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The (Morally) Courageous Leader

Inside-Out Leadership

Captain Stephen Trainor

The Soderquist Center for Leadership and Ethics

Transcript of Integrity Week Keynote Speech,

Case Western Reserve University

It is truly a privilege to be here on the campus of Case Western Reserve University and participate in Integrity Week. Thank you to the Integrity Board members and everyone who has played a role in the week's activities, especially to John Weibel, Samantha Tucci, and Larry Monocello for being such gracious hosts during my visit. I also think it is a powerful statement that the university has empowered the Integrity Board to spend an entire week highlighting character and leadership. However, I am also very pleased to be on campus and share time with my dear friend and former Naval Academy colleague, Professor Shannon French. The Naval Academy bond is one that students and faculty share forever and I am so happy to be here to support the important collaborative work occurring between the Integrity Board and the Inamori Center.

I had the privilege of serving in the Navy for thirty years and I truly appreciate the gracious welcome you provided to me today. My military career was an incredibly rewarding and challenging experience that provided a tremendous foundation on which I continue my passion for leader development with businesses, public, and nonprofit organizations at the Soderquist Center for Leadership and Ethics.

I have a two-fold goal this afternoon: first, I hope to offer some insights on leader development through the lens of personal experiences and stories, and second, I will make a case for a model or a method that I believe helps us develop the ethical muscle needed to exercise morally courageous leadership in our lives. Contrary to conventional thinking, you don't have to be a superhero to lead with moral courage, but you do need a unique approach to prepare yourself.

We hear a lot about courage these days. Stories are written about courage in the news, videos of courageous acts are played on the Internet, and tales of courage are shared among family, friends, and coworkers. When

we hear courage described, it most often falls into one of three basic categories: physical, mental, or moral courage. Despite how prominently and frequently courage is portrayed and discussed around us, I believe there is a general misunderstanding about how courage works and whether or not it actually can be developed.

Conventional thinking argues that courage is an attribute reserved for and exercised by special people in unique circumstances. Unfortunately, such an approach to courage creates a problem for everyone else. If courage is found only within a limited set of people, how do we know who the courageous person is when we need one? This unrealistic approach results in most of us ignoring or dismissing the very real possibility that each of us has the ability to exercise courage if prepared adequately. This idea is particularly important for organizational leaders because they are very likely to face challenges which demand the exercise of different forms of courage (sometimes simultaneously). The discussion today will focus not on physical or mental courage, but on moral courage. It is not because I believe either physical or mental courage are less important, but it is because I believe exercising moral courage often precedes or supports the others.

The first time I reflected seriously on the idea of courage was as a young undergraduate midshipman at the Naval Academy. The image I have is still very clear. I was seated in an old, dark lecture hall on the campus in Annapolis and Vice Admiral Jim Stockdale limped back and forth in front of our seats, telling us about his eight years in a prisoner of war camp, after being shot down over Vietnam in 1965. Admiral Stockdale was the senior officer over hundreds who were imprisoned in that camp and he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for the physical, emotional, and moral courage he exercised while leading his fellow prisoners. Admiral Stockdale told of the brutal torture and years of solitary confinement at the hands of his captors. As an aspiring future Navy pilot, I was shocked by the description of his physical injuries, but I was riveted by the stories he told about exercising the courage to withstand the emotional trauma and how he motivated others to press on and resist, despite guaranteed outcomes of pain and separation.

At the time, I remember thinking how hard it must have been for Admiral Stockdale and his fellow POWs. It would have been so easy to give in, to take the easy path, but why didn't he? Stockdale claimed that he never lost faith that he'd get out of that camp and that the experience would define his life. But he also said that he had to accept his current situation, however bad it was. At the time, I concluded that Admiral Stockdale

possessed superhuman attributes. His ability to remain resolute and lead his comrades amidst horrendous circumstances left me perplexed. I could find no explanation for how a normal person could withstand and survive, much less thrive, as a result of such an experience.

