, therefore, make sure you take the time to eat well, exercise, and sleep. I have also found that various relaxation techniques such as meditation or yoga can be quite helpful create the clarity of mind required for courageous action.
- **Recognize that you are not alone:** Having people with whom you have freely shared your fears — and who have shared theirs with you — can be a valuable resource when you are faced with a challenge to your courage. They don’t always have to be people you know very deeply — my student told me that he drew strength from the other participants on our seminar, people he hadn’t met before. In some ways, fear can be like an addiction, and the support of people who are in the same boat as you are can help you overcome it.

The more we are able to face our fears, the more we will replace fear-based responses with courageous ones. But it’s not all about a struggle with the inner enemy. For as we fight our fear, we will find ourselves acting in ways that make us feel more alive. To quote the philosopher and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson: “He who is not every day conquering some fear has not learned the secret of life.”

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries is an executive coach, psychoanalyst, and management scholar. He is the Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development and Organizational Change at INSEAD in France, Singapore, and Abu Dhabi. His most recent book is [Down the Rabbit Hole of Leadership: Leadership Pathology in Everyday Life](#).
