

John McCain and the elements of courage

You'll probably never need courage to do your work, at least the kind of courage required against physical threats like torture or gunfire. Still, understanding courage can help you become a better leader.

Sen. John McCain, a career Navy flier held prisoner in North Vietnam for more than five years, has tried to define courage. Here's what he's come up with so far:

- **Prepare for the long, hard road.** John Lewis led quiet marchers in Alabama in 1965 to secure civil rights without violence, for which he was tear-gassed, arrested and beaten more times than he could remember. On the way to Montgomery, a blow fractured his skull and left him unconscious. "When I care about something," Lewis says, "I'm prepared to take the long, hard road."
- **Do what you think you can't do.** McCain cites Eleanor Roosevelt as a woman of resolve who assured people that they gain strength, courage and confidence every time they face their fears. He especially likes her exhortation: "You must do the thing you think you cannot do."
- **Meet the enemy.** McCain's father and grandfather were admirals. They thought the best definition of courage lay in Admiral Lord Nelson's advice: "No captain can do very wrong if he places his ship alongside that of the enemy."
- **Bear whatever comes your way.** Roy Benavidez stepped on a land mine during his first tour in Vietnam. During his second tour, he helicoptered into the jungle and evacuated dead and wounded soldiers for six hours while under intense fire, despite gunshot, shrapnel and bayonet wounds that nearly killed him. "This is courage in a man," wrote Euripides: "to bear unflinchingly what heaven sends."
- **Forget about 'grace under pressure.'** For years, McCain thought grace and "mental toughness" defined courage. But he learned that people who cry out in despair, seized by mortal terror, can still act heroically. "What matters," he says, "is that you faced it, lived it and did so because your conscience compelled you to act."

So, why do you need courage in the workplace? Because without it, all virtue is fragile: admired and sought after but held cheaply and surrendered without a fight. McCain quotes Winston Churchill, who called courage "the first of human qualities... because it guarantees all the others."

— Adapted from *Why Courage Matters: The Way to a Braver Life*, John McCain with Mark Salter, Random House.