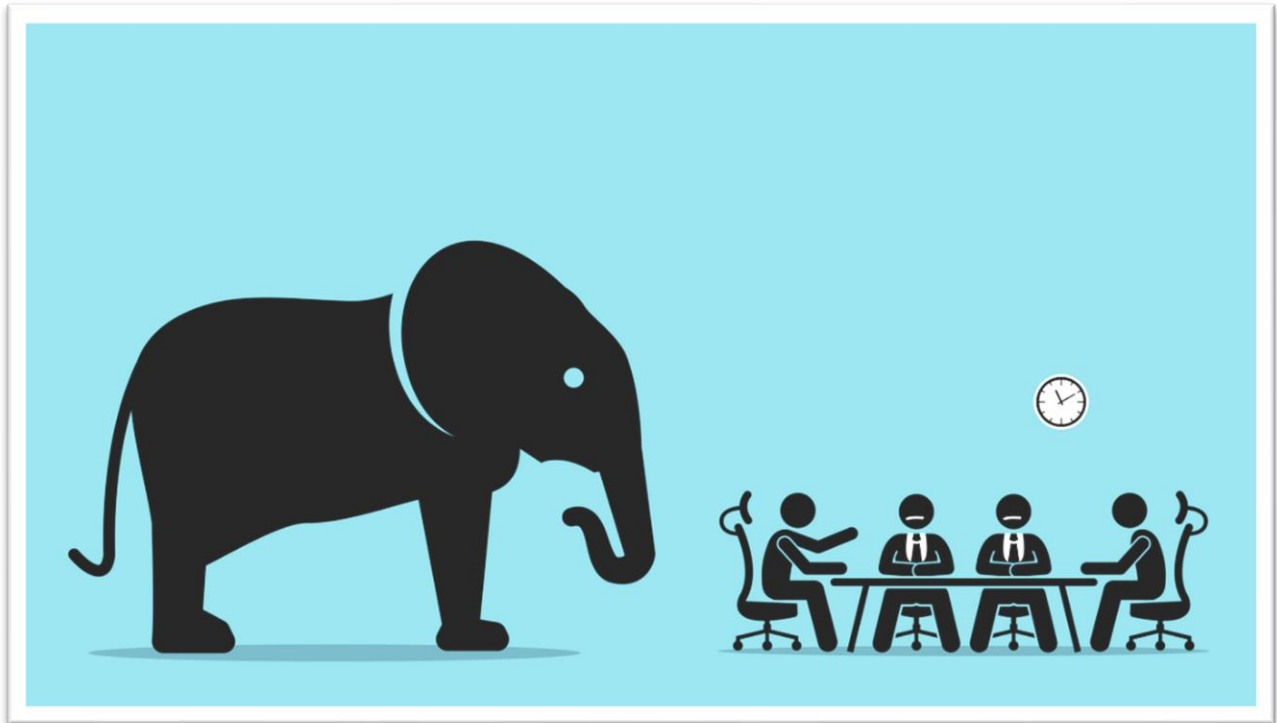


Guide to Governance Courage



According to Russell Reynolds research, the courage to do the right thing for the right reason is one of the most important director behaviors that drive board effectiveness.

"No one wants to be the director who disrupts the agreeable flow of the proceedings. But it is exactly this – sharing and listening to diverse views – that produces truly great outcomes at the governance level. The remedy – don't let fear outweigh courage. You are at the table for a reason and remaining silent isn't it. Whatever you have to contribute is likely exactly what the group needs to hear."

– Savvy Director reader

Courage in the boardroom

Dictionary definitions of the word 'courage' have some subtle variations. Dictionary.com defines it as *"the quality of mind or spirit that enables a person to face difficulty, danger, pain, etc., without fear."*

But the idea that courage implies a lack of fear is not realistic. If you lack fear, then you don't need courage at all. Instead, courage implies the presence of fear and the decision to withstand it and act anyway, or, as our reader put it, not allowing your fear to outweigh courage.

I like the Collins English Dictionary definition: *"Courage is the quality shown by someone who decides to do something difficult or dangerous, even though they may be afraid."*

It's pretty much universally acknowledged that directors do need courage to be effective. But what is there to be afraid of in the boardroom? After all, there are no physical dangers, no life-and-death situations. But the fear of embarrassing ourselves, of being wrong, or creating conflict and harming relationships – that kind of fear requires governance courage to overcome.

There's an *Aha!* moment when you realize that that our physiological response to boardroom tension and conflict is the same as our fight-or-flight response to physical danger.

The presence of tension and conflict around the board table; the predicament of having to choose between keeping the peace or naming the elephant in the room; the sinking feeling when your gut tells you something needs to be said but your cowardly heart tells you to keep quiet – those are situations that most of us have encountered at one time or another.

In his article '[Courage is the Key to Great Leadership](#),' Bill Treasurer list three types of courage:

1. **The courage of initiative and action** — making first attempts, pursuing pioneering efforts and stepping up to the plate.
2. **The courage of confidence in others** — letting go of the need to control situations or outcomes, having faith in people and being open to direction and change.
3. **The courage of voice** — raising difficult issues, providing tough feedback and sharing unpopular opinions.

The board as a whole may need to exercise the first two kinds of courage when difficult decisions are required. But, when it comes to the individual director, it's the third type of courage – the courage of voice – that's essential.