The reality is superhuman people only exist in the movies, but it is nearly impossible for just about anyone to imagine how they would respond if placed in Admiral Stockdale's shoes. As a result, we end up believing that courage is the stuff of legends, an elusive pipe dream for the average person, and we continue with our normal routines. The fact is that each of us will face physical, emotional, and moral challenges that demand more of us than we think we can deliver.

My basic argument is [about] the perceptual gap between the real danger that we face and our ability to overcome the challenge where fear exists; the larger the perceptual gap, the greater the amount of fear experienced. Likewise, it seems reasonable to argue that the smaller the perceived gap, the more likely one is to think, speak, or act in a way that seems to be courageous, or overcomes our fears. Could it be that Admiral Stockdale somehow perceived a smaller gap between his abilities and the challenges that he faced? Was he somehow better prepared in a way that allowed him to more courageously face the challenges of being a POW? Is it possible that the right form of preparation will help close the perceptual gap between ability and challenge and promote the exercise of courage? If so, courage is not beyond our reach. It is practical and attainable, even for mere mortals.

So what does it take to close the gap and exercise moral courage? My discussion today is an attempt to offer some concrete steps to move ourselves in the right direction. Right up front, my conclusion states that, contrary to conventional thinking, you don't have to be a superhero to lead with moral courage, but you do need a unique approach to prepare yourself to exercise it. I use an athletic analogy to describe the approach to becoming a morally courageous leader because, just like physical performance, courage and character are not attained through revelation or appointment. Instead they must be cultivated and perfected, just as a disciplined athlete trains and prepares for the competition. Like the performance of an athlete, the ability to exercise moral courage involves effort in several areas. First, it requires agility or leader mastery across different domains. Second, it demands a deliberate focus on strengthening our core, or the integrity and completeness of our character. Finally, it requires the motivation to act, when everything around us is aligned against action. I'll begin by discussing leader agility.

But before I do, I will extend a critique or a critical conclusion about leader development that likely applies to many of you. I believe that nearly every organization and most individual leaders approach development from the wrong direction and that important failure has direct implications on the growth and strength of our character. In fact leader development is nearly always role or position specific—from the outside in. You're a new manager, a committee or department chair, a team or organization leader, and you realize that you lack the preparation for your new role responsibilities. You seek out leader development or perhaps your boss offers development to you. For quite some time, the bias in business and in the military has been role specific—develop the person for the position. I argue that, to grow agility, the approach to leader development should be focused in the opposite direction, what I call “inside-out leadership.”

Here is the basic model. Focus first on self-leadership, which is the deliberate emphasis on the basic motives and abilities that guide and enable us to participate effectively and positively in relationships, small groups, and larger organizations. If viewed as a vector, self-leadership is our ability to direct inward and guide ourselves in important, socially relevant ways. Ultimately, self-leadership is a function of our belief systems and [the] associated self-concepts.

The second piece of inside-out leadership is followership. Why included followership in the model about leadership? In any organization, in any relationship for that matter, there is always someone or some group to which you are accountable or from which direction comes. The reality of those relationships are that we need a continuing and expanding ability to lead upward, especially in the dynamic and complex work environments of today. Followership is the extent to which we shape the vertical relationships around us. Followership is influenced directly by the strength of our values.

The third aspect of inside-out leadership is peer leadership, which is perhaps the most powerful, and yet most misunderstood and least perfected area of development. Every leader has peers, near or far, virtual or in-person, intra- or extra-organizational, with whom they interact and perform. Today's business, military, and organizational environments are more horizontal than ever before and the demand a greater ability to lead across or horizontally in organizations. The extent to which we engage in effective peer leadership is a function of the loyalties we have to those peers and for the larger organization that we share.

The last element of inside-out leadership, and in my opinion, very least, is positional leader development, which includes an expanding array of skills, abilities, experiences, and knowledge to accomplish role responsibilities and complex tasks. Why do I say least? Because nearly all of the more than \$13 billion a year that American businesses spend on leader development is invested in positional leadership, to the near exclusion of self, follower, and peer leader development.

