# SIGMA
# Leader Character Series

## Great Leaders Act with Courage

**SIGMA**
ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS INC.

# GREAT LEADERS ACT WITH COURAGE

> ❝ **Courage** is not simply one of the virtues,
> but the form of every virtue at the testing point.
>
> — C. S. Lewis

When we think of courage, we often imagine people in military zones, healthcare, or disaster relief — but courage is also important in traditional business settings. In an office environment, courage might look like speaking up to defend a co-worker, taking responsibility for failure, or suggesting and spearheading a new strategic initiative.

What sets courageous leaders apart is that they do the right thing even when it is unpopular, actively discouraged, or has a negative consequence for them. Courageous leaders show an unrelenting determination and confidence when confronting difficult situations. They also rebound quickly from setbacks. Being a courageous leader can not only improve your own job performance[1], it can also create positive outcomes for your direct reports. For instance, employees who observe more courageous acts are more likely to see their own organization as better than competitors in overall performance, customer satisfaction, and likelihood of having long-term success.[2] Courage is also contagious; direct reports who watch their leaders act courageously are more likely to be brave themselves.[1] These direct reports who witness courageous acts are also more likely to behave ethically and be helpful to their coworkers.[3]

In assessing your ability to be courageous, ask yourself the following questions:

- How confident do I feel when considering whether or not to take risks?
- Would I describe myself and would others describe me as brave?
- Am I persistent when faced with challenges or opposition?
- How determined am I to accomplish my goals?

## Ways to Improve Your Courage

**Get comfortable with fear:** If being brave sounds frightening to you, perhaps you need some practice. By doing more things that require courage, such as facing a fear or taking an action that is anxiety-inducing, you can experience first-hand whether being brave is as scary as it seems. You can also hone your skills at bouncing back from inevitable failures and disappointments, which will make you more comfortable taking risks and being courageous again in the future. For example, try setting yourself a tighter timeline than normal, or challenge yourself to make small talk with someone you don't know well.

**Engage in positive self-talk:** It's normal to feel afraid or anxious when you are trying to act more bravely than you are comfortable with. Use positive self-talk to help you manage your fear and feel more confident in yourself and your abilities. Remind yourself of past occasions when you've met and overcome challenges. When you fail, focus on what you learned and give yourself credit for trying anyways.

**Stand up for others:** One of the most meaningful ways in which we can show courage is by standing up for others. Take time to advocate for your employees wherever possible, and don't shy away from tough conversations. For example, you can strike up conversations to discuss diversity and inclusion when you witness discriminatory comments, rather than expecting your team members to defend themselves. It's worth a few moments of personal discomfort to increase the degree to which your employees feel comfortable being their authentic selves at work.

## Consider These Tips to Moderate Your Courage

Effective leaders are able to balance the 11 leader character dimensions rather than focusing on just a few. As you develop your leader character, look for places where strengths may need to be moderated. If you scored a 4 or higher on courage, use the tips below to help you balance the expression of this character dimension.

**Motivations matter.** The difference between courage and recklessness often comes down to motivation. Courage is motivated by a sense of right and wrong, often with a desire to stand up for yourself or others, such as defending a co-worker against gossip. Recklessness, on the other hand, is usually motivated by an emotional thrill — like driving fast above the speed limit because it's fun. The next time you feel compelled to take a risk, pause and consider what is motivating you to act. If you're simply bored and need the emotional thrill, then consider seeking a healthy and productive outlet for your energy instead.

**Courage is tempered by accountability.** Another way to differentiate between courageous and recklessness is to consider whether you are prepared to own the consequences of your actions. Reckless acts are usually spontaneous and carried out without any consideration of consequences. Courage, on the other hand, understands the risk but does what is right anyway — often at a personal cost. Before taking a risk, think about what the possible outcomes may be, and whether you are prepared to accept them.

**Know your limits, know the situation.** If you find you often act without thinking, you may want to work on controlling the number of courageous actions you take. To determine whether you need to act, gather information about the situation and set your own limits first. For example, you can ask yourself, "What is the catalyst or trigger that would move me from inaction to action?" Hold yourself accountable to that trigger and wait to act until the event occurs. If you're lacking information about the situation, ask others or hold a meeting with your team so that you can get first-hand input from the parties involved. Gathering information is the first step towards taking calculated risks and using courage in a manner that is appropriate and wise.

## Resources

**watch**     [Courage to Lead](#)

**read**     [Cultivating Everyday Courage](#)

**develop**     Develop your courage by taking advantage of SIGMA's [coaching services](#).

Contact SIGMA for more information about leader character.

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### References

[1] Tkachenko, O., Quast, L. N., Song, W., & Jang, S. (2020). Courage in the workplace: The effects of organizational level and gender on the relationship between behavioral courage and job performance. *Journal of Management & Organization, 26*(5), 899-915.

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[3] Hannah, S. T., Avolio, B. J., & Walumbwa, F. O. (2011). Relationships between authentic leadership, moral courage, and ethical and pro-social behaviors. *Business Ethics Quarterly, 21*(4), 555-578.