

Slow Courage and Doing the Right Thing



Why do some bureaucracies succeed while many others fail? There are endless explanations for this, and we will add one more: *slow courage*.

We're not talking about the kind of heroism displayed in 1987 by U.S. sailor Wayne Weaver who escaped a fierce on-board fire only to turn around and go back for his buddies — three times. On his *fourth* descent into the hellish flames he did not return.

That's raw, gritty courage, the kind that brings tears to our eyes.

But there is a different kind of courage, and it's what keeps the wheels of the world moving, even if its practitioners don't get written up in their hometown newspapers.

People with slow courage do the right thing in organizations that reward the wrong thing, rising above the systems they inhabit. Rather than single acts of brazen bravery, it's *heroic habits over time*.

You see, here is the problem with most bureaucracies, public or private: they *say* they are out to achieve some Right Thing ("help the kids," "defend the country," "delight customers," whatever) but what they *reward* is realism.

Realism is about leaders who defer maintenance on critical equipment to make their numbers look great (and let the next guy clean up). Realism is about transferring bad employees, instead of firing them, because firing them is so damned hard. Realism is about cutting everyone's budget the same percentage — the salami slice — because intelligent, surgical cuts require thought, work, and a thick hide.

But people with slow courage are patient idealists. They say, "The hell with 'reality'; I joined to do the right thing." They are the purchasing agent who buys what her company needs, not what her boss's buddies are selling; the safety inspector who digs deep enough to actually protect people, even if it annoys them;



or the Pentagon cost estimator who delivers real costs rather than the “right answers” her superiors are looking for.

These moral choices occur repeatedly over time and there are no medals for making the right choice, again and again. People with slow courage are not always happy people, but every morning they can look at themselves in the mirror and know that they will do the right thing. It is their integrity that drives the organization actually to deliver on its promised results, if only a little.

If the person with slow courage happens to be a leader, then here is what they do: they act as the *crap umbrella* for their people. They shield their people, saying, “We *claim* to be here to do the right thing. As long as you work for me, that’s what you *really* do. I’ll protect you from the idiots; now go and do the right thing.” And then they create a culture where the right thing is rewarded and the dumb thing is not, and they take the flak. They create an island of sanity in a sea of silliness.

Anyway, this brief post is a paean to the many, MANY anonymous people with slow courage. Whether you fulfill orders in a warehouse, deliver mail, or defend the country, we thank you. You don’t face one great moment of truth; you face many small moments of truth. Thank you. And you do the right thing. Thank you.

A REQUEST, DEAR READER: It’s likely we’ll say more on *slow courage*. For one thing, we’d like to herald examples of it. If you can tell us about any such examples you’ve observed (and we can share), we’d be obliged. Write us directly at billandwendi@elg.net.

