

# Courage

**The Backbone of Leadership**

 **JOSSEY-BASS**  
A Wiley Imprint  
[www.josseybass.com](http://www.josseybass.com)



## Praise for *Courage*

“*Courage* offers insightful advice for executives who wish to do *good*, while doing *well*, showing them how ethics and character can lead to increased profits and loyal customers. But the most important audience for this book may be the rising generation of business leaders, particularly MBA students. *Courage* offers them an important perspective that’s often absent from their course work.”

—Donald L. McCabe, professor of management and global business, Rutgers Business School, and founding president of the Center for Academic Integrity, Duke University

“I look at this wonderful book through my combat experiences in Vietnam and thirty years in the FBI. Gus Lee has hit the nail on the head. He’s captured the essence of leadership. Want to be a true leader? It’s in *Courage*.”

—Charles Hickey, FBI Special Agent (retired)

“Gus Lee fans who enjoy curling up with the trademark eloquence of his storytelling will not be disappointed by *Courage*. His demand for leading with courage comes not from a suspender-snapping CEO; it comes from a humble immigrant and former soldier whose astonishing achievements were built on guts and integrity. Lee argues for courage with the strong voice of humility. It is his voice—a voice of uncommon power that will embolden every reader.”

—Bill Robinson, president, Whitworth College

“As the Old Sarge once said, ‘All I want from my officers is bravery. Brave is enough.’ Gus Lee is a full-tilt practitioner of the principles in this book. His life has been filled with moments of grave challenge, and those who know and have served with him, both in and out of the Army, know he writes of courage from first-hand experience. That is why he can tell just the right story that links Confucius and Aristotle to the gut-wrenchers of daily modern life, and make it ring strong and true.”

—James P. Sullivan Jr., president of Sullivan Technology, Inc.;  
teacher of creativity and problem solving, Purdue University;  
former infantry officer and Army aviator

“Gus Lee and I worked together in a start-up technology company for two years. Gus was one of the cofounders. Weak leadership threatened the company’s viability and necessitated bold action to preclude failure. Gus had the courage to lead the way for major change and thereby save the enterprise. Gus lives what he teaches. Integrity, courage, and character are action words to him, not just theoretical concepts. *Courage* is a leadership book that demands to be added to your professional library—but only if you are determined to be successful.”

—James R. Ellis, Lieutenant General, U.S. Army (retired);  
cofounder of three technology companies; CEO of a children’s  
charity in Florida

“Gus Lee has identified *the critical element* that determines outcomes for executives and for organizations. I’ve studied, written about, and coached courageous leaders for nearly two decades; this book captures the learnable behaviors they have in common. I look forward to sharing Lee’s clear insights with my clients in business, in government, in academia, and the nonprofit world—with anyone who would be a better leader.”

—Ed Ruggero, leadership and ethics guide, and coauthor  
of the U.S. Army Field Manual *Army Leadership* and  
*The Leader’s Compass*

“Many great books have been written on leadership, but Gus Lee strikes at the heart of the matter in *Courage*. He reminds us what we know to be true, but don’t want to face and see rejected in everyday life. Most important, he provides us the opportunity to reflect, while we read the stories he tells, on how we might change and become the leaders we know we can be.”

—Pat Scully, president and CEO, Kids at Hope,  
and former EDS Iran Rescue Mission member

“Gus Lee and Diane Elliott-Lee have raised the leadership issues relating to integrity, courage, and character to an entirely new level. This book is a must-read for anyone who aspires to be a leader of character.”

—Len Marella, president, Center for Leadership and Ethics

“I was up before dawn reading this book. I find it an excellent read. It made me reflect on issues we deal with over the years which require us to be courageous; I think we have all stood at the edge looking at the river of fear. Gus Lee’s use of stories is powerful.”

—General Maureen LaBoeuf (retired),  
first female head of department at West Point

“In *Courage*, Gus Lee brings a new perspective to the essence of great leadership. ‘Courageous leadership’ is an especially practical and powerful tool for the many expressions of leadership. Emerging leaders in politics, business, community, education and faith need to absorb the message Lee conveys.”

—Bambang Budijanto, area director for Asia,  
Compassion International

Gus Lee  
with  
Diane Elliott-Lee

# Courage

**The Backbone of Leadership**

 **JOSSEY-BASS**  
A Wiley Imprint  
[www.josseybass.com](http://www.josseybass.com)

Copyright © 2006 by Gus Lee.

Published by Jossey-Bass

A Wiley Imprint

989 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94103-1741 [www.josseybass.com](http://www.josseybass.com)

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, 978-750-8400, fax 978-646-8600, or on the Web at [www.copyright.com](http://www.copyright.com). Requests to the publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, 201-748-6011, fax 201-748-6008, or online at [www.wiley.com/go/permissions](http://www.wiley.com/go/permissions).

**Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty:** While the publisher and author have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives or written sales materials. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a professional where appropriate. Neither the publisher nor author shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

Readers should be aware that Internet Web sites offered as citations and/or sources for further information may have changed or disappeared between the time this was written and when it is read.

Jossey-Bass books and products are available through most bookstores. To contact Jossey-Bass directly call our Customer Care Department within the U.S. at 800-956-7739, outside the U.S. at 317-572-3986, or fax 317-572-4002.

Jossey-Bass also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Lee, Gus.

Courage: the backbone of leadership/Gus Lee with Diane Elliott-Lee.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7879-8137-2 (cloth)

ISBN-10: 0-7879-8137-0 (cloth)

1. Leadership. 2. Courage. 3. Management. I. Elliott-Lee, Diane. II. Title.

HD57.7.L4387 2006

658.4'092—dc22

2006000529

Printed in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

*HB Printing* 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



*To the marriage of  
Ancient Wisdom  
and  
Modern Organizational Practices*



# Contents

Introduction	1
<b>Part One: Backbone at the Point of Decision</b>	<b>9</b>
1. Chris's Story	11
2. Seeking Courageous Core Values	19
3. Going Deeper (and Higher) into Values and Ethics	31
4. Chris Boldly Moves Forward	43
5. Coda: Applying Courageous Values at Whirlpool	57
<b>Part Two: Courage in Action</b>	<b>63</b>
6. Courageous Communication	65
7. The Courageous Communication Model	75
8. Courageous Feedback	89
9. Courage by Example	105
10. Courageous Leadership	113
11. Three Acts of Courageous Leadership	125
12. Courageous Problem Solving: The Black Box	145
13. Using Courageous Communication from the Bottom Up	161

<b>Part Three: Growing Your Courage</b>	<b>173</b>
14. Everyday Habits That Build Courage	175
15. Your Character Quotient	185
16. The Courage to Change	199
Notes	205
Acknowledgments	211
The Authors	213
Index	215

Courage



# INTRODUCTION

Courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities . . . because it is the quality which guarantees all others.

—*Winston Churchill*

I've worked with hundreds of bright and well-educated leaders in fifty industries and on every continent. Most are good people who are honorable in their private lives. But when they face the great river that cuts across all organizations, they remain on the safe near bank. On this bank, most business is done with reason and general fairness.

On the far bank live our crises, bad hires, weak ethics, questionable acts, misreporting, anger, jealousy, regrets and character-challenged managers. This is the stuff that demands dynamic and courageous leadership. Facing us is the River of Fear, made deep and wide by our hesitations, timidity, doubts, and paralysis.

How many fine and experienced execs boldly cross the river to challenge wrong behaviors and take risks for principles and for others? Not many. This is a crossable boundary, but most of us won't try it.

What do we know about the few who courageously do? They demand excellent conduct of others because they first require it of themselves. Their courage inspires prodigious results. This allows these classic leaders to find work-and-life balance, to love their families and to enjoy private lives. They tend to be happier and more content.<sup>1</sup>

## **We Are Built to Cross Rivers**

That's why Churchill, as Great Britain faced a grand moral and national crisis, deemed courage "the first of all human qualities." Aristotle said that courageous virtue is the essence of not just happiness but life itself.

Cowardice is the great opposite. Instead of building, it ruins. Fear begins in our guts and spreads into families and organizations. Living in fear is not living; it is tantamount to being a prisoner of our own weaknesses, constantly awaiting the next injustice.

Thus courage—or its absence—determines all outcomes. Modestly put, courage decides quality of life and personal as well as institutional success.

Courage is so crucial that it sits in the heart of us. That's why we can't help but admire and follow courage until we demonstrate it.

Courage—not brashness, greed, or recklessness—was, early in our evolution, the *one quality* needed for human survival. It brilliantly linked learning, communication, and teamwork to social advantage. Using courage, we slow, daylight-limited bipeds without fangs, claws, wings, armor, or four legs could subordinate our egos for the good of the clan. We could defeat the fast, lethal, night-visioned predator quadrupeds that still inhabit our collective memory—that make little kids peer under their beds at night and cause them to awaken with sudden, branch-grabbing spasms.

Long before the invention of the corporation, we were hardwired to show courage regardless of risk to ourselves. Here's what is interesting: even today, without courage, nothing—from our relationships to our firms—is safe.

Heroism's era has not passed. It is here, before us, for in truth, no generation, regardless of war, peace, depression, or prosperity, is spared the need to demonstrate courage.

