



# It Takes COURAGE

**True leaders  
overcome fears  
of failure and  
rejection**

**T**wo uniformed officers of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) helped a plainclothes detective unit stop four dangerous suspects. As the two officers approached the suspects' vehicle, one of the suspects reached out of the right rear window of the car and shot one of the officers. A vicious, prolonged gun battle resulted. The seriously wounded officer lay on the pavement just behind the criminal's vehicle, with bullets ricocheting around him. Through a hail of gunfire, one of the detectives ran forward, exposing himself to the deadly bullets, and pulled the wounded officer to safety. He was awarded the Medal of Valor.

Most police agencies have some way of recognizing courage in the line of duty. The Los Angeles Police Department has several levels of recognition with the Medal of Valor as the highest award for courage. For many years, I sat as the chairman of the awards and decorations board, which considered the many nominations submitted for recognition. Some involved incredible acts of courage. Others recognized meritorious service. For those nominations recognizing courage, the board always asked, "Did the officer recognize the danger of the situation and understandably face fear?" The board noted true courage cannot exist outside the presence of fear. Without fear, there is no courage. An officer may lack knowledge of the gravity of the situation or awareness of imminent peril, but true courage involves recognition of risk and a decision to overcome fear and move forward with duty.

The word "courage" usually conjures visions of performing dangerous acts of valor in the midst of hazards or

threats. However, there is another realm of fear that rarely involves physical risk, but does require great moral courage. Those in leadership positions face various kinds of real fear from this realm, including the fear of failure, the fear of criticism and the fear of rejection. In fact, these fears prevent many people from assuming leadership. Leaders combat these fears with the courage of conviction.

Leadership requires making decisions. A decision always entails the possibility of error or the risk of criticism when additional facts come to light. The acute fear of failure can paralyze you into inaction. Leaders learn to make decisions without the benefit of all the facts. Doing so makes you a leader.

## Without fear, there is no courage.

We all enjoy being liked, but leadership involves a willingness to experience rejection. It's easy to feel alone and alienated when making the "right" decision proves unpopular. The fear of rejection can run so strong it overpowers your good judgment and sense of duty. Leaders are susceptible to surrendering their integrity, choosing to take the expedient way of least resistance rather than do what is right and risk rejection. American patriot William Penn famously said, "Right is right even if everyone is against it, and wrong is wrong even if everyone is for it." A true leader overcomes the fear of rejection (at least temporarily) because not all right decisions are popular or appreciated at the time.

Another hallmark of great leaders is their desire to seize the initiative. A leader does not watch things happen; a leader makes things happen. Seizing the initiative involves recognizing problems, seeing a window of opportunity, perceiving a vacuum of leadership and taking action without having

to be told to do so. Everyone will intersect with a great opportunity during their lifetime. More likely, you will encounter several of them. The issue is not whether you will have a rendezvous with a window of opportunity; it is whether you will 1) recognize it as such, and then 2) seize the initiative and jump through the window. This plunge requires courage.

A young officer resigned from a police agency because of the corruption top leadership seemed to tolerate. He joined the LAPD hoping for a career in an environment that did not tolerate corruption. His previous experience, coupled with an accent not common in Southern California, landed him an undercover assignment in a vice unit. To his dismay, he observed some of his colleagues accepting bribes. He cautiously approached his sergeant and discovered the sergeant and even the lieutenant in charge of the unit were also involved. He contacted the commander of the Internal Affairs Division (IAD) and received instructions to meet investigators in a café outside the city. Preparing for the meeting, he donned two guns, fearing he was being set up for a hit. The IAD officers proved legit, and he later learned the corruption was confined to the vice unit. This whole scenario involved perceived physical danger as well as the likelihood of rejection and career failure. The officer overcame these fears. This demonstration of courage and character paved the way for a very successful career and earned the admiration of his colleagues.

Overcoming our common fears and choosing the path of courage ultimately results in respect and personal fulfillment—on point. **LOM**

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