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## Managing in Uncertain Times: Transforming Employees from “Com*fe*ar*table*” to Courageous

What’s a “com*fe*ar*table*” employee? It’s a worker who is either too comfortable or too fearful to do things differently and deliver results, says Bill Treasurer, author of the new book *Courage Goes to Work: How to Build Backbones, Boost Performance, and Get Results* (Berrett-Koehler 2008).

Treasurer, a former member of the U.S. High Diving Team, is on a mission to help managers create a more courageous workforce. He says, “Com*fe*ar*table* workers perpetuate the status quo. In seeking the safety of sameness, they withhold their energy and creativity—often when the company and the boss need it most.”

The good news, says Treasurer, is that courage can be learned: “It’s a skill—teachable and learnable—that managers can help workers develop.” He encourages managers to instill courage in their workers by avoiding five common “hard times” mistakes:

1. **Joining the pity party.** Resist commiserating with workers, which will only shake their confidence even more. “See,” they’ll say, “even the boss is scared.”
2. **Stoking the fire.** Don’t let your own fears trickle down to employees. Avoid fear-laden threats and “or else” directives.
3. **Offering too much “there, there.”** Workers want and need direction—not handholding. Give them clear, common-sense information about how to proceed.
4. **Giving in to distractions.** In tough times, it’s easy to take your eyes off the ball, letting people and projects fall by the wayside. Keep workers focused on what needs to be done and, at least for now, have daily status check-ins.
5. **Hiding—or hovering.** It’s tempting to hole up in your office, or go to the other extreme, becoming a “helicopter manager”—micromanaging everyone and everything. Don’t do it!

Instead of falling back on negative behaviors, Treasurer outlines 10 ways to manage through employees’ fears and to “help courage go to work:”

- **Go first.** Be a courageous role model. Jump first—whatever the leap—and workers more likely follow your lead.
- **Provide a view.** Forget the canned corporate vision statement. Provide a “view”—a smaller, more personalized vision—to help employees see their own big picture and how, at an individual level, their courage will be rewarded.
- **Set up safety nets.** Most people won’t take a chance without some degree of support. Create safety nets—from protecting jobs to preserving reputations—to reinforce courageous actions.
- **Give permission.** Many workers think they aren’t “allowed” to do courageous things. Loud and clear, give people permission to *go for it*.
- **Value good mistakes.** Making no mistakes is just as dangerous as making too many. Let employees know that you value “good” mistakes—strong effort, weak results—and, odds are, they’ll step out of their comfort zones.
- **Have their backs.** Show them you support them by going to bat for them—consistently and courageously—with higher-ups.
- **Normalize fear.** Fear is a normal part of the work experience. Help workers see their doubts and fears as a natural occurrence, so they can refocus their energy on the job at hand.
- **Modulate comfort.** Adjust employees’ comfort zones with incrementally greater challenges. You’ll steadily stretch their capacity to deal with uncomfortable situations and to exert more courage.
- **Ask the “holy” question.** Find out what really matters to people by asking: “What do you want?” Only then can you give them personally meaningful assignments worth stretching for.
- **Clarify courage.** You can’t be courageous unless you’re afraid. Remind workers that courage isn’t the absence of fear, but an ability to carry on in its presence.

Who wins in a courageous workforce? “Everyone,” says Treasurer. He concludes, “With less fear and more courage, workers take on more challenging projects, deal more effectively with change, and start speaking up on important issues.

The company, its leadership, and the entire workforce benefit. Every manager should vow, right now, to help employees unclench their white knuckles and face the day armed with the courage to succeed.”

For more information, visit [www.couragegoestowork.com](http://www.couragegoestowork.com)

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