No individual, organization, or society comes to character without struggle. We should welcome moral struggles but have told our children that if they win in academics, they'll succeed in life. This runs counter to everything that wisdom teaches, and the results of this falsehood are becoming obvious.



There is much we do not control. Yet we have a tailor-made opportunity to build our individual and collective courage.

## **Courage and You**

I want to equip you to cross the river, for three things are certain. First, you and your organizations will face Points of Decision. Second, the power of courageous behaviors are well known. Third, you will need courage to cross.

I've seen the water many times and been required to face my many swarming fears. After early and later failures—many of them the stuff of novels—I learned to accept the challenge.

If an asthmatic, legally blind, babble-mouthed kid from a Chinese immigrant family who struggled on the streets of an inner-city black ghetto and in the engineering halls of West Point could do it, you certainly can, with far more grace and far less difficulty.

When we master the skills that are the competence of courage, we confidently enact bold leadership practices, translating the first human quality (courage) into effective and inspiring actions of true excellence.

I have watched executives and managers replace behaviors of timidity, doubt, and hesitation with the high conduct of courage. With each iteration, they grew their courage competence. With each act, they inspired those around them to their best selves. Over time, they built enduring teams and deep leadership benches. They reinstalled a sense of worth and camaraderie into their work environments.

They began, like all of us, as good people. They didn't cheat. But they wouldn't repair conflicts. They didn't lie, but they tolerated gossip and avoided dialogue with bullies who hurt coworkers and impaired the efforts of employees. Under pressure, these good people refused to cross the river of their own fears to do the right thing for others. They silently chose inaction and tolerated the unheroic long-term destructive consequences of fear.

What my clients discovered was that courage was not something with which we are born. That tall, physically powerful, and

imposing males have no special aptitude for courage, for each of us has fair and equal access to the first human quality.

Clients discovered that courage—facing fear, acting for what is right, correcting wrongs in oneself, and addressing problems—could be developed and strengthened through practice. Courage is a learned quality, an acquirable set of skills, a practiced competence. It's like boxing, except it's easier, it smells better, and it causes fewer nosebleeds.

We have seen this truth since earliest human times. Moses, Joshua, Confucius, Aristotle, Abraham Lincoln, Eleanor Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Einstein, and Harper Lee teach us through their lives and writing about both the accessibility and the centrality of courage in human affairs.

## **Points of Decision**

They, like us, faced Points of Decision. Points of Decision are key institutional intersections where crises test our high core values.

Whirlpool entered a Point of Decision (POD) when it failed to meet revenue goals. MCI faced a POD when it considered merging its fiber-optic transmission network with WorldCom's backbone services. Kimberly-Clark faced a POD when it considered selling its mills. You'll read about these examples, and many more, at various places in this book.

Character-based institutions prepare for PODs by bulking up on courage. In PODs, key executives are predictably pressured and are expected to respond with character. Research proves that only in this singular way do we realize sustainable and outstanding results.

But even though we clearly need principled people in times of crisis, few organizations courageously prepare for their inevitable PODs.

What stops us? We resist repairing bad habits. We also resist change.

Yet principled conduct under pressure is a simple concept. It has two working parts: (1) establishment of high core values and (2) courageous behaviors in alignment with those core values.

When firms fail, it doesn't take Sherlock Holmes and a galloping herd of bloodhounds to find the trail. Through the smoke and flames, we can still see the Point of Decision, where crisis tested values and firms were found lacking in the practice of principled conduct.

We need courage and character at our PODs.

## **The Lost Path**

A survey of today's busy business shelves reveals no book that explains how to have courage—or how to develop it personally or grow it organizationally. Human courage, the primary competence that saw us through Paleolithic species-threatening hazards and led the United States against the greatest empires in history, is no longer in our national consciousness.

We didn't mean to stop developing character. No one would consciously choose to make expensive daily personal sacrifices of hard-earned well-being on the altar of fear. But while chasing increasingly elusive success, we lost our way.

In our families, universities, schools, communities, and institutions, we accidentally canceled our central national life quality program—character development. In that dimmed light, we have treated the observations of Moses, Aristotle, and Confucius as academic trivia questions instead of as demonstrated truths defining the quality of life. We actually began to believe that we no longer needed wisdom.

Courage is universal. It is needed by each of us in every conceivable circumstance. Courage, to our benefit, is a constant. I learned this as a boy fighting to be accepted as an American on the streets of San Francisco, as a deputy district attorney convicting criminals, as a senior executive with offices in three cities, as a vice-president advocating high core values, as an executive coach, as a corporate and government consultant in many fields, and as a husband and father.

