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The Source of Courage in Leadership

By Stephen Camilli

Editor's note: In the Leadership & Development Section's Leadership Inspiration Contest, entrants were asked to tell us what inspired them to be better actuarial leaders. Here is the winning entry from the Inspiring Leadership Quote category.

Courage is being afraid, but going on anyhow.
—Dan Rather

This quote rang especially true with me in several moments of my life when faced with the lonely abyss of being a leader: working to set up a network of food banks in a foreign country, dealing with unruly students in a high school math class and taking my first steps in leading a Society of Actuaries (SOA) section council. In each of these experiences, at different times, I felt assailed by thoughts of inadequacy and the desire to



run from the leadership duties that I had chosen to take on. But each time, after some soul searching and an objective analysis of my skill set, other people's comments and reflecting on why I was in that position, I realized that I was exactly where I needed to be and I should not pay attention to the "phantom thoughts" that my fear was sparking in me.

In analyzing my own feelings of hesitance or reluctance when faced with a leadership position, it has helped to look back at some historically renowned leaders, their experience taking on new responsibilities and how they responded.

- **Moses.** In the biblical account of God calling the prophet Moses, despite direct signs from God, Moses shows significant reluctance to become the leader of the people of Israel, saying, "I am slow of speech and tongue." However, he went on to lead a group of people out of slavery to their new promised land. Similar reluctance is seen in the story of the Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah.
- **Abraham Lincoln.** By many historical accounts, Lincoln suffered repeated bouts of depression. He sought, in his suffering and doubts, to find strength in the service of a greater cause. There is an excellent article in *The Atlantic* about Lincoln's leadership despite, and perhaps inspired by, traversing frequent depression and melancholy.¹
- **King George VI.** The famous subject of the film *The King's Speech* struggled with fear and stammering, yet, with the help of a speech therapist, he moved forward with a nationally broadcast speech that was key to Britain's morale upon declaring war on Germany.

In thinking about what these have in common, I've asked myself what the source of this courage was, and I've decided that it is about taking the focus off of oneself and one's own feelings and focusing on the needs of those you have chosen to or been chosen to serve. Perhaps this is a key foundation for courage, focusing on the good of others. In doing so, your truest self will come out and you will be able to go on, despite being afraid. ■



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ENDNOTE

- 1 Shenk, Joshua Wolf. 2005. Lincoln's Great Depression. *The Atlantic*, October, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2005/10/lincolns-great-depression/304247/> (accessed April 30, 2019).