To make matters worse, I have discovered through years of working with midshipmen at the Naval Academy, and now with business leaders, a unique bias towards leader development that says, “I understand what leadership is, I’ve seen it in action, just tell me what I need to know to do my job.” This position bias is not necessarily arrogance, as much as a response to the organizational environment and a general impatience with the hard work of leader development. I believe that just like exercise, most people search for a shortcut to success, the “ab-buster,” the “SEAL training workout,” or another quick-fix solution to leadership challenges. Unfortunately, just like athletic training, impatience and lack of discipline come at a cost to character and moral courage.

Without an intentional focus on the first three areas of leader development, it is nearly impossible to have the agility to lead with moral courage. I argue that the quality of one’s leadership and the ability to exercise moral courage is directly related to the depth of development in self, follower, and peer leadership. Coupled with positional and role leadership development opportunities, a leader possesses the basic ability (and agility) to face ethical challenges from nearly every direction. However, just like the competitive athlete, a leader who develops agility without also strengthening core ethical muscles is training for a marathon by running short sprints. You may be in good shape, but you won’t be well-prepared for the ultimate challenge of the race course.

The duality of leader agility and ethical core strength is critical when facing moral danger because nearly every human possesses the protective fight or flight response, but that response is largely unpredictable. Very often, our response to a dangerous situation is to flee because it quickly removes the threat with the least amount of stress and effort. The basic unpredictability of that response poses an important problem for most people and organizations. How do we know with certainty how people will respond to a dangerous situation? If our natural (or at least unpredict-

able) response to a morally fearful situation is to take the easiest way out and flee the danger, as opposed to engaging the challenge head on, what hope do we have for success?

Some people may think that military soldiers are innately courageous, but that strength and consistency of purpose is not something that comes naturally to everyone in uniform. The military spends significant time, energy, and lots of money training teams of people to stand fast and fight in the face of danger. Like an athlete or a soldier, a leader's character must be developed to effectively meet those challenges. Ask almost anyone who has succumbed to a significant moral or ethical failure and they will tell you that they were not prepared to face the dilemma or challenge. They had not invested the energy into it, and therefore didn't have the muscle to stand fast in the face of moral danger. In addition, when the situation is deconstructed, the vast majority of the time the challenge was not role-specific, but focused directly at self, follower, or peer leadership.

My primary assertion is that core ethical strength can be developed methodically and purposefully by deliberately strengthening three muscles that support leader agility: beliefs, values, and loyalties. Each of those muscles, acting in unison, creates purpose, trust, and commitment that enable the action of moral courage against a challenge. The stories and ideas that follow illustrate how leader agility and ethical muscle can be developed.

A very important part of flying a helicopter at sea is, of course, safely landing it aboard the ship. One of the methods used to ensure a safe landing is a device we called the "bear trap," a steel box attached to the ship with two powerful jaws which secure the helicopter to the flight deck upon landing. The key objective for the pilot was to align the helicopter with the trap before attempting to land. The same idea applies to leadership. All too often leaders set off on a path or decide on an action that is clearly not in their best interest, but they do it anyway. Why does that happen so frequently to leaders?

I argue that leaders pursue the wrong path for several reasons, but very often due to a lack of alignment between actions and purpose. In fact, I believe a root cause is the actual substitution of action FOR purpose. This is based upon a simple exercise of asking people to describe their purpose. Most of the time, people respond to that question with a description of something significant that they do, or have done. However, purpose is not so much what we have done, but why and how you do what you do. In other words, purpose is the set of beliefs (the why and the how) that drive what

you do. To understand and articulate one's purpose demands deep reflection around the question, "What is right and how do I decide?" Some may describe this as a worldview, others a personal philosophy and in many cases such reflection conforms to more general approaches of moral philosophy (e.g., justice and fairness, the greatest good for the greatest number, what conforms to universal human principles, or revelation by God). However, without the depth of that reflection and direction (around why and how) it is nearly impossible for a leader, or anyone for that matter, to clearly and consistently discern a path forward.

