

Overcome People's Resistance with These Steps

Help people find the courage to change.

By Edward G. Brown

Are you ever frustrated by board members who refuse to raise funds, employees afraid to try new things, supervisors who back off from coaching others? The answer may be right there in your hands. When people lack a critical skill, they need to be trained in it. If they're afraid to do their job, they need to be taught, in this case, courage.

Courage is what's called a "soft skill" or "third-space skill" in a world that considers business and engineering first- and second-space skills. Courage is the most essential third-space skill in today's organizations.

Courage isn't the absence of fear, because fear is always with us. Rather, courage is the ability to overcome fear. Those who don't learn courage will be forever hobbled by the constraints of their fear.

How can courage be taught? There are six key ways:

1. Remember that you can't fix it until you admit it.

Courage comes from the French word for "heart." What gives heart to people trapped by fear? Realizing they're not alone – that the brashest, boldest-appearing person they know carries doubts, too – sets them on a path to confronting their own fears.

“Take a small action within 48 hours of learning a skill.”

2. Be sure people realize that courage is learnable.

Just as there are steps to learning math, or engineering, or French, there are steps to learning courage. It comes in increments, but it comes.

3. Start small. People quail in the face of big risks but can be coaxed to take lesser risks. It's called the "off-Broadway principle." Stage your show where a failure won't hurt. Correct mistakes before going big.

4. Have people take a small action within 48 hours of learning a new skill so that they immediately build confidence and experience. Lag time creates space for fear to reassert itself.


5. Welcome people's objections. When was the last time you were being sold something, or told to do something, and you immediately responded with "Yessir!" That's not how people work. We question, we clarify, we offer concerns,



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we negotiate. Those may sound like no's but they're really just steps on the way to yes. Be ready to confront people's doubts and remove their resistance with gentle reassurance.

6. Begin by changing the behavior. Fears are often revealed through nervous behaviors. Shaky voice and hands. Rushed words. Monotone. Shrinking posture. Don't let that happen to people in your organization. Instead, feed them confidence in the form of communication skills: "Here's the tone you want, and the tempo – practice using them. Here's what your hands should be doing, and your eyes, and your arms. Here are words to use for this occasion, and others for that. Where's the smile? Here's how to listen. How do you show that you're sincere?" Change the physical and the mental will follow. (See "To Make an Impact, Improve Your Non-Verbal Awareness" on page 22 for small but important tweaks you can make to people's communication skills.)

Success favors the brave. If people are letting fear hold them back, there's only one solution: Teach them courage so that they can let go of their trepidation and leap forward to reach their full potential. 

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