I want you to have the essential gift of courage. We should all experience the benefits of courageous habits not only for ourselves but also for the people and organizations with whom we share our lives.

## Coaching for Courage

I once asked Coach Tony for one punch that I could use to win every fight. “Best punch is yur left hook,” he said. I nodded eagerly. “Hook into the bag about twenty thousand times. Then it’ll be yur best punch.”

He had taught me this when I understood nothing. After I had followed his advice to the point of exhaustion, he showed me more. *Plant left foot forward, chin in, right glove up. Cock left arm, aim for the head, breathe. Swing with a grunt through the bag from the hip, pivoting on the left, a door on a jewel.*

*Make it whistle. Recover! Again! Again! Again! Snap lead left jab! Three hooks—Joe Louis could put five together— now right hook, snap, jab, jab! Left hook—again! Again! Right lead, snap jab, left hook, right hook, three left hooks! Didja feel that? All right! Do it again.*

Because I was coached, I can coach you. You won’t have to bob and weave, get arm-weary, get a busted nose, or need a transfusion. But through the pages of this book, we will develop the reproducible behaviors of courage.

## True Stories

*Courage: The Backbone of Leadership* uses true stories from Whirlpool, Kaiser Permanente, IntegWare, and other actual organizations. This lets us observe executives as they face and overcome the worries and fears that confront us all. For you will also be required to face your own private and institutional Points of Decision. Everyone does.

We’ll watch these executives use the behaviors of courage to produce extraordinary and reproducible results. We’ll also watch their very smart, gifted, experienced, and worry-burdened counterparts fail.

Their collective examples offer us practical lessons, practice opportunities, and operational to-do’s that we can apply to our decisions on leadership’s playing fields.

We can use the transformational power of courage to lead effective change.

After reading this book, you will own the tools to transform yourself, your organization, and your family.

## **Organization of the Book**

This book is a primer on courage. It has three parts.

In Part One, we watch Chris Kay of IntegWare approach several Points of Decision. We learn what happens when courage is not considered and what happens when it is.

Through Chris's story, we will experience the call to courage, the obstacles in our path, and the emancipation from fear and failure when values-based, principled, courageous behaviors are employed.

We will see ourselves in Chris's story.

Part Two, "Courage in Action," is the book's core.

Courage is manifested in courageous communication, courageous leadership, courageous problem-solving, and in resolving high-end conflicts.

These tools and skills constitute the competence of courage and are presented in a progression of learning based on programs that have been presented to Levi Strauss, Kaiser Permanente, Whirlpool, ISEC, IntegWare, West Point, the FBI, the U.S. Department of Justice, the Young Presidents Organization, Centura Hospitals, the Smithsonian Institution, the La Jolla Conference, various colleges and universities, the National Conference of Supreme Court Justices, and since 1994, West Point's National Conference on Ethics in America.

We first learn the three base skills: courageous communication, courageous leadership, and courageous problem solving. We're then ready to enter corporate tiger country to learn to face and fix high-end conflicts and mend gut-wrenching personal, departmental, and institutional feuds.

Part Three, "Growing Your Courage," concludes with a set of take-away practices. These equip you to fight entropy—the natural erosion and retrogression of values, integrity, and skills.

Throughout the book, we learn to use specific tools and measurements to apply the behaviors of courage in everyday situations.

Life is demanding. Luckily, there is one quality that drives transformational leadership and personal and institutional success.

That one quality is courage, Churchill's prime human quality.

One day, I passed the final test to become a YMCA junior leader. Coach Tony gave me a key to the Central Y; I could open up the gym for other kids, turn on the lights, line up the gear against the walls, and start training classes with warm-ups and answering questions.

With this book, you can open up doors for your organization, for your family, and for your life.

You can turn on the lights for yourself and others.

You can make uncommon courage common.

# Part One

## **BACKBONE AT THE POINT OF DECISION**

Here's a truth: principled leaders solve moral problems. They have the courage to act rightly. They consistently demonstrate principled conduct under pressure.

This gives them the strong spine to be effective and envied leaders. Backbone is what everyone admires, everyone needs, everyone wants, and everyone follows.

Courage is the single most decisive trait in a leader. This is because personal and organizational crises are as routine and predictable as midtown cabs and sirens, and a manager without courage is as useful as a rowboat in a bullfight.

Leaders with courage lend backbone to their organizations. Then, when institutions face their Points of Decision—when serious crises test actual core values and therefore an institution's future—both leaders and institutions can act rightly and powerfully.

In Part One, we'll meet actual executives in real firms who strive to apply courage and high core values to the types of problems and challenges we all face. We'll watch as they develop courage and backbone in themselves, their companies, and their families.

