

Leadership Takes Guts

By **Anthony Schmid**, *CPS Engineer*, Corporate Project Services, Wenger Manufacturing, Inc.

I remember the day I figured out the real strength it takes to be a leader. It was my first supervisory role with a previous company—a job I enthusiastically took on, excited for the boost in salary and responsibility. I was proud of the promotion and ready to take the next step in my career journey.

But the reality check came when my boss told me the company was cutting positions across the board and our department had to let a member of our team go. Not only did I have to be part of choosing who that would be, I had to press on knowing my soon-to-be ex-coworker and his family would be put in a difficult situation.

This was a business decision completely out of my control, but the role I had to play in it was agonizing.

In that situation, I had to put my own apprehensions aside, draw upon compassion and choose my words and actions carefully ... because the way I handled it would affect more lives than my own.

And that was the point in my career when I learned leadership takes guts.

It's one of the most distinguishing qualities strong leaders possess—guts to face the pain of leadership head on and not avoid it.

Guts to stand up to critics and stick to your principles.
Guts to make tough decisions with compassion and confidence and defend them to those who might not agree with you.

Here's how to lead with guts:



Be direct

Bad news is hard to hear and leaders often find themselves in the undesirable position of having to deliver it. Communicate directly—especially about the hard stuff—and address the nuances you naturally want to avoid. When you sugarcoat details, it may feel more compassionate, but it's just sending mixed messages. Maybe it makes you feel better in the moment, but you're likely making the long-term impact on them even more devastating. Being straightforward and treating people with respect is the better way to "lessen the blow."

Be uncomfortable

"No pain, no gain" is a well-known mantra of perseverance, inspiring us to push

through challenges even when it's hard. When we work through the pain, we become something stronger and better.

Discomfort is essential for growth. And, pain is valuable—it's what creates a sense of urgency that encourages change. The reason people tend to be change averse is because they're comfortable with the way things are, and it can be scary to step into the unknown. If you are going to successfully lead your team through changes, whether big or small, you must be comfortable being uncomfortable. At times your world will be awkward or downright unpleasant. Ask hard questions, brace for the responses, then react accordingly. These conversations are where truths are revealed—and they might be hard to hear at first, but they ultimately will lead to improvement.

Be humble

Check your ego at the door. In the context of leadership, being humble means listening to others and consciously deciding how to process the information they give you. Don't assume your viewpoint is the only right answer. When our ego is in control, we respond to opposing viewpoints defensively or refuse to hear them altogether.

Find the nugget of truth and plan your next steps around it. What others express to you is very much real and true to them, so how can you factor that into your assessment of the situation and subsequent actions? By setting our own beliefs aside, perhaps we can find common ground.

Be unoffendable

Effective leaders must shroud themselves with Teflon and accept the fact that unrelenting scrutiny comes with the territory. Leaders are always under a microscope. People serving in leadership capacities of any kind will most certainly be the recipient of wrath on some level, at some point, and therefore must be thick-skinned. You have to anticipate (and prepare for) resistance, and learn to let it slide off.

You are going to make decisions and not once will those decisions please everyone—each one will be wrong in someone's eyes. Every move you make will be criticized, debated and scrutinized. There will be pain, but it's temporary, so you can't let others' reactions stick with you.

Be constant

Once you do the important work of casting a vision for your team, you have to keep the path illuminated. Despite the twists and turns, pressures and distractions, leaders have to stand firm so the team knows where they're going and what they're fighting for. You are a beacon for your team, shining a continuous light on your destination.

I think of it like a dogsled team—the leader is quiet, observant, and always on full alert. It keeps a watchful eye on the team while also looking out for threats and unexpected hazards. If a couple sled dogs lose their traction or wander off in the wrong direction, that throws the whole team off. Keeping the vision in view will ensure

everyone is mushing toward the right end goal.

Be decisive

Have courage to make decisions and own them. When times are uncertain and things feel out of control, decisiveness can push teams out of a rut and into a forward trajectory. Even if the path forward is a risk, decisions provoke confidence because there is clarity and direction. Stop churning over what to do next—pick a path and see it through. Don't succumb to fear and be afraid to make bold decisions—use the data you have to make a decision, then go for it.

These “gutsy” qualities are not easy to achieve, but people who let fear drive their actions or allow their ego to prevent them from making the right choices are stepping into common pitfalls that separate the good leaders from mediocre and poor ones. Sometimes you have to make waves to make progress. Leadership is humbling and at times uncomfortable, and it takes a lot of grit and tenacity to stand your ground and face the harsh realities head on.

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