

Morale Courage

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Defining Moral Courage outside of Daft

In 'Business Leaders Need Moral Courage,' Jon Mertz defines moral courage as acting on ethical principles and the 'greater good' despite personal risk or public pressure. He suggests that this is not a static trait, but a practice cultivated through honest conversation and the study of moral examples (Mertz). By evaluating leadership through the 'Big Three' (intentions, means, and results), Mertz argues that leaders can empower themselves to challenge bad practices and proactively steer organizations toward a more ethical future.

Daft on Moral Courage in Leadership

According to Richard Daft, modern leadership relies less on technical skills and more on the internal 'engine' of moral courage. This is not about grand heroism, but the quiet resilience required to prioritize ethical principles over social acceptance or professional safety. Because courage is a skill rather than an innate trait, Daft suggests leaders find strength by believing in a purpose bigger than themselves and harnessing frustration over injustice to fuel positive action. This empowers leaders to break the silence of false consensus, the 'Abilene Paradox', and voice the brutal truths necessary for sound decision-making.

What Courage Looks Like in Practice

In the daily grind of management, courage is most visible in a leader's willingness to practice humility and navigate uncertainty (Daft). This involves the strength to admit failure in perfectionist cultures and the resilience to maintain team stability during turbulent periods (Daft). Perhaps most importantly, courage serves as the essential remedy for the "Abilene Paradox,"

empowering leaders to break the silence of false consensus (Daft). By voicing brutal truths that others avoid to keep the peace, courageous leaders ensure that group harmony does not come at the expense of sound decision-making.

Moral Leadership and Finding Strength

Since courage is a skill rather than an innate trait, it must be cultivated. Leaders can find this strength by:

- Believing in a higher purpose: Focusing on a goal bigger than oneself makes personal risk feel less significant (Daft).
- Drawing strength from others: surrounding oneself with ethical peers provides a support network (Daft).
- Harnessing frustration: converting anger over inefficiency or injustice into fuel for positive action (Daft).
- Taking small steps: practicing courage in minor moments prepares a leader for the major crises (Daft).

Ethical Dilemma

I am facing a conflict with a top-performing senior engineer who has developed a pattern of failing to record his time off. I initially allowed flexibility given his high output and personal stressors, such as a home build, but this lack of documentation has become a liability. My primary fear is that an internal audit could flag this discrepancy as 'time theft,' jeopardizing the career of a valuable team member. I need to reset expectations immediately to protect his professional standing without destroying our positive working relationship.

AI Evaluation of the Dilemma

This situation represents a classic conflict between **utilitarianism** (maximizing the well-being of a high performer) and **deontological ethics** (adhering to the duty of company policy and fairness).

From an AI perspective, the primary risk is **systemic and legal**. While the short-term benefit is a happy employee, the long-term risk includes:

- **Compliance Violations:** Potential "time theft" accusations during an HR or internal audit.
- **Equity Issues:** Damage to team morale if other employees perceive a double standard.
- **Personal Liability:** Your own credibility as a leader could be questioned for allowing a known policy breach to persist.

Recommended Actions

To resolve this while maintaining the relationship and protecting the engineer's career, I recommend the following steps:

- **Conduct a "Protective" Reset Conversation:**
 - **The Approach:** Frame the meeting not as a disciplinary action, but as a proactive move to protect him.
 - **The Script:** Use "Corrective Loyalty". Explain that while you value his output, the current lack of documentation makes him vulnerable to termination if flagged by HR.

- **Formalize Flexibility:** Transition from "informal unrecorded time" to an official flexible schedule or "comp time" arrangement if company policy allows.
 - Ensure that all future time off is documented according to standard procedures to remove the "time theft" risk.
- **Retroactive Correction:** Work with the engineer to estimate the unrecorded time and enter it into the system now.
 - Correcting it voluntarily is far more defensible in an audit than waiting for HR to discover the discrepancy.
- **Practice "Workplace Courage":**
 - Apply the principle of **speaking up**. By voicing this "brutal truth" now, you avoid the **Abilene Paradox**—where staying silent to avoid conflict leads to a worse outcome for everyone.

Human Analysis

Humanity of response

The AI's advice to conduct a "Protective Reset" feels genuinely insightful and empathetic. It captures the nuance of human relationships by recognizing that I don't want to punish the employee, but rather to save them from administrative rigidity. The suggestion to "frame the meeting... as a proactive move to protect him" demonstrates an understanding of office politics that goes beyond simple rule-following. Additionally, the advice to fix the time retroactively feels like the kind of practical, "off-the-record" advice a seasoned mentor would give to clean up a mess before it becomes a legal issue.

The AI's advice to conduct a 'Protective Reset' feels genuinely insightful, capturing the nuance that I am trying to save the employee from administrative rigidity rather than punish him. However, the illusion of human empathy breaks when the AI uses the phrase 'From an AI perspective,' which immediately distances the advice from human intuition. Furthermore, terms like 'Corrective Loyalty' feel like artificial jargon; a human mentor would simply call it 'tough love' or 'looking out for him'. While the strategic advice is sound, the hyper-logical structure lacks the conversational flow of a real colleague.

Plan of attack

Based on the risks identified, I must prioritize protecting both the employee and the organization. I will schedule a private, low-pressure meeting tomorrow, strictly framing the conversation around 'audit-proofing' his career rather than disciplining his behavior. I intend to explain that his lack of documentation creates a vulnerability that HR could exploit as 'time theft,' regardless of my approval of his work. We will spend the meeting retroactively logging his time to close the compliance gap and explicitly defining a process for flexible hours to prevent future recurrence.

Reference

Business leaders need moral courage. (n.d.). Jon Mertz.

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