



Cowards

need not apply

In 2006, the most vital leadership trait may surprise you.

BY MICHAEL STAVER

What is the most important leadership trait for surviving in a tough-as-nails global economy and a sometimes-turbulent professional environment? You might guess intuition (for knowing where to take yourself or your law firm next) or persuasiveness (for getting others to go along with you) or resourcefulness (for getting more out of limited time and money).

But you would be wrong. The most critical leadership trait — the one without which none of the others matter — is something you're more likely to associate with four-star generals or firefighters than with legal administrators or law firm managers.

Courage.

Here's the thing about operating in a harsh business environment: There are serious consequences for making the wrong move. The safety net just isn't there. And because competition is so fierce and customers are so savvy, you may have to make some pretty risky choices to differentiate yourself and your law firm. Otherwise you're a nonentity — and your career or even your organization may fail.

SHORTCUT

Do you possess the No. 1 leadership trait for tough times? In the 21st century, courage is more critical than ever, and it's a vital attribute for successful legal administrators. Michael Staver describes the path to courageous leadership and identifies six key steps to achieving it.

THE PATH TO COURAGEOUS LEADERSHIP

Fortunately, there is some good news. Courage is not a quality that you're born with or without. It *can* be developed and nurtured. And if you commit to leading with courage, and consciously work toward that goal every day in every decision you make and every action you take, acting courageously will soon become an automatic response.

In my recent booklet, *Leadership Isn't for Cowards: How to Lead Courageously in a Turbulent Age*, I explore in depth what courage really is, why it matters so much and what you can do to bring it out in yourself and the others in your firm. There's no better way to demonstrate your strength and talent as a legal

you fail to do anything about it, that *is* your fault. Responsibility is not about blame; it is about response. Own what is yours, and ask how you can help other leaders in your firm address challenges that they own.

T: Take Action. You are never going to have all the data necessary to make the kinds of decisions you need to make as a leader. You have to act in spite of that fact. And even if you *do* have the data, you must be courageous enough not to feel that you must have every "t" crossed and every "i" dotted before you pull the trigger. Just make sure every action you take is in line with where your heart is, where your values are and where your culture is — or, more accurately,

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administrator than to take the necessary steps to show courageous leadership in your firm.

The path to courageous leadership has six components — and they can be summed up using the acronym "ATTACK."

A: Accept Your Current Circumstances. Many leaders either overestimate or underestimate the health of their current workplace cultures. As a leader, you need to look reality in the face and accept it. By the way, this does not mean you should "settle." Accepting that you have a less-than-ideal culture in your law firm is the first step toward changing that culture for the better. Ask yourself this question: What are you pretending not to know?

T: Take Responsibility. A courageous leader is willing to own the results of his or her choices. Don't blame industry issues or any other outside conditions for circumstances inside your culture. As a leader, they're *your* responsibility. That doesn't mean every problem your law firm has is your "fault," of course. But if

where you want your culture to be. Analyze the pitfalls and act quickly.

A: Acknowledge Progress. Many leaders are so goal-oriented that they can't really see the individual steps of the process. Determine the desirable results, determine the benchmarks and be certain that those benchmarks are acknowledged and celebrated when they are achieved. Celebrate them with the same energy and enthusiasm as you would if the goal were already accomplished.

C: Commit to Lifelong Learning. If you are leading, you're learning. If you're not learning, you're not leading, regardless of your title. So many people get into leadership roles and have the sense that they have "arrived." That's the death knell for leadership success. You must commit yourself to learning on three levels: Learn about yourself first, your people second and your industry third. The extent to which you do these things, in that order, is the extent to which you're going to exhibit courage.

K: Kindle Relationships. Courageous leaders are constantly developing people, engaging people and caring about people's progress. This does not mean you should gather your firm's lawyers around in a circle, have them put their arms around each other and lead them all in singing inspirational songs. Nothing could be further from the truth! Courageous leadership doesn't mean softening your approach with people. It actually means toughening your approach. It means confronting people, challenging people and not letting them get away with being less than you know they can be.

FACING THE CHALLENGES

Leaders are human beings who are constantly working to influence others. And no matter how smart you are, your leadership is being tested every day. Given the substantial change of pace and information in business today, you have to be able to focus on no more than four core centers of excellence — those things that are most important in driving your firm's success. That kind of focus takes courage.

One of my clients identified his four core areas as follows making this organization the best place to work, creating an exceptional customer experience, operational excellence and financial strength. For many legal administrators, these may also be core areas of focus — and they will take courage to achieve.

If you're wondering how courageous *you* are, I can help you find the answer. Visit my Web site, www.thestavergroup.com, and take the Leadership Courage Quotient Assessment. Along with the aforementioned downloadable booklet, it's meant to help you achieve a state of being in which acting with courage and authenticity is second nature — even in the most hand-wringing times. ✱

about the author

Michael Staver is the CEO of The Staver Group. With his colleagues, he provides engaging keynote presentations, consulting programs, workshops and executive coaching sessions that help people lead with courage and authenticity. To learn more about his company, take the Leadership Courage Quotient Assessment or to download a copy of his popular informative booklet, *Leadership Isn't for Cowards: How to Lead Courageously in a Turbulent Age*, visit www.thestavergroup.com.

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ALA Resources

These titles are available through ALA's Web site, www.alanet.org/education/mrc/index.asp.

- *Managing Leadership: Toward a New and Usable Understanding of What Leadership Really Is — and How to Manage It*, by Jim Stroup
- *Responsible Managers Get Results*, by Gerald W. Faust, et al.
- *The Instant Manager: More Than 100 Quick Tips & Techniques for Great Results*, by Cy Charney
- *The Leadership Training Activity Book*, by Lois B. Hart, Ed.D., and Charlotte S. Waisman, Ph.D

The following articles are available in the ALA Management Encyclopedia (ALAME), www.alanet.org/alame.

- "Make Your Firm a Great Place to Work"
- "The Administrator's Guide to Firm Dissolution"

The following articles are accessible via ALA's Legal Management Resource Center, <http://thesource.alanet.org>.

- "Your Leadership Report Card — How Do You Stack Up?" by Joan Wagner Zinober and Lawrence R. Richard — Type in keywords "leadership tough times" in the search engine.
- "Team Engines? Teamwork in Law Offices Drives Success," by Kevin Joyce — Type in keywords "leadership tough times" in the search engine
- "Leadership: The Key Skill for the New Millennium," by David Temporal — Type in keyword "leadership" in the search engine

On the Web

- BusinessTrainingMedia.com Inc., "Leadership: What Makes a Good Leader?" — www.business-marketing.com/store/article-leaders.html
- Workinfo.com, "How to Be a Strong Leader in the Face of Uncertainty" — www.workinfo.com/free/Downloads/272.htm

On the Shelf

The following titles are available for purchase or download through many online retailers, including www.amazon.com.

- *Leading in Tough Times: The Manager's Guide to Responsibility, Trust and Motivation*, by Richard S. Deems and Terri A. Deems
- *Tough Times Never Last, but Tough People Do!* by Robert Schuller
- *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership Tested by Time: Those Who Followed Them and Those Who Didn't*, by James L. Garlow, Gerard Reed and John C. Maxwell
- *The 7 Acts of Courage: Bold Leadership for a Wholehearted Life*, by Robert E. Staub II