

# Competence & courage

Competence and Courage are essential qualities of a leader. Be it, 'the in the ability to take risks' or, 'make vital decisions' – such as changing your strategy from discrete practices to lean manufacturing methods, mergers and acquisitions, changing product portfolio... Courage is the ability to face fear, uncertainty, doubt and the unknown. Competence is the ability to visualise the other side, chart the course and strategise a successful journey and sail through the rough seas...

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*"Courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities ... because it is the quality which guarantees all others."*  
-Sir Winston Churchill

**W**hen Pakistan breached our borders at Kargil and its surrounding areas, the Indian Army pressed into action. Many battalions from JAK Rifles, Grenadiers, Jats and others moved into the battle positions on our northwestern frontiers. Pakistan had moved into Indian territory with intent to occupy the strategic areas. Col. Ravindranath Magod commanded a battalion from Rajputana Rifles. On one fateful day his battalion received marching orders to move to the border, and reclaim the occupied territory.

When they moved from their location to the base of the mountains, little did they know what lay ahead them. Much as they sought for clarity, little did they know of the facts, as they existed on the battlefield. Call it the fog of war. The battleground was over 15,000 ft high above sea level. All that the men could carry, was what they could hold in their hands or on their backs. This meant hand held guns and ammunition. The boffors guns provided the artillery cover from far behind.

## Courage

When nothing is clear – enemy position, their formation, their firepower, etc, – it can be a scary situation. You don't know from where the bullet will come. Col. Ravindranath had no time to be afraid. He kept going and demonstrated that 'action dispels fear'. He had to psychologically prepare himself and his men for the worst that was yet to come. Col Ravindranath led his men from the front – something that the Indian Army has become symbolic for its officers. To clear the fog of war, he went on a reconnaissance mission himself to seek answers for many mysteries. For a commander of a battalion it was an exemplary and courageous act. This would instill tremendous confidence in the men, energise and motivate them. He had overcome the fear of the unknown and provided true combat leadership.

Braving minefields, tremendous shelling and firing from the enemy, he led his men



forward. What ensued for the next few weeks is recorded in the annals of history as one of the bloodiest wars, fought on totally inhospitable terrain and against unimaginable odds. One of the wars fought very bravely by the Indian Army. They pushed the enemy back beyond their lines and made them stay put. The battle was won, but not without its casualties. Some officers and men never came back; many were injured, most marched back victoriously. The Indian flag was flying high. Every Indian commander who led from the front like Col Ravindranath brought honour and glory. The President of India decorated him with Vir Chakra. In the face of death; they did not flinch, they did not bat an eyelid in fear, and they put the interests of their country and their men before them. If this is not courage, then what is this? Today these glorious men proudly display medals of honour on their courageous chests. "Courage is fear that has said its prayers," wrote a Swiss theologian.

When you look at the acts of Col Ravindranath or those other Indian commanders, you cannot help seeing great courage. Remember it's possible to see it in war heroes, but it's also present in every great leader in business, government, sports, real life, etc. When you see an organisation make significant progress, behind it is the leader who makes courageous decisions. A leadership position doesn't give a person courage, but courage can give him a leadership position. Larry Osborne observed, "The most striking thing about highly effective leaders is how little they have in common. What one swears by, the other swears against. But one trait stands out: the willingness to risk."

Here are some truths about courage that you can recognise:

- At the origin of courage is an inward battle – Col. Ravindranath's test began within himself. All the significant battles were waged within him. To him courage wasn't the absence of fear. It was doing what he was afraid to do. He practiced the power of letting go of the familiar, and forge ahead into new territory. That was the truth for him; similarly it can be true for you too
- Courage is making things right "The measure of man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience,

but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." Great leaders have good people skills and they can get people to work together. They also opine their stand on issues when needed. When Col. Ravindranath faced the fog of war, his courage dealt with the principle keeping perception aside. His courage was demonstrated by his decision to go on reconnaissance missions, and bring back eyeball vision of the enemy made him an effective leader. Your dedication to potential must be stronger than your desire to appease others

- Courage in a leader inspires commitment from followers Courage is contagious. When a brave man takes a stand, other's spines stiffen. Show of courage encourages others. But, show of courage by a leader inspires others as it did to the Rajputana rifles battalion commanded by Col Ravindranath. "Leadership is an expression of courage that compels people to do the right things," Jim Mellado
- Life expands in proportion to courage Fear limits a human, fear limits a leader. Perhaps it stems from the desire to have great safety standards. Courage opens the doors, and that's a wonderful benefit of courage. The battalions that fought the Kargil war "feared not that their lives would come to an end, but that it would never have a beginning". Courage not only gives you a good beginning but also a better future. The irony of life is those who have courage and those who don't have the same amount of fear. The only difference is, those who don't take chances worry about trivial things. If you have to overcome your fears and doubts anyway, you might as well make it count.

Every time you stop to look fear in the face, you gain on courage, confidence and strength. As the men of Rajaputana Rifles or JAK Rifles, Grenadiers, or Jat regiments can now say, "we lived through this horror, we can now take on the next thing". They did the thing they thought they could not do.