That's what we mean when we refer to *governance courage*. That kind of courage is what gives the Savvy Director the confidence to ask the right questions at the right time.

What is your gut telling you?

Let's say you are in a position where your gut tells you something is not right. You think it's your duty to speak up, but you are feeling fearful. You want to dominate your fear, but how?

First, it's a good idea to take some quiet time for self-reflection before the meeting. You want to try to pin down what it is that's bothering you. Your gut may be reliable, but it's usually not very precise. Before you charge ahead like a bull in a china shop, it helps to identify more clearly what it is that's *just not right*.

If there's something about the board dynamics that is amiss, try asking yourself some of these questions from '[A Call for Courage in the Boardroom](#)', by Jane Mack.

- Are board and staff members respecting boundaries?
- Which relationship might be out of balance?
- Do we engage in productive discussion and freely express our individual opinions?
- De we each do our part in keeping one another and the board focused?
- Are we functioning in ways that best serve the organization?

Ultimately, if something is not as it should be, you have to ask yourself, "Will I ignore the elephant in the room, or will I act with governance courage to bring it out into the open?"

If you've made up your mind to address the elephant in the room but you are still dealing with your fear, ask yourself, "What's getting in my way?" "What am I most afraid of?"

Maybe you're concerned about damaging relationships, but have you considered that there may be more damage done by shying away? As we all know, when important issues go unresolved for too long, they fester until we find ourselves in crisis mode. More importantly, acknowledge that it's your duty as a board director to bring the issue forward in the interests of the organization and its stakeholders.

Ask yourself, "What is the potential downside of delivering a message I think is needed and will help our organization?" "What if I were the person affected, would I appreciate someone bringing the issue to my attention?" "How would I feel if someone knew something and did not tell me?"

It helps to put the situation into perspective. What is the worst thing that has ever happened to you? How would you rate that event on a scale of one to ten? Now, what is the worst thing that can happen to you if you speak up about this particular board situation? Using the same scale, how would you rate that outcome on a scale of one to ten? Chances are, its rating is pretty low.

If you were able to withstand all those other bad things in your life, surely you can withstand this one too.



You're braver than you think

We all have the capacity to be courageous when we need to be. If fear is an invitation to courage, all you have to do is open the door and let it in. You may find your courage is right there, waiting in the wings.

The cowardly lion from *The Wizard of Oz* thought of himself as cowardly because he felt fear. But he managed to overcome his fear, and his actions demonstrated his courage. The wizard presented the lion with a medal of courage, but it meant nothing, because the lion had already proven himself to be brave.

"There is no living thing that is not afraid when it faces danger. The true courage is in facing danger when you are afraid, and that kind of courage you have in plenty."

— L. Frank Baum, *The Wizard of Oz*

Your takeaways:

- Speaking up on difficult issues in the boardroom requires governance courage.
- The courage to ask the right question at the right time is one of the most valued traits of an effective board director.
- Everyone can be courageous. It's a teachable and learnable skill.
- When speaking up on difficult issues, be calm, concise and stay on message.

Courage and the Savvy Director

Once you've faced your fears, gathered your courage, and resolved to raise the issue in the boardroom, what's the best way to do that and still try to preserve relationships? A savvy director's thoughts naturally turn to the power of questions. Ask yourself, "How could I ask the gutsy question in a non-offending, non-threatening manner?"

You don't want to frame it in such an oblique way that you fail to communicate your concern. That just leads to misunderstanding, conflict, or sounding passive aggressive. You want to communicate that you own the concern.

The article [Courage in the Boardroom](#) by Natalie Richardson has some great advice.

- **Be clear about why you are speaking out.** Courage comes from knowing that you are doing your job as a director, fulfilling your fiduciary duty, and seeking a better outcome for your organization and its stakeholders. Keep in mind that you are coming from a place of strength, not personal gain or petty vengeance.
- **Be concise.** A long preamble may frustrate others and get you cut off before your message is heard.
- **Say your point directly and constructively.** Focus on getting your key point across with no embellishment.
- **Stick to the facts.** State the issue and its consequences. Start with specifics before moving to more general points.
- **Maintain your composure.** If others become aggressive, don't respond in kind, just stick to your point.
- **Stay on message.** If your initial point is rejected or glossed over, return to your message.

A couple more pieces of advice. First, some issues are best dealt with one-on-one rather than at the board table. It still takes courage to have this conversation.

If privacy is called for, approach the person, let them know what you would like to talk about, and ask permission to have the conversation. Choose the time and place carefully for maximum privacy and comfort – in fact, it would be better if the other person chooses.

Second, whether you will be raising your concern at the meeting or in private, giving the board chair a heads-up is always a good idea. Not only is it the courteous thing to do, but your issue may end up getting resolved without a lot of fanfare and drama.

"Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts."
– Winston Churchill

Resources:

- Future Directors. [8 Tips to Navigating Difficult Conversations](#). Paul Smith.
- Octane Magazine. [Courage is the Key to Great Leadership](#). Bill Treasurer.
- Friends Journal. [A Call for Courage in the Boardroom](#). Jane Mack
- Performance Frontiers. [Courage in the Boardroom](#). Natalie Richardson.
- Board Agenda. [Courage Ranked Top Boardroom Trait](#). Gavin Hinks.

This guide is adapted from The Savvy Director blog '[You're Braver Than You Think](#)' posted September 20, 2020.