Have you deeply reflected on your purpose (the why and how of what you do)? The fact that most people have not illustrates what is all too common in organizations today—the struggle to act. It's become harder to act, because competing priorities make it difficult to discern the right path. However, through greater clarity of our purpose, the right path (or paths) becomes more visible. Admiral Stockdale believed that he would eventually prevail, and the code of honor shared by his fellow POWs would protect and enable them to endure, despite being in the worst of all possible circumstances. At the individual level, the first step you must take is to reflect and the articulate what you truly believe. By describing and declaring your beliefs, you take the first step of self-leadership and solidly fix the gap between your present self and the moral challenges you will face. This form of accountability and reinforcement not only demonstrates the boundaries, but the direction of our character as well. Not that the direction of our character cannot or will not change over time, but it begins with a solid declaration. By checking your internal alignment, you set and strengthen your leadership purpose.

In addition to defining one's purpose, leaders face yet another problem when it comes to deciding the path to follow. Quite often, even with a solid understanding of your beliefs, a leader is presented with multiple right paths to pursue. How do you know and trust which path is the best course of action? In my early days as a Navy helicopter pilot, I remember hearing someone say to "keep the main thing, the main thing" and thinking to myself, "That sure seems obvious!" However, I discovered early on that the cockpit of a Navy helicopter at sea was full of activity, which confused and complicated things. Making internal and external radio communications, monitoring the instruments, watching the navigation picture, dealing with the noise and vibrations of the engines and transmissions, executing the assigned tactics—while actually flying the helicopter—all competed for the

skill and attention of crewmembers. Operating in unfamiliar or difficult situations, like shipboard take-offs and landings at night, only made things worse. My lesson was learned on a night-time take-off at sea, when the loss of an engine showed me the true meaning of “keep the main thing, the main thing.” I became a quick believer in that philosophy and I have since discovered that this idea applies to leader development as well.

The argument is based upon work with Naval Academy midshipmen and a variety of business leaders who, when asked to describe what is most important to them (the “main thing”), typically respond with a list or a description of their basic values (e.g., excellence, integrity, family, faith, hard work, etc.). Unfortunately, there is a central problem with this sort of answer. While values help identify and describe what people think is important and good, values alone do not build essential ethical muscle until something very serious is done with them. To be useful and build the trust needed to exercise moral courage, values must not only be identified, but they must also be prioritized.

Unfortunately, not only do most leaders fail to prioritize values, they do things that create dangerous conflicts between the things they prize the most. For example, if integrity and excellence are valued equally, then what should a leader do when seeking an answer is likely to also reveal a serious shortcoming in your work? If work and family are equally important to a leader, what are the implications of working on a tablet at your daughter’s soccer playoffs? Instead, most leaders declare an equal set of three to five values, enough to fit on an index card posted to the cubicle wall. Instead, leaders must identify “the main thing;” the most important value from among all those they cherish. Providing clarity and priority to values builds consistency of action and fosters the bonds of trust among the people around a leader.

Admiral Stockdale often described the values of camaraderie, integrity, and warrior defiance that helped to sustain and guide the POWs who were held in captivity for so many years. How did the prisoners know what was most important when their physical torture resulted in a breakdown that divulged important information about their comrades? I recall Admiral Stockdale explaining that every prisoner would eventually break under torture, but the most important thing was to resist as long as possible, knowing two things: their fellow prisoners would back them up and each prisoner would regain the ability to resist the very next time. Defiance, camaraderie, and integrity each became the main thing, but not simultane-

ously. When those values came into conflict, it was up to Stockdale and the other leaders to prioritize the values for their followers. Without exercising that ethical muscle, the bonds of trust would have broken and their ability to persevere would have been threatened.