How do you handle fear? Are stretching experiences part of your daily lives? Do you embrace fear? Have you retreated so far into your comfort zone that you don't even feel



fear? How can you change to develop the spirit of courage in your life? To improve your level of courage consider to do the following:

- Face the music – Col. Ravindranath simply said went out with his men and faced the music. He simply stretched himself to grow in courage. You can do a variety of other things to grow in courage, such as; join the Shiamak Davar school of dance and go perform on the stage in a group, try to speak in front of an audience, go bungee jumping or sky dive, climb a rock, climb a hill, go rafting in a river ,etc. Make a wrong decision, falter and fail, learn out of it, correct course and come out. Face the music and get rid of that fear
- Talk it out – if you are avoiding confrontation with a coworker, boss, family member, friend, neighbour etc., then just go talk to that person. Avoid abuse, but speak the truth. If you have learned to face the music, you wont be afraid to do so
- Take a big leap – if you think you should make a career move – change jobs, start your own enterprise, relocate, etc. – just do it if that’s what you believe in your heart. Talk it over with your mentor, your spouse or even a trusted friend. If it’s the right thing for you, just do it and improve your courage by overcoming fear.

### Competence

“Competence goes beyond words, it’s the



leaders ability to say it, plan it, and do it in such a way that others know that you know how – and know that they want to follow you,” John Maxwell.

Let me share something that happened in my life with you. When I worked in South East Asia, my assignment was to look after six manufacturing factories with five different businesses. One of them was a joint venture (JV) with Bridgeport. This JV was in existence for five years, and had not produced its very first prototype in spite of having the men, machines and resources to do it. A Bridgeport man headed the JV with an ex-Cross & Trekker chairman as consultant for marketing the products. Producing machines is one of the easiest things to do, and producing good machines is even easier – so I believed then and continue to do so today. I could have sat down and tried to figure out why they had failed to produce machines or take the baton and create the pull from the market.

The JV had an amazing team of people hungry to produce machines and be counted. I quickly laid out my fast track strategy (ref: ‘Ethics in business is about who YOU are’ in the Nov 2004 issue of Indian Management) and went about implementing it. My team was exited. They had heard about my competence with strategy and marketing and believed we would succeed. Over the next three to four months I took actions that would create the pull from the market, and two months later we were booked for over a year at the rate of a hundred machines per month.

The factory was now busy and industrious as a beehive. Future presidents and ministers were brought to see the miraculous turnaround. The first phase was to succeed with the lean supply chain, beat Taiwanese prices and start acquiring market share. I had chartered the course; we set sail and were on our way. I encouraged everyone in the value stream to lend his or her talents; my attitude was “what’s the use of a sundial if you put it in a shade?”

We all admire people who display high competence, whether they are business leaders, sports persons, teachers, artists and scientists, presidents or prime ministers. The truth is, you don’t have to be Tiger Woods or Schumacher, Ratan Tata or Narayan Murthy, Michael Angelo

or Ajit Koujalgi, Abdul Kalam or Bill Clinton to excel in competence. Here are a few points that you can do to cultivate this quality:

- Show up every day - believe me, if an organisation exists in all forms for five years and has not produced even a single machine, the flywheel and its mechanism has rusted. It takes an enormous doing to get it going. It's a difficult game that the less competent won't touch. I focused on the results that motivated me to get going. "All things come to him who waits" – theology, but be careful that you are not saddled only with leftovers. People who are responsible show up whenever they are expected. Highly competent people just don't show up, they come ready to play everyday no matter how they feel, or what kind of circumstances they face or how difficult they expect the game to be
- Keep improving – highly competent people always search for ways to keep learning, growing and improving. They seem to apply kaizen to their personal lives. They always ask 'why'. When they know the 'why' they will find the 'how'. The person who knows the why will always lead
- Follow through – all competent people follow through. Performing at a high level of excellence is a choice and an act of the will. Like Villa Foster once said "quality is never an accident; it's always the result of high intention, sincere effort, intelligent direction and skillful execution; it represents wise choice of many alternatives"
- Accomplish more than expected – when I worked for the Kirloskar group and whether I was marketing or manufacturing, I always outperformed my commitment so consistently that people began to expect it to happen that way always. Setting stretch goals and exceeding them became a way of life for me, and for those who worked with me. I remember one day we were sitting down to make a long range plan. This was my seven-year plan. We had just reopened the factory from closure and sitting down to project a plan when I told my team that the dream is to take our business unit to Rs 100 crore turnover in seven years, their jaws dropped. Rightly so, as the industry was still in recession,



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no visual substantial increase in demand, and no competitors had vacated space to be occupied. But I had a clear vision of how we were going to create the market pull and do it. Three years later, when I left the organisation, we were on track to achieve that highly stretched goal. We not only over committed, but also more than accomplished our goals

- Inspire others – when my people saw me perform at such level, it motivated and inspired them to do the same. Effective leaders combine relational skills with high competence to take organisations to an all-new level of excellence and influence.

When you think of competent people you are considering only few types:

- those who make things happen
- those who watch things happen
- those who learn things happened
- those who wonder what happened

When it comes to your profession which one are you? Where in the above four categories do you consistently perform? Are you a thinker, doer or a clutch player? The better you are, greater the influence you will have on your people.

Here are a few tips to improve your competence:

- Never get mentally or emotionally detached from your work. If you have, now is the time to re-engage. Dedicate yourself to the job. Give it your undivided attention. If you are detached, find out why. See if you need new challenges. Are you in conflict with anyone? Are you in a dead end job? Try to identify the source of the problem, then create a plan to resolve it
- Examine your standards. Do you take short cuts? Are you aiming too low? If yes, set more demanding expectations on yourself
- Improvement is not possible if you are not intentional about it. Research to find out what you can do to improve your skills. Think positively. Dedicate time and resource to follow through and achieve your objectives.

"The society which scorns excellence in plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water," John Gardner. **MMT**