



“Having Courageous Conversations”

In today’s fast-paced and ever-changing business climate, time is one of our most precious resources; hence, doing or getting things “right the first time” is vitally important. In this dynamic environment, having courageous conversations is a must. Without them, valuable time, energy and productivity (\$\$\$) are wasted because of what “goes unsaid” in meetings and in other human interactions where honesty, direction, expectations, clarity and/or feedback are desperately needed, but not delivered. Obviously, business execution and performance suffer when people fail to “engage and say what they honestly think and feel, to whom and when they need to say it, in a humanistic manner so others can hear their message without feeling judged and respond to it in like manner without feeling afraid.” For the purpose of this article, when we choose to engage and communicate in this manner, regardless of the topic, the perceived risks, or the ranks/positions of those involved, we are having a “courageous conversation” (Principle 8 of LeadQuest’s 10 Principles of Personal Leadership).

The 10 Principles of Personal Leadership

- 1. Be In The Moment**
- 2. Be Authentic & Humanistic**
- 3. Volunteer Discretionary Effort Constantly**
- 4. Model High Performance – Desired Behaviors that Drive Desired Results**
- 5. Respect & Leverage Separate Realities**
- 6. Be Curious vs. Judgmental**
- 7. Look in the Mirror First – Be Accountable**
- 8. Have Courageous Conversations**
- 9. Provide Timely, Clear & Specific Performance Expectations and Feedback**
- 10. Teach, Coach & Mentor – Spend at Least Half of Your Time Developing Others**

What people often forget is that without Principles 1 through 7 working in harmony, they cannot effectively execute Principle 8, let alone Principles 9 and 10. Each principle is an essential piece of a powerful leadership model; when even one piece is neglected, we do not perform at our very best and we do not have the impact we desire on relationships and results. Over time we’ve come to realize that courageous conversations is one of the most misunderstood and misapplied leadership principles; this is so, in part, because people interpret “courageous” to mean that they now have permission to “tell people what they really think of them” (i.e., “let them have it”) without regard for how or when the message is delivered, or how it might be received. Obviously, operating under this interpretation of a courageous conversation, it should not be surprising that one or more of the preceding seven principles is often left out. Though some of the preceding principles are easier to apply than others, they are all equally important and interdependent. ***This article focuses only on those principles that are most often ignored or misapplied when having a courageous conversation.***

Principle 1: Be In The Moment. In order to have a healthy, productive courageous conversation, we need to be completely in the moment – giving our “undivided attention” to the person(s) with whom we are interacting. Often, in meetings and in other forums where we interact with others, we fail to be fully present, instead engaging in what is known as “autopilot behavior.” Autopilot behavior is “conditioned behavior” that occurs when we “unconsciously react” (out of habit) to what is happening in our environment; e.g., we react without thinking about how our response might impact the person(s) with whom we are interacting. It is not surprising that many forms of undesired autopilot behavior occur in human interactions and that they impact relationships negatively. For example, autopilot behavior could be rolling our eyes when someone says something we disagree with, or blurting out an inappropriate comment when we are frustrated, or working on our Blackberry when we get bored in a meeting. In psychological terms, when exhibiting autopilot behavior, we move habitually and quickly from “stimulus to reaction” (S → R) without pausing in between to consider and choose an appropriate response.

Undesired autopilot behavior often arises when we find ourselves in an emotionally-charged situation or conversation; for example, some people report becoming “hooked” or “sucked in” by the behavior of another and, consequently, losing control and lashing out at the other person. It is at these times when pausing (e.g., taking a deep breath or asking to take a break) may be the wisest thing to do. Obviously, when operating on autopilot instead of being in the moment, attempting to have a courageous conversation can be difficult because we are more likely to “react” and say or do something that has a negative impact on the other person(s), hence shutting down the conversation and creating hurt feelings.

The bottom line is that for courageous conversations to have the most positive impact, they must occur when we can be and can remain in the moment. Being in the moment enables us to be more “self-aware” so we can “access and push the pause button” when necessary (e.g., when feeling ourselves beginning to become “hooked”) to prevent us from exhibiting undesired behavior. Being in the moment also enables us to access our “inner wisdom” (e.g., what we feel at a visceral level) so we can readily share personal feelings, observations, clarifications and other comments/additions that perhaps will elevate the quality and output of a meeting or interaction. We have the makings of a courageous conversation when we choose to share our personal feelings, observations, etc., in a meeting or one-on-one interaction, and elect to do so in a humanistic manner.