How do you know which among your values is most important (and why)? There are tools to help identify and sort through values, but for simplicity's sake, a leader must focus on prioritizing and then integrating the most important personal and professional values. Leaders who do this build self-accountability and priorities which guide their lives. However, values are much more dynamic than beliefs and the relative importance of values may change dramatically at different times or stages of life. Regularly engaging in this process maintains the muscle to act in the moment and make timely and precise decisions informed by principles, rather than random pressures. Without the strength to clarify what is most important and focus on it fully ("keeping the main thing, the main thing"), leaders will be buffeted by the many powerful pressures of the moment.

With an ethical core of beliefs and values established, many would argue they have sufficient strength to face the difficult challenges of leadership, but it takes one more very important muscle to be fully prepared to exercise moral courage. That last, but most important ethical muscle, is commitment. Most people argue that they are strongly committed to their key beliefs and important priorities, which is generally true. However, most people do not know how they will react when their beliefs or values begin to cost them something. It is easy to know what is right and important when the stakes are low. When the stakes are high enough to actually cost something is when the muscle of commitment is desperately needed.

One of the most incredible stories I remember Admiral Stockdale tell so many years ago was when he learned that he was to be paraded in front of foreign journalists who were visiting Hanoi to chronicle the conditions provided to American prisoners. Clearly a propaganda ploy, Admiral Stockdale described using a piece of wood and a razor to so severely beat and cut his head that his captors never showed him as an example of their humane treatment. Why would anyone endure such harm to avoid a simple photograph? While beliefs and values may be powerful enough to drive the assumption of significant risks or take actions to achieve positive outcomes, why would anyone choose something with a guaranteed negative result? The reason lies in the deeply held commitments Admiral Stockdale had for his comrades, his code of conduct, and his country.

Commitment, strengthened by pure loyalties, is the power behind the most amazing acts of moral courage. Loyalty is the most powerful component of commitment because it determines the direction and strength of action delivered against a moral danger. Unfortunately, most leaders have not done the heavy lifting to determine precisely where their loyalties lay. Just as it is impossible to have two most important values, the loyalty between commitments cannot be split and leaders who fail to understand the true nature of their loyalties will hamstring their actions at the most critical point in time.

The first step to develop a pure hierarchy of loyalties is to place “self” in the middle of a blank page and ask the question, “To what or whom am I loyal?” Asking this question is very different than asking, “To what or whom am I accountable?” Loyalties are those things or people you would willingly sacrifice for based upon shared beliefs and values, whereas accountabilities are things or people you would assume risk for in return for extrinsic or intrinsic rewards. Once all of the loyalties have been placed on the sheet, the most difficult conditioning exercise begins. Each loyalty must be hierarchically arranged in an order above self and no two things or people may share the same level of hierarchy. The end result is a powerful demonstration of your commitment to people, organizations, and ideas. With loyalties firmly established, the ethical muscle of commitment, supported by purpose and trust, generates the power to act in the face of moral danger.

Beliefs, values, and loyalties are not merely slogans on a wall; they are the meaning behind purpose, trust, and commitment, the drivers of our decisions and actions. The real power of this approach to exercising moral courage is that it can be developed, practiced, and shaped continually, just as an athlete trains and prepares for the competition. The model of inside-out leadership—agility, core strength, and action is not limited to the work of a solo performer. Purpose, trust, and commitment are three of the central attributes of high-performing teams and are key factors that influence effective organizational change and agility in an increasingly complex world.

In the end, it is not merely enough to want to act in the face of moral danger. But neither is moral courage relegated to the realm of superheroes. Leaders must and can develop the agility and ethical muscle to face moral challenges and take a stand for self, team, or organization. The key is to train and be ready for action. Just like the disciplined athlete, the integrity

of a leader's character requires constant attention and development in order to act in alignment with purpose, to build focus and energy through trust, and deliver moral courage through the power of commitment.

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak to the Integrity Week community. I wish you all the very best.