



## CAMERON-BROOKS, INC. Professional Recruiters

### **Roger's Tip of the Month**

#### **"Courage and Harry Potter."**

While I have yet to personally read any of J.K. Rowling's series on Harry Potter, I did recently read a fascinating literary essay regarding the principles of courage personified in the Harry Potter character. It struck me that these principles have a lot of relevance for leaders in both the military and the business world.

In the books, Harry is an orphan whose parents were killed while trying to fight the most evil wizard on earth (Lord Voldemort). As a young wizard, Harry attends Hogwarts School of Magic where like any wizard teenager, he slowly develops the knowledge, skill, and maturity necessary to be a successful adult wizard. He learns the importance of friendship, honesty and loyalty as he builds close friendships with Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. Throughout the books, Harry repeatedly thwarts the evil Voldemort's attempts to return to power. Harry does not relish the dangers he faces in battling Voldemort, yet knowing that his own life and the lives of his friends are at stake, he does not shrink from them either. Each success grows his confidence as well as his ability to think for himself and make important decisions, all of which help him face future challenges. Most interesting about the character is that Harry is not portrayed as an omnipotent fearless teenager insensible to danger. On the contrary, he is a sensitive, fear-prone, often terrified boy who somehow musters the courage to face up to some of the greatest dangers of his time and prevail. He is not motivated by success or power, yet his courage in the face of tremendous personal adversity provides the strength for him to grow more and more powerful in the face of the enemy.

His recipe for courage is what has endeared millions of readers to these books, and in my opinion, where the relevance to business comes in. For Harry, courage is doing what is right, even if it means making choices that are physically hard, unsafe or socially unacceptable. He cares about doing what is best overall, rather than what is necessary, easy or best for himself. Harry repeatedly overcomes the natural urge toward self preservation, self protection or personal gain in order to pursue and secure the greater good. He shows the courage of his convictions in circumstances where there is a lot of pressure to hide the truth or to give up in the pursuit of a risky or difficult task.

When it comes to leadership, courage is a basic pillar upon which all other leadership attributes are based. Leaders (especially in the military) are taught this early in their careers. You can't effectively lead other people or grow as a leader if your motivation is self preservation/promotion rather than doing what is right. The best leaders have the courage to put personal reputation on the line for a worthy goal or principle. Personal gain, promotion, additional responsibility, etc. are not their motivations. Rather, they are the by-products of their true motivation – a job well done, making the tough decisions, and of bringing value to the company. Don't fall into the narcissistic trap popularized by TV that promotes "taking care of yourself" and situational values.

I hear a number of reasons from people who quit their companies in the face of adversity. "Roger, I need to take care of myself." "If I don't look out for myself, no one will." It's not a popular notion these days, but sometimes the greatest test of a leader's courage comes from staying the course through the most trying of times. Can you imagine the great heroes in history quitting because things became too tough? To stick it out takes a great deal of faith, especially when you are in the middle of it, but this is the nature of courage.

Regardless of what a person thinks of President Bush's politics, one needs to admire his leadership courage. There is no better test of courage than making unpopular decisions and sticking with them. You never see the President

complaining about circumstances external to his decision. He knew what he had to do, he made the decision, and he is sticking with it. It takes a lot of courage to do this, especially in a situation as complex as the War on Terror.

Some of the most courageous leaders in history have later said that they did not feel particularly courageous at the time of their great accomplishments. It's hard to be brave when a lot is at stake and there is no realistic assurance of how things are going to turn out. These leaders knew what they had to do and held to that despite their fear. Their convictions for doing what was right helped them overcome their natural fear when personal consequences were at stake.

Habitually doing the hard right builds courage over time (one tough decision at a time). Each time Harry Potter faced down a challenge, he became stronger. This is also the way it works in business careers. Companies want courageous leaders who have a history of facing overwhelming adversity. Building these types of experiences makes you even more marketable. The problem is when junior leaders are in the middle of uncertain career situations, they too often get their resume out to find a different career, thus missing a learning opportunity. I assure you that company recruiters (especially in the more senior leadership ranks) are asking a lot of interview questions about this (give me your toughest accomplishment, tell me about a time you overcame adversity, give me a time you turned around a bad situation, etc.). Harry's example is right on: the greater the adversity, confusion and fear, the greater the learning.

Courage is what allows a leader to overcome doubt, second guessing, and external criticism in order to keep going. It's a leadership skill in high demand, so take advantage of the learning opportunity of it the next time the opportunity arises. If nothing else, you'll have a great interviewing answer down the road that you would not have had if you had avoided the confrontation.

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