

# Fear is Normal! So is Courage

**FEAR** is an appropriate response right now.

Fear is our reaction to threat, and we are threatened in ways we can't control.

Fear sharpens the senses, cuts noise away from signal, and provides a boost of energy for action.

Unless you're sedated, feeling fear is normal.

And feel it you must. I'll come back to that.

Panic, over worrying, deep anxiety, incessant fretting, though, is unnecessary.

Panic is a selfish impulse that dims your thinking and closes your heart.

Panic always leads to unwise and dangerous choices – dangerous to you and others.

Panic is an immature indulgence in a time that calls for mature leadership.

Panic is an unconscious reaction just when we need conscious leadership.

Panic isn't the answer to the pandemic driven crisis we're in.

Nor is the answer a stream of positive affirmations designed to drown out your fear.

Nor is the answer simple platitudes ("this too shall pass." Or, "Everything happens for a reason.")

Nor is the answer some metaphysical explanation that masks your sense of powerlessness.

Nor is the answer constant consumption of muddled information that keeps you triggered.

The answer is (as it has always been) **COURAGE**.

Courage isn't bravado.

Courage isn't foolhardy action.

Courage isn't a devil-may-care lack of caution.

Courage isn't ignoring fear.

**Courage is walking toward what you'd rather run away from.**

**Walking. Toward. What. You'd. Rather. Run. Away. From.**

When you're courageous, you lean toward the scary stuff, and penetrate it with wisdom and with love.

When you're courageous you heed the fear, hear its urgency, and proceed with intention and purpose.

Now is the time for your courage – as a leader, a human, a community member, and a family member.

I offer you a three-step approach to cultivating courage, first for you personally, and next for your organization.

The process is Feel, Face, and Embrace, and here's how you cultivate and apply courage in the face of chaos:

## Personally

**Feel:** The beginning of courage is physical awareness of the sensations of fear – flushing heat in the face and neck, increasing blood pressure in the eyeballs, accelerating heartbeat, tightening shoulders, and churning or pulsating in the solar plexus or belly. Noticing discomfort is already an act of courage. These sensations are unpleasant, and we're trained to push them away or hide them. But when you choose to pay attention to what you're feeling (rather than avoiding, denying, or overwhelming your body), you step toward courage and develop embodied wisdom.

**Face:** When you "face" your fear you get to see and understand it. When you face your fear you can name it, and you can name the thoughts and beliefs that make up that fear. "Fear of the Unknown," for example, has distinctions – fear of failure, humiliation, powerlessness, rejection, death. By naming your thoughts you slow down your thought-fueled story and the panic and anxiety that comes with it. You can name the believed-thoughts in your story – "I'm anxious about future opportunities; I'm afraid of looking like an idiot; my family will suffer because of this behavior; this is out of control; if I can't be heard, then my life's on hold."

Your believed-thoughts are mental habits that feed and energize your fear. Ultimately, articulating your believed-thoughts diminishes their grasp on your decisions and choices.

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**Embrace:** Fear is a contraction - it's pulling back, closing off, and defending. Embracing is an expansion. To embrace my wife, I have to be open and vulnerable, extend myself, and be available to connect. Embrace is the action phase of courage. We can't eliminate fear, but fear is the gatekeeper to power. When we cower before this gatekeeper, we give up our power and energy. The courageous step is to embrace your fear, hear your inner story, feel your physical discomfort, and not distract yourself. Embrace your fear by taking small (or even large) steps and moving toward what you'd rather run away from. Even two, five, or ten percent forward movement is still forward!

## Organizationally

**Feel:** Begin with acknowledging reality and noticing the fear signals in your people's behavior. Many people would rather deny or diminish their feelings with work, worry, "research," activity, or a variety of drugs. Or you may notice hoarding, hiding, gossiping, fretting, and a variety of made up reasons to chat that are really veiled calls for comforting. By consciously acknowledging your people's experience you are practicing both courage and presence.

And, obviously, don't criticize or berate your people, but empathize with them. Acknowledge the individual and collective fears – yours and theirs. Hiding from the fear or being super positive only makes you seem detached and inauthentic.

**Face:** Turn toward the fear and name it (or them, there's more than one). Name the threats that you're seeing. And there are many. Cash position, employee morale, employee communications, logistics and supply chain, possible layoffs, competition, personal wellness, PTO, child care, remote working, health and safety, to name some.

Bring the team together to face fear and make a plan. Actually, make three plans. Plan for your business best case scenario, plan for a worst-case scenario, and plan for a grimly ugly scenario. Yep, it's scary to face these thoughts and plans, but it's even scarier to navigate without a plan.

**Embrace:** Take incremental and consistent action (maybe drastic action, too). Be sure to communicate like your life depends on it, because it does! This is the time to face your fears AND face your people (via video for the most part ☺). The biggest mistake in crisis is silence - not keeping your people up to date. We are all wired for the negativity bias – assuming things are worse than they are. Communicate your plans, communicate relevant data, and communicate feelings.

([See Arne Sorenson, CEO of Marriott, deliver a brilliant communication](#))

And realize that your plans are flawed – we're navigating uncertainty and ambiguity. But take action you must (inset Yoda's voice), even with flawed plans. Combine awareness, planning, collaboration, and communication to form a dynamic, active, and cohesive team that works toward survival (as needed) and toward continued success.

Finally, remember that fear is like a child – don't let it drive the car, but don't lock it in the trunk, either.

In the spirit of leading and learning.

Eric Kaufmann  
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