

What Do You Do When You Are Afraid to Act?

by **Margaret J. Marcuson**

Leaders are faced with the necessity to act, and to make decisions which are difficult. Sometimes we have to tell the truth about a mistake we made. Sometimes we have to take an unpopular stand. Sometimes we have to fire someone. How do we face these challenging tasks? We must lead with courage and with thoughtfulness. We don't want to jump the gun and anxiously respond. We want to think carefully about what we are doing and why we are doing it (often with the help of neutral adviser).

But then the time comes when we have to act. We wake up at night in a cold sweat, we run over imaginary conversations in our head. When I make a public statement, how will they react? What will they say at the door after the sermon? When I take steps to ask this employee to leave, what will the consequences be?

How can we find the courage to take the necessary difficult actions? Eleanor Roosevelt was an excruciatingly shy young woman who developed into a key leader, both as First Lady and later as ambassador to the United Nations. She knew about fear from the inside out and said this: "The encouraging thing is that every time you meet a situation, though you may think at the time it is an impossibility and you go through the tortures of the damned, once you have met it and lived through it you find that forever after you are freer than you ever were before. If you can live through that you can live through anything." She added, "You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you stop to look fear in the face." (*You Learn By Living*, 1960, pp 29-30) She recognized that we can do more than we ever thought possible when we are willing to face our fears. <http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/abouteleanor/er-quotes/index.html>

Here are some tips for acting with courage as a leader: 1. Keep breathing. When we breathe consciously and deeply, we get much-needed oxygen to our brain, which helps us to act more thoughtfully and less reactively. When we are afraid, our automatic body processes take over and we move into the fight-or-flight response, which is rarely useful in a leadership setting. Breathing helps keep us thinking.

2. Keep the bigger picture in view. Courageous action is not just for ourselves, but for the sake of the whole organization, its people and its future. We can find it easier to deal with the natural reactivity we'll see in others (and to keep ourselves calm) if we remember the ultimate goal: the health and vitality and impact of the whole endeavor.

3. *Let go of the outcome.* We cannot control how others respond to our actions. No matter how important we think the matter at hand is, ultimately we control ourselves only.

Then, as Eleanor Roosevelt said, "You must do the thing you think you cannot do."