Principle 2: Be Authentic and Humanistic. The authentic side of this principle is relatively self-explanatory. When we choose to have a courageous conversation, we need to be honest and say what we truly feel, without putting what’s on our mind on the backburner for very long. However, when and how we communicate our feelings are vitally important for courageous conversations to be effective. In discussing Principle 1, we talked about the “when,” let’s now address the “how.”

This is where the second part of Principle 2, being humanistic, comes into play. Unfortunately, it is this part that many people seem to misinterpret or leave out when having courageous conversations. For the sake of this discussion, we'll use the term "respectful" to describe what we mean by being humanistic (note: this is simply one of several words we would typically use to define what it means to be humanistic). When we are humanistic while having a courageous conversation, we care about two important things: 1. being respectful, and maintaining or enhancing the self esteem of the person(s) with whom we are interacting, and 2. achieving a positive outcome to the conversation. Let's recall our definition of a courageous conversation: courageous conversations occur when people choose to "engage and say what they honestly think and feel, to whom and when they need to say it, *in a humanistic manner so others can hear their message without feeling judged and respond to it in like manner without feeling afraid.*" When having a courageous conversation (for example, when providing a sensitive piece of constructive feedback), humanistic leaders leave the other person feeling respected and feeling that their self esteem is "whole or intact." The impact of this is that the person receiving the constructive feedback is more likely to act on the feedback and make the necessary improvements. The corresponding impact is that the relationship between the two parties remains respectful and productive.

Principle 6: Be Curious vs. Judgmental. When having a courageous conversation, we need to respect the other person's "separate reality" (per Principle 5) and avoid behaving as though our reality is superior. Given this, "coming from curiosity vs. judgment" is essential while having a courageous conversation. When we enter an interaction with a judgmental mindset, our resulting behavior is usually perceived as negative. For example, if we are in a meeting that seems to us to be poorly organized, lacking clarity and purpose, we could intervene and say, "Hey, this meeting is one of the worst I've ever been to; who planned it?" That type of judgmental and non-humanistic statement would probably halt the conversation and affect the feelings and performance of everyone in the meeting. Instead of abruptly stopping the meeting in this manner, the curious, humanistic person might say, "I am unclear about our desired outcomes for this meeting, is anyone else unclear?" Even if no one else says they don't understand, the person might go on to say, "I am sorry, but would you please restate the desired outcomes because I am unclear." Instead of harshly judging the meeting planner/facilitator, we calmly ask for further explanation and clarity. The main difference between the two approaches, besides the first being outright rude and disruptive, is that the second approach allows for further dialogue, which in turn may lead to greater understanding and, hopefully, the achievement of the desired meeting outcomes.

Principle 7: Look in the Mirror First – Be Accountable. Finally, courageous conversations cannot occur unless we choose to be accountable and initiate/have them. As was written in the beginning of this article, "business execution and performance suffer when people fail to engage and say what they honestly think and feel, to whom and when they need to say it, in a humanistic manner so others can hear their message without feeling judged and respond to it in like manner without feeling afraid." When we

choose to act on one or more of the “accountability questions” below, we are potentially launching a courageous conversation.

1. What more can I do/say right now to make this meeting more productive?
2. What more can I do right now to say what needs to be said that no one else is saying?
3. What expectations or feedback can I deliver right now to make a positive difference in individual or team performance?
4. What more can I do/say right now to achieve the outcome I/we desire?
5. What more can I do/say right now to prevent something undesired from occurring?

As organizations strive to do “more with less” (e.g., have fewer, more productive meetings) to improve operating margins, etc., they need employees to “volunteer discretionary effort” by stepping up and engaging in more frequent courageous conversations. What goes unsaid in meetings and in other human interactions is the “silent enemy” that many companies are facing today; fear and distrust are often the causes of this phenomenon. To combat it, the leaders of an organization must embrace and model The 10 Principles of Personal Leadership on a daily basis and commit to creating a culture where all employees choose to